

The Queensland Journal of Labour History

No. 36 Winter 2023



The Brisbane Labour History Association

The Queensland Journal of Labour History

The biannual radical history journal of the
Brisbane Labour History Association

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Front Cover Image: *Bjelke Bitter: Queensland's premier beer for discriminating drinkers. This label was a fictional brew invented for the University of Queensland Revue of 1977 and featured in a number of 'adverts' for Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland such as the following, a parody of Cabaret's Tomorrow Belongs to Me: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dX9bwamb1Ls*



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Labour
History
Association

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**The BLHA is the Brisbane/Meanjin branch of the
Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.**

The BLHA organises seminars, lectures, meetings, conferences and publications on themes of labour history. Membership is open to all individuals and organisations who subscribe to the Association's objectives.

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The Queensland Journal of Labour History (QJLH) is compiled and published twice a year by the Brisbane Labour History Association (BLHA), the Queensland branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The Brisbane Labour History Association is a not-for-profit collective of volunteers.

The BLHA seeks to assist rather than merely to document the activities of the working class. Neither is its conception of labour history narrowly academic, spanning, rather, all social aspects of the productive process. How were class relations formed? What was the role of the state and the production process? How does labour relate to race and gender? What were the industrial and political organisations created by workers and what struggles did they fight? What are the cultural expressions of class? How have these people, those who live by their labour, recorded, remembered, and represented their own history?

Although the BLHA has a particular focus on Brisbane (Meanjin) and Queensland, we support the study of working-class history in its local, national and transnational settings. We also encourage the study of social movements in which workers have participated or which have affected workers' personal, social, political or economic circumstances.

Material published herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the BLHA or the editorial committee of the BLHA.

Notes for contributors

The QJLH is published in Summer and Winter each year. Articles of any length are invited. Contributors receive one-year membership of the BLHA.

First-person accounts of trade union, social movement and progressive political struggles and organisations are particularly welcome. We encourage oral history.

Reports on exhibitions, seminars and research projects are sought, as are book reviews and photo essays.

Contributions can be submitted either as hardcopy (posted to the Secretary) or as an electronic file emailed to qldlabhist@gmail.com or other BLHA email addresses.

Please ensure that your name, any relevant organisational affiliation and all contact details are included in the article itself as well as in the covering email. Please also send details of any graphics, photographs, maps, drawings, cartoons etc. that might accompany your article.

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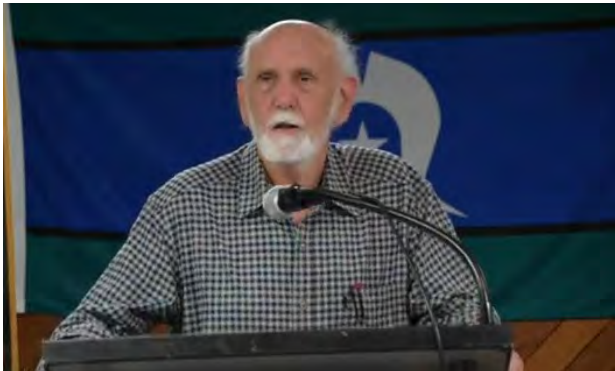
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Guest Editorial

Howard Guille

From Gough to Albo - Is Progressive Labor reform still possible?

This is the revised text of a presentation by Howard Guille in the panel session to the Forum “From Gough to Albo” held by the Brisbane Labour History Association and Vintage Reds on 26 October 2022



Howard Guille, speaking at the BLHA/Vintage Reds event, ‘From Gough to Whitlam and Beyond: Is progressive Labor reform still possible’ 26 October 2022

Image c/o Lachlan Hurse.

The combination of the words *Laborism* and *progress* in the subtitle of this Forum could be an invitation to bring out Lenin, Luxembourg and Miliband and to search the internet for the route of the parliamentary road. We could have a long debate.

Instead, I want to start with what reforms are needed by identifying the two dominant and over-riding issues of current Australian politics. They are

- a settlement with First Nations’ people
- a settlement with the planet and all other sentient species.

Can our politics cope?

Setting aside the ‘shape’ of these settlements, I want to concentrate on whether our politics can achieve such settlements. In fact, whether left progressive politics is adequately equipped.

‘Politics’ includes institutions, ideas and ideologies, processes, and organisations. The most pertinent Left organisations are the political parties and the industrial and civil society ones. Some are ‘red’ and some are ‘green’. Achieving a settlement requires making progressive ideas what Galbraith termed the orthodox or conventional wisdom. Separately accomplishing these two settlements with First Nations’ people and with the planet, will almost undoubtedly require a long period holding the levers of state and social power/authority.

The centrality of democracy and equality

My view is that politics built around democracy and equality are essential to achieving the two big settlements. For example, a settlement with First Nations people requires non-Aboriginal people to decolonise. This means giving up material and cultural

advantage and adopting a commitment to doing things only with the prior and informed consent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The “Voice” is but a start; albeit an important one, to this.

Similarly, a settlement with the planet on climate change and reversing the continuing and accelerating ecological destruction, requires an express commitment to material equality of outcomes and conditions for everyone. It is particularly important because much current climate and environmental action is exaggerating extant inequalities. Of course, subsidies for fossil fuel producers should be removed and a super-profits tax on gas producers and exporters introduced. But the feed-in tariffs for roof top solar and the tax incentives that are proposed to purchase EVs go to benefit the already privileged. Without change, the distribution of ownership of Tesla cars will mimic that of BMWs.

Collectivism and solidarity as organising precepts

I suggest that the precepts and practices of collectivism and solidarity are crucial to achieving the two settlements in democratic

and equal ways. First Nations' peoples and unions both subscribe to collectivism and solidarity. Collective and shared land ownership is central to Aboriginal and Maori societies, and throughout the Pacific Islands. It directly informs the social, political, and economic character of these communities and places. One immediate political consequence is that decisions about land-use are made by the entire community; for example, this is given legislative force in the prescribed body corporates that administer native title holdings.

Collective land ownership is eschewed in non-Aboriginal Australia. Individualism perhaps rules more in land ownership than elsewhere. Yet there is community strength in collective land ownership. It was not by chance that local landowners in Hela Province turned to the Papua New Guinea Maritime Union for assistance in dealings with ExxonMobil and LNG producers. Some sense of collectivism remains in Australia and even occasionally resurfaces. For example, the Queensland Government is now spruiking the crucial role of publicly owned electricity assets in responding to climate change. So too is Daniel

Andrews in Victoria. Pity about the privatisation of railways and forests under the government of Anna Bligh!

Solidarity should draw on 'old style unionism'. It is about preventing a race to the bottom; lifting the floor; and using the 'strong' to ensure that material conditions are fairly distributed. This was the modus operandi of the union movement in the award system of the 1960s-70s (think flowing-on increased annual leave, shorter working hours, and over-awards). It also underpinned at least some of the Accord period including the efforts to use award restructuring to spread career structures and equate pay for skills across female and male occupations. Of course, much of this got tossed out with enterprise-by-enterprise bargaining, which is a major factor in both the decline in real wages and the widening of wage inequality.

Re-cultivating the ideas and practices of collectivism and solidarity could resuscitate progressive politics. It would need to be expressly democratic since solidarity in a collectivity means accepting decisions which have been openly and properly debated and determined. Prior and informed

consent needs to apply here just as in First Nations' matters.

Some impediments

Regenerating progressive politics in Australia faces substantial impediments. One is the extent of and scope of 'markets'. Another is the level of wealth and income inequality. Wage inequality in Australia is substantially larger than in Nordic and Western European countries, in the United Kingdom and in New Zealand.¹

I think Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman would not be displeased in how well their handiwork has been adopted in Australia over the last four or so decades. In neo-liberalism, the 'best' outcome is that produced by the market; as Hayek said "there is no point in calling the outcome just or unjust".² The free price system (that is the competitive market) was a source of "spontaneous order". It is also where the 'dollar vote' is more crucial than the electoral vote: "the ideological clash of coercive political democracy vs voluntary market democracy".³ Sometimes it is difficult to know whether neo-liberals find democracy or collectivism the more distasteful.

Comparing Curtin and Keating

Some sense of the task of combating the market and inequality can be gained by comparing the approaches of the Curtin - Chifley and the Hawke - Keating Governments to employment/unemployment. This is also useful because the Albanese Government intends to release an employment white paper in 2023.

Full employment became a collective, public responsibility via Clause 3 of the 1945 *White Paper on Full Employment*; it reads

In peacetime the responsibility of Commonwealth and State Governments is to provide the general framework of a full employment economy, within which the operations of individuals and businesses can be carried on.⁴

Moreover, full employment meant an unemployment rate in the order of 1%. From 1945/46 - 1973/74 the average unemployment rate was 2.0%.⁵

In 1994 the Keating Government issued *Working Nation, the White Paper on employment and growth*.⁶ This aimed to reach an

unemployment rate of 5% by 2000 and its main policies were the Job Compact with obligations on the unemployed to undergo training or lose benefits, a 'training wage' and the start of contracting out the Commonwealth Employment Service to private and community providers. The government stressed the "thrust of Government policy is towards globalisation, competitiveness and productivity" And, explicitly, "The process of microeconomic reform, will continue. A consistent goal of the next few years must be economic efficiency".⁷

H C (Nugget) Coombs was one of the architects of the 1946 White Paper on Full Employment. In 1994 he compared the approaches of the documents from the Curtin & Keating governments. Of the latter, he said,

No challenge was mounted to the dominance of the hard-line commitment to the dictates of 'the market'.

And

Essentially, we have lost control of our own economic affairs. Our business leaders, our ministers and their

advisers respond to the dictates of a market which is increasingly dominated by external interests.⁸

It is salutary to note that Coombs' observations about the dominance of the market came before National Competition Policy and New Public Sector Management which made market principles *de rigueur* throughout politics and the public service. And hence a subsequent rash of privatisations and user-pay schemes within the Third Way terminology that governments should 'steer not row'.

Coombs also said in 1994 that "we need time to pause and reflect on possible changes in direction". We still do; opening up knowledge and ideas is essential to combat inanities and aberrations of marketisation. It is not 'chance' that the 'market' has substituted almonds for small farming in the Murray-Darling or corrupted the EIS and coal mine approval processes. Let alone given the top four management consultancies 25% of "Building Better Regions".

Taking the fundamental aspects of people's working, family and social lives and livelihoods out of the hands of markets is essential to

achieving equality and democracy. In turn collective and solidaristic political action are essential to equality and democracy.

But/And to end

All the high-minded values in the world are worthless if you can't keep the lights on. Governments (and unions) need to be competent. They also need to maintain a wide consciousness of ideological movement and direction.

Politics is hard. Meaningful progressive political change is really hard. Max Weber called it "The strong and slow boring of hard boards".⁹ Right now it feels like the kind of boring you do when the drill battery is dying.

Howard Guille was the Queensland Secretary of the NTEU from 1993-2006. He is active in community issues including the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerrabah and has been a joint editor of the QJLH from 2012. His latest book is *Paltry Paradise: A History of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum* (2019).

Notes

¹ Gross earnings: decile ratios, OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/data/earnings/gross-earnings-decile-ratios_data-00302-en

² FA Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice; Law, Legislation and Liberty Vol 2*, Uni of Chicago Press 1978 see ch 10.

³ William H. Peterson, *The Democracy of the Market, The Free Market*, The Mises Institute, 2005. <https://mises.org/library/democracy-market>

⁴ *The 1945 White Paper on Full Employment*; available at http://www.bill-mitchell.org/White_Paper_1945/index.html

⁵ Joanne Loundes, *A Brief Overview of Unemployment in Australia*, Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 24/97, 1997

⁶ *Working Nation: the white paper on employment and growth*, <http://hdl.voc-ed.edu.au/10707/118757>.

⁷ Statement By The Prime Minister. The Hon P.J. Keating, MP, House of Representatives, 4 May 1994, Working Nation The White Paper On Employment And Growth. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00009211.pdf>

⁸ HC Coombs, *From Curtin to Keating: The 1945 and 1944 White Papers on Employment, A Discussion Paper*, North Australian research Unit, ANU, 1994 <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/47102>

⁹ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" in HH Gerth and C Wright Mills (Translated and edited), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946., pp. 77128

Editorial

Dean Wharton

Joëlle Gergis is a lead author for the IPCC's *Sixth Assessment Report* and a climate scientist at the Australian National University. Throughout her recent book *Humanity's Moment - A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope* (2022) she states that the Great Barrier Reef will likely be history, dead, by the 2040s. She lays the blame for this impending disaster on global capitalism. She believes that our ability to overcome neo-liberalism is at the heart of the hope she still has for the future. This issue of the *QJLH* offers some evidence that her hope is not completely misplaced and directly details how solidarity saved the Great Barrier Reef in the past.

Howard Guille's guest editorial argues effectively that our current crop of politicians is prevented from saving the Reef, or the ecosystem that includes human and other life, because of their belief in the Almighty Market. In the speech he delivered at the 'Gough to Albo' event last October he was the only speaker to discuss the transformation within the ALP caused by the party's adoption of the right-wing neo-liberal philosophy since the Whitlam era. He gives

examples at national and state level of how the ALP now believes itself subservient to the market. How else can anyone understand the action of the Federal Government in taking taxpayers money and gambling it on the stock exchange—in the hope that the profit generated will provide the finance for social housing? Despite the rhetoric of social reformism, the party now cannot—indeed must not—overcome the inequality that sustains neo-liberalism. By rejecting liberalism and social reformism the mainstream parties have moved from being unlikely to affect meaningful change to major problems, to being incapable.

Alison Stewart tells us how social reformism—what we used to call 'Old Labour' in the UK—successfully protected the Great Barrier Reef from the 1960s through to the 1980s. This is the largely overlooked history of how the Queensland Council of Unions was enlisted by the early environmental movement and 1960's radical student movement. The QCU established the industrial framework to protect the Reef from development during the Bjelke-Petersen era, a framework Alison

has termed ‘The Blue Ban’. This history should be given far greater prominence. If the labour movement cannot rely on politicians, it needs to recognise that it has played a role in the past to save our environment and must step up and do so again in the present.

Unfortunately, Mike Barber suggests that the current union leadership in Australia is not only incapable of facilitating fundamental social change they—unlike their contemporaries internationally—are less inclined to. In the second and final part of his interview with Jeff Rickertt, Mike continues his personal story and considers how unionism has adapted and retreated in the face of the neo-liberal onslaught.

Later in this issue, in keeping with the internationalism of his interview of Mike Barber, Jeff Rickertt reviews *Maritime Men of the Asia-Pacific* by Diane Kirkby.

The power of the union movement in Australia was never more obvious than during the 1912 Brisbane General Strike. Three articles, one by Matthew Mercer, and two by Neil Frost, illustrate this. Both contributors produced their studies as part of university coursework.

Matthew considers whether the

strike was revolutionary in substance or merely in the rhetoric being used by the strike leaders. Whilst the governing classes in Queensland certainly believed revolution was afoot, was this really the case?

Neil’s articles are a short history of the strike and biographies of two activists who played their part in the dispute, Ellen Hewett and Maggie Finney.

Neil’s contributions stem from his research into the comrades who are buried at South Brisbane Cemetery at Dutton Park. This research formed the basis of the walking tour Neil conducted for the BLHA in 2022 and will be utilised in a booklet he is producing for the Friends of South Brisbane Cemetery. His original research has been split into two parts for this issue. Further research, on some of the other comrades buried at the site, is lined up to appear in our next issue.

Neil mentions the state of the graves of both Ellen Hewett and Maggie Finney in his second article. At our 2022 BLHA AGM the possibility of repairing and/or upgrading these graves was raised and the BLHA Management Committee has been investigating ways in which this can be achieved. If readers have any knowledge of grants or awards

that we could utilise, we would be grateful if you could contact us.

Last September we said farewell to SEQEB strike activist Bernie Neville and in this issue we publish an edited version of the obituary Ian published for Bernie on his Workers Bush Telegraph website.

The Brisbane Labour History Association

The BLHA does more than produce this journal twice a year. Each year we hold our annual Alex Macdonald Memorial lecture in May/June and in addition to other events we have recently arranged film showings, walking tours and museum visits. This activity is only possible through the involvement and encouragement of our membership.

The resignation of Jeff Rickertt from the position of President at last year's AGM, and from his position as a management committee member was, in my opinion, a significant blow to our association. His level of activism is difficult to replace. He was an encouraging and driving force behind much of the BLHA's recent activity.

Like many volunteer groups, the BLHA functions with too few people doing too many roles. Reflecting my English humour, for several

years, I have joked that we are one (more) heart attack away from collapse. Executive officers have been doubling up in their roles to cover vacancies and the activity of the association is restricting as the situation continues. We do have a healthy editorial situation regarding this journal, and we do organise events well. But we would also like to campaign on issues when history impacts on today's activists and on the labour movements hopes for the future. This year we have taken steps to put Indigenous Australian history at the heart of historical teaching in schools by challenging government, and we hope to help in addressing the deficits in the historiography of women activists. Unfortunately, on these, and other issues, we are only making painstakingly slow progress.

But this is not just about easing the current Executive's burden, we also need new people to move the association forward with their fresh ideas and new approaches. It's also about getting in touch with campaigns and radical histories we aren't aware of or have under-appreciated. If members are interested in getting more involved, then do get in touch.

Dean Wharton,
Editor, QJLH
Secretary, BLHA

President's Report

Craig Buckley

Comrades and friends, after more than ten years as the Secretary of the Brisbane Labour History Association, I find myself writing, for the first time, a column in our journal in my recently-elected capacity as President.

At the outset, I would like to extend my gratitude to our outgoing President, Dr Jeff Rickertt, for the enormous amount of work he has done for BLHA, not just as President, but also as an editor of the journal in years past. It is primarily due to Jeff's efforts that BLHA has been able to conduct so many events that have proved popular with our existing members, and have attracted interest from young activists outside our immediate circle. Jeff's leadership will be sorely missed. However, I understand that one of the reasons that Jeff has stood down from the executive committee this year is because he is determined to devote time to writing more labour history. I very much hope this is the case and look forward to reading the results of Jeff's endeavours.

Of course, I would also like to extend my congratulations to Jeff for being awarded Life Membership of the Brisbane Labour History Association at our annual general meeting. The award was well-deserved, both for Jeff's contribution to BLHA as an organisation, and the contribution of his work to the study of labour history more generally.

While many members may know me from BLHA events, they may not necessarily know my background. I am a lawyer by trade and have worked as an industrial officer with the Meatworkers' Union (AMIEU) for the last nineteen years.

Although not, myself, an historian, I have had an interest in history ever since I was very young. That interest was sparked largely by the stories I was told about my grandfather, Harry. He had died shortly before I was born, but the experiences of his working life were relayed to me by my mother: about his childhood in Newcastle in England, lying about his age to go to sea (aged 15) as a merchant seaman during the First World War,

losing his eye in an industrial accident after the war, travelling to Australia in 1929 in search of work, arriving just in time for the Great Depression to hit. Harry spent most of the Depression years swagging around the countryside of eastern Australia, working in exchange for food and a place to sleep. He and other itinerants would ride the freight trains between towns. In American films featuring hoboes 'riding the rails', the workers always seem to find open carriages that they can climb inside to rest. In reality, the carriages were mostly locked, and people had to hold on outside as best they could. My grandfather described seeing men killed because they became too tired to maintain their grip and fell between the carriages onto the tracks.

Ultimately Harry found work in the coal mines west of Ipswich. I heard stories of gas build-ups and hurried evacuations. I heard stories of piecework and 'stand-over men' who used to mark their names on tubs of coal dug by other workers. One such stand-over man thought better of trying to mark his name on Harry's tub after my grandfather's mallet connected with his head. When injury forced Harry from the mines in the mid-1940s, he moved to the railway workshops, and participated in the rail strike in 1948, witnessing the po-

lice bashing workers on St Patrick's Day.

I realised, much later, that it was these stories which did so much to shape my views of the world when I was still very young. They left me with very definite ideas about fairness, justice, trade unionism and even class, long before I ever saw a history book, much less read one.

Of course, if those stories helped me to understand something of the way the world works, Marx reminds us that the point of doing so is to enable us to figure out how to change it.

One of the recurring themes of BLHA's activities in 2022 was a focus on the use of labour history to assist the present struggles of the working-class movement. It was the explicit subject of last year's Alex Macdonald Lecture, delivered by Terry Irving: How Can History be Useful to A Workers' Movement in 2022? It also featured prominently in the executive committee's discussions about BLHA's activities and future direction. I hope that BLHA as an organisation will not merely record and publish the stories of working-class struggle – but to continue to find ways of connecting those stories with those in the labour movement who continue that struggle today.

Vice-President's Report

Greg Mallory

In October last year I chaired the BLHA and Vintage Reds joint event 'From Gough to Albo' that we'd organised to commemorate fifty years since the election of the Whitlam Labor Government. The speakers were introduced by former ALP federal senator and BLHA life member Claire Moore. They were John Faulkner, former federal senator for the ALP; Rod Welford, former Queensland Government Minister; Howard Guille, long-time *QJLH* joint editor (among many other roles); and Sharlene Leroy-Dyer, Senior Lecturer in Business at UQ and Chair of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy Committee of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU)

John spoke about the achievements of the Whitlam Government whilst Rod was largely uncritical in his comparison of the Whitlam and current Albanese Government. Howard's speech considered whether neo-liberalism, adopted by the ALP since Whitlam, could ever solve the massive problems that society faces in the twenty-first century. Sharlene described how only the Albanese and the Gough governments have set reform for first-nations people in their commitments for change.

The first observations from the floor, from Adrian Skerritt and Dan O'Neill, noted that the speakers had all failed to mention the radical trends that were synonymous with the 1960s and early 1970s. By centring their speeches on the internal politics of the ALP, they had ignored the radicalism that drove the Whitlam agenda. It was perhaps this same willingness to ignore the militancy of the masses that led Whitlam and Hawke to respond to The Dismissal not by channelling it into mass demonstrations, but into getting the ALP re-elected.

Anne Warner, former union organiser and MLA in the Goss state Labor Government, received applause and calmed the atmosphere by arguing that people could both work through the ALP as well as demonstrate in the streets.

The full event was filmed by Lachlan Hurse and is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRpb6WHhrBE>

At our AGM in December our President Jeff Rickerrtt resigned from his post, and from the BLHA management committee, after four years at the helm of the BLHA. His contribution to our association's activity over



Dr Jeff Rickertt, retiring BLHA President, (right) is conferred with life membership at the 2022 BLHA AGM by BLHA Vice-President Dr Greg Mallory.

image c/o Neil Frost

those years has been overwhelming. In recognition of this, of his BLHA management committee membership both recently and twenty years ago, of his role as a former editor of this journal, and of his varied published research in the field of labour history, he was awarded life membership of the association. Jeff's parting speech at the AGM highlighted the uses to which radical history can be put in contemporary activism and will be published in the next *QJLH* issue.

Craig Buckley became Secretary of the BLHA in 2012. At the AGM he

stood down from that role and was elected as our new President. Craig is an Industrial Officer at the Australian Meat Industry Employees Union. Craig's role as Secretary was adopted by Dean Wharton, a former health worker and UK trade union branch secretary. Dean has been lead editor of this journal since 2018. Craig continues in his role as Treasurer of the BLHA.

In 2021 the BLHA introduced the Stella Nord Bursary to assist labour history researchers when finance could limit their ability to undertake



Lesley Syngé is awarded the 2022 Stella Nord Bursary. Presented by retiring BLHA President Dr Jeff Rickertt

image c/o Neil Frost

research. With no applications in 2021, the Stella Nord Bursary was awarded for the first time at our AGM in December.

Lesley Syngé, an independent labour history researcher, was the 2022 recipient of the bursary. Lesley is an experienced and much published writer in many genres. She co-authored the memoirs of Wal Stubbings, *Wharfie*, in 2017. Lesley has also won the Lorna MacDonald Essay Prize on three occasions, most recently in 2022. Her Lorna

MacDonald 2022 winning essay *The Earth and Sea Furnishes Them* can be accessed via:

<https://web.library.uq.edu.au/blog/2022/11/lesley-syngé-2022-lorna-mcdonald-essay-prize-winner>

Lesley is a former member of the BLHA Management Committee and was part of the BLHA working group that established the rules of the Stella Nord Bursary in 2020. The research project that Lesley is undertaking is titled: *Aboriginal Workers on Rewan Police Horse Breeding Station in the Central Highlands 1909-1934*. In part

the bursary will facilitate ‘travel to Woorabina in Central Queensland to forge/build on links with descendants of the workers of Rewan’.

Lesley’s research may be published in a future issue of this journal or be presented at a future BLHA event.

In October 2021 the BLHA arranged a visit to the *Getting Equal!* exhibition at the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerrabah. It was great news to hear that the exhibition had won the 2022 Gallery and Museum Achievement Award from the Museums & Galleries Association Queensland, which is the peak body for the public museum and gallery sector in Queensland.

Getting Equal! was about Australia’s first successful Aboriginal wages case. The exhibition shared the significant story of the Aboriginal work gang of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum and their fight for equal wages. The campaign began with a strike in 1918 and continued with 25 years of industrial, community and political action. In 1944 they became the first Aboriginal workers in Australia to be paid the same as white workers doing the same work. This happened 22 years before the granting of equal pay in the pastoral industry and more than two decades before the 1967 Referendum counting Aboriginal Australians in the census.

The exhibition was presented by the Museum for a year from July 2021.

Back in November 2008 the BLHA helped launch *ASIO: The Enemy Within* by Mick Tubbs at the Brisbane Workers Community Centre in Paddington. Mick is a former iron worker, Communist Party organiser and barrister. Unfortunately Mick is now suffering from dementia. Over the Xmas holidays I visited Mick with Judy Munday at the retirement home where he lives in Sydney.

In February this year I attended QPAC to view the Wharf Review’s series of parodies on contemporary politics called *Waiting for Albanese*. There were good satires on Peta Credlin, Bob Katter and Pauline Hanson. A notable sketch was the get together of three former Labor Prime Ministers, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Paul Keating, all assembled around a piano and singing about their achievements.

Many people are aware of my passion for Rugby League, a working-class sport about which I have published in the past. Despite being an occasional Broncos fan (as well as supporting Queensland and Australia) I have been more than amazed with the performance of the Dolphins in their inaugural season. I have attended as many of their games as I can alongside long-term Redcliffe fans former BLHA President Jeff Rickertt and BLHA management committee member Neil Frost. We have been witnessing history in the making.

Blue Bans

How Unions Saved The Great Barrier Reef

Alison Stewart

Introduction

The trade unions...held the key, and if they stood firm, the door would be closed on drilling, perhaps for ever.¹

This is a quote from renowned Australian poet-activist Judith Wright in her book *The Coral Battleground*.

She was describing the precedent-setting industrial action by Queensland unions in 1970 which halted the push to drill for oil on the Great Barrier Reef.

Alongside a determined campaign waged by environmental activists, union black bans endorsed by the Queensland Trades and Labor Council paved the way for protection of the Reef as a marine national park and its World Heritage listing.

These black bans foreshadowed the much more famous 'green bans' of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation.

It is a remarkable and under-appreciated episode from Queensland labour history, demonstrating the power of workers and their willingness to take

industrial action on a key environmental issue—with striking lessons for today.

Setting the Scene

Up until the second half of the twentieth Century, the Great Barrier Reef was mostly viewed by society and governments through the lens of its resources and economic potential.

The 1960s however began to see growing concern within the community about environmental damage to the Great Barrier Reef, for example, from unregulated coral and shell collectors.

This was on a background of increasing disquiet about the impact of human activity on the environment in general, internationally and in Australia, symbolised by the impact of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, which documented the environmental harm caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides.

In Queensland, people were beginning to speak out about the burning and felling of rainforests in the state's north and the prospect of sandmin-

ing at Cooloola, fearing that areas of environmental value would be lost forever.

But while groups had campaigned in the past to protect elements of the natural world from human induced destruction, environmental activism as a social movement was still in its infancy as was the science of ecology.

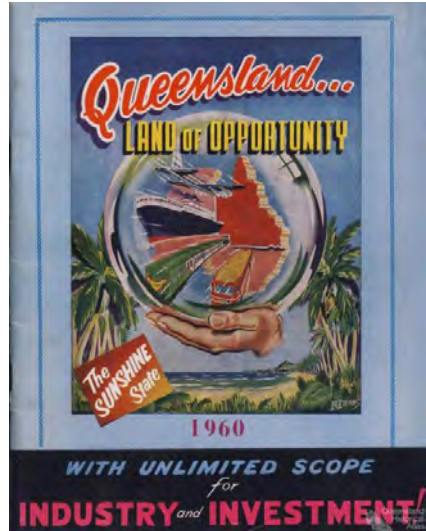
Research conducted on the Great Barrier Reef was largely centred on taxonomy—the identification and classification of species—and, in large measure, on the geology of the reef.

Scientific bodies and scientists were generally conservative and not opposed to development as such. Natural resources could and should be exploited, just in a ‘controlled’ way.

In 1956, for example, University of Queensland and Great Barrier Reef Committee geologist Dorothy Hill compiled a report for the mining industrialist Maurice Mawby entitled, *The Geology of the Great Barrier Reef in Relation to Oil Potential*.

While there had been regulations implemented regarding the Reef, these protection efforts were mainly local and species-specific.

The Country Party, in coalition with the Liberals, governed Queensland from 1957 to 1983 (they governed alone—renamed the National Party



The Sunshine State, 1960. Brochure produced by the Premier's Department and Department of Labour and Industry, 1960. Collection of the Centre for the Government of Queensland
www.qhatlas.com.au/photograph/sunshine-state-1960

in 1974—until 1989). Led from 1968 by Premier Johannes Bjelke-Petersen these governments saw the Reef, as well as many other significant natural environments, as ‘resources’ to be exploited in the interests of ‘progress’ and ‘development’.

In Judith Wright’s words, the Queensland government “was wide open to every proposal for development, mining, industry and settlement.”²

It was in this context that the Wilderness Preservation Society of

Queensland (WPSQ) was established in 1963, a grassroots campaigning organisation which came to argue for “preservation” of the natural environment and not just “conservation”.

Judith Wright was a founding member of the WPSQ and one of its key activists. Her book *The Coral Battleground* is a fascinating blow-by-blow insider’s account of the campaign to save the Reef.

I have relied on her book, alongside a newly released book, *Saving the Reef* by Rohan Lloyd—a detailed historical examination of settler society attitudes towards the Reef and of the environmental campaign—to gain an overview of these events.³

Concern for the future of the Reef ramped up significantly in 1967 when an application was made to mine Ellison Reef, on the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Innisfail, for limestone, a product utilised by the sugar cane industry. The application was advertised in the local newspaper, the *Cairns Post*.

John Busst, an artist and environmentalist who lived in Bingil Bay near Innisfail, organised to oppose the application in the court.

John was passionate about the reef. He had taken up the idea of making the Great Barrier Reef a national marine park to honour the memory of his friend, former prime minister Harold

Holt, who had been a keen recreational scuba diver.

Ellison Reef was claimed by the state government and mining proponents as being “dead” and therefore mining it would not be detrimental. Even the University of Queensland argued this was the case when Busst approached them for support. They replied to him that:

It appears that the portion of the reef known as Ellison Reef ... is dead and in consequence exploitation would not endanger living coral. In view of this, the University would not oppose the granting of the lease.⁴

To build the case against mining on Ellison Reef, Busst recruited volunteer scientists to survey the reef which was found to be very much alive with 88 species of live coral, 60 species of molluscs and 190 species of fish identified.

The mining warden accepted the environmentalists’ arguments and recommended that the application be rejected.

Defeating the application to mine on Ellison Reef was seen as being incredibly important. Rohan Lloyd writes that Busst approached the application as a vital test case. He felt strongly that if the limestone mine had gone ahead, it would have opened the door to other mining and development ap-



Ellison Reef (Google maps)

plications on the reef.

As well, the campaign to oppose the application had generated widespread publicity about the dangers threatening the Reef.

Soon after, it became known that permits to explore for oil on the Great Barrier Reef had been quietly issued by the Queensland government. Unlike mining, these applications were not required to be advertised. John Busst only found out about them incidentally when reading a company prospectus.

The Queensland government initially refused to publish the details but when they did in 1969, almost the entire 2000-kilometre length of the Great Barrier Reef had been carved up. Only a small section of the Reef off Cairns had not been included.

When the leases went to tender, forty

oil companies vied for drilling rights in the Gulf of Papua and off the Queensland Coast.

Ultimately six firms were awarded the rights to oil exploration including a company, Exoil in which newly installed National Party premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen had significant personal shareholdings.

The WPSQ campaign to save the reef was launched.

The WPSQ joined forces with a group of university scientists and students who had established the Queensland Littoral Society (QLS)—now known as the Australian Marine Conservation Society—in 1965.

The WPSQ and QLS were tireless in building opposition to drilling through letters to the papers, lobbying politicians, trying to facilitate vital research into the ecology of the

reef, organising petitions and opinion polls.

The first ever bumper stickers in Australia were “Save the Barrier Reef” and they were incredibly popular: 15,000 were eventually sold. When Judith Wright landed in Perth after an overseas trip in 1968, she “saw a car in one of the streets with a striking red sticker on its window; SAVE THE BARRIER REEF, it read.”⁵

Public opinion was swinging increasingly in favour of protecting the reef—in Queensland and across Australia.

In August 1969, the QLS organised a petition asking the state government to prevent any drilling on the reef unless adequate detailed plans had been made to deal with any oil spillages rapidly and in a manner which would not harm aquatic life. It quickly got 13,000 signatures—an incredible number for the time.

The environmentalists also looked at legal options as there was a question mark over whether the state government had the right to issue permits for oil drilling and exploration given

that offshore regions were meant to be under the control of the federal government.

More broadly, there was now a growing comprehension of the ecology of the Reef: that it must be treated as one ecological whole. The enormous size of the reef was pivotal in generating the incredible diversity of life. It could not be carved up without downstream consequences. So-called “dead” reefs were essential to the cycle of life on the reef.

This challenged the concept put forward by the government, the oil and mining industry, and conservative scientific bodies who argued that sections of the reef could be developed without harming others. There could be ‘controlled exploitation’.

Into this mix was thrown concern about an outbreak of Crown of Thorns starfish. Starfish numbers had grown to plague proportions on some sections of the reef and coral was being destroyed. Scientists were uncertain as to the cause but there was speculation that some form of human action had led to a breakdown in the



Save the Barrier Reef car bumper sticker

ecology (such as the collection of shells containing animals which predated the starfish, or pollution of coastal waters by insecticides).

The Crown of Thorns crisis added to the concern about how throwing one element of the ecology of the reef out could have downstream effects that could threaten the entire reef. Increasingly, the science was saying the reef must be preserved as a whole.

Strengthening this resolve was a series of terrible accidents involving offshore oil and gas rigs and tankers.

The *Torrey Canyon* disaster in which an oil super tanker ran aground off England's south-western coast in 1967 was the world's first major oil tanker disaster. One hundred thousand tonnes of crude oil leaked into the surrounding sea causing a major environmental disaster and contaminating 20 000 birds.

The oil slick eventually reached a size of fifty-six kilometres and thirty-two kilometres wide. The only way the au-



A US geologist suggested the Reef could be drilled for oil and was subsequently lampooned in the media - here by cartoonist Ian Gall in the Courier Mail April 30 1969

thorities could deal with the issue was to bomb the wreck. Closer to home, there had been a gas blow-out from an Esso BHP well in Bass Strait. Then in January 1968, there was a monumental offshore oil leak at Santa Barbara in California.

According to Judith Wright:

The papers were full of the awestricken accounts of the damage. There were full-page photographs of dead and dying sea-birds, oiled seals and dead fish washed ashore, of blackened beaches, slimy rocks and volunteer workers struggling to clean

up the beaches as more and more oil came ashore on every wave.⁶

The leak continued for months and was unable to be stopped. Detergents were used to try and break up the oil, but these were found to be both ineffective and toxic in themselves.

These accidents undermined the assurances given by the state government that oil spillages and leaks would be rare, limited in nature, would not damage the Reef, and could be dealt with. Public opinion swung strongly against allowing similar dangers to the Great Barrier Reef.

Despite the growing concern about the dangers of offshore drilling for oil demonstrated so acutely by these disasters, the Bjelke-Peterson government was intransigent.

Bjelke-Peterson was adamant that drilling on the Great Barrier Reef should proceed. The government kept stating that “every precaution” would be taken to prevent such a disaster here. But while Joh and the Country Party - Liberal Party coalition repeatedly assured the public the reef would be protected, behind the scenes exploratory surveying and drilling were already taking place without any for-



The stern section of the Torrey Canyon awash following break-up. The RAF and Royal Navy used bombs, kerosene and napalm to try to burn up the leaking oil.

image c/o www.axfordsabode.org.uk/torrey13.htm

mal protective measures in place.

Liberal Prime Minister John Gorton had expressed reservations about drilling and the federal government made moves to broaden its authority over the resources of the Reef.

But Gorton's government was deeply divided and did not proceed with legal action as the Commonwealth to

claim jurisdiction of the Reef because it did not want to impinge on states' rights.

Then came the bombshell. In September 1969, the Queensland government announced that drilling by a joint venture between oil giant Ampol and oil exploration company Japex would commence in Repulse Bay off Mackay in October 1969.

Japex had already begun preliminary work: equipment was being assembled in Mackay.

There was an outpouring of public opposition. Rohan Lloyd writes that:

On September 18, the Premier's Department became inundated with telegrams from the public deploring the government for allowing drilling to go ahead.⁷

The commencement date was subsequently postponed to February 1970 due to delays in the fit-out of the *Navigator*, the oil rig hired by Japex to perform the drilling.

The *Navigator* was an ex-US navy cargo ship which was being modified at the Texas port of Orange to become a state-of-the-art mobile oil rig. It then had a forty-five-day journey to sail to Brisbane.

With the embarkation of the *Navigator* imminent, the most decisive ele-



John Busst

ment in the campaign to oppose oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef came into play—industrial action by the unions.

The Unions Move

QWPS activist John Busst was an incredibly energetic activist and well-connected, and he had been lobbying anybody and everybody to oppose the drilling—including Labor leaders and the unions.

On September 5 1969, Busst wrote to federal opposition leader Gough Whitlam and asked if “the appropriate unions would care to take strike action against Ampol—after all the Reef is the workers’ playground!”⁸

His efforts began to bear fruit.

On 16 September, the Commonwealth secretary of the Amalgamated

Engineering Union wrote to Bjelke-Petersen:

If Ampol-Japex persists, in the face of public opinion and drills in Repulse Bay, a voluntary Australia-wide boycott on all Ampol-Japex products will be called for, and a similar boycott on any other oil or mining company endangering the future of the Great Barrier Reef.”⁹

As Judith Wright recounts:

He [Busst] helped to draw up a submission for an Innisfail member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union to present to the ACTU Conference. This was to be published in the union journal; and the AEU had endorsed the campaign to prohibit mining or oil-drilling on the Great Barrier Reef. Mr Bob Hawke had given the submission his own attention; copies were to be sent to the Prime Minister and the Premier.¹⁰

According to Wright, the submission concluded:

It is therefore resolved:

That a total ban on all mining on the reef be immediately declared.

That an independent scientific and judicial commission be set up to determine the future of the GBR with the power to co-opt all such international scientific assistance as thought

necessary.

That the Commonwealth Government be requested to issue an originating summons to the High Court to determine the constitutional issue involved.

That a writ be issued against the Queensland Government to prevent its proceeding with the decision to allow Ampol-Japex to drill in Repulse Bay

That a public opinion poll on mining on the reef be conducted at every major centre on the Queensland coast before the general elections.

That the Barrier Reef be declared a National Marine reserve for the benefit and relaxation of the Australian public, in no way despoiled by the activities of mining companies.

That a voluntary Australia-wide boycott be called for on any oil or mining company endangering the future of the Great Barrier Reef by mining operations.”¹¹

This resolution was incredibly significant. While it was not yet ACTU policy, the AEU had endorsed the campaign to save the Reef and a union black ban to stop mining and drilling, and it was one of the most important unions involved in the mining industry at the time.

Judith Wright understood the precedent that could be set:

Our hopes for a final decision on a union ban were rising. But it seemed too much to expect. We would not know for sure whether it would be implemented until the second week in January. And if it were, it would be the first time, not only in Australian history but as far as we knew in world history, when the trades unions had taken a step that went so far outside their traditional boundaries of interest.¹²

Eddie Hegerl from the Queensland Littoral Society had previously addressed the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland Congress in 1968, calling for the Reef's protection. His address was received "with acclamation":

The President pointed out that if Mr Hegerl's organisation supplied the material, Council would do its best to keep unions acquainted with the developments of this very progressive policy.¹³

In 1969, the Queensland Trade Union Congress went on to pass a resolution "Barrier Reef Protection":

That Congress is concerned at the attempts by the Government to minimise the danger associated with off-shore drilling, particularly drilling within the vicinity of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef is ac-



Judith Wright

knowledged as one of the outstanding tourist attractions of the world, and Congress is completely opposed to endangering this great asset by off-shore drilling.

Congress gives full support to the conservationists and their supporters who are in complete opposition to the drilling of oil wells in and around the Barrier Reef in view of the number of blowouts that have occurred in off-shore drilling around Australia and other countries which have fouled beaches and killed off land and fish life.

That Congress request the Federal Government to immediately make sufficient funds available to protect the Great Barrier Reef from the ravages of the Crown of Thorns starfish as the reef must be protected.

Congress calls on the Federal

Government to declare the Barrier Reef as a National Park and Reserve and assume full responsibility for its preservation.

Further we call on the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party to raise the question of the Barrier Reef at the recommencement of Parliament.¹⁴

Then on January 6 1970, environmental activists woke to see headlines splashed across all the major papers: Unions Likely To Ban Work on Coast Drill.¹⁵

The Transport Workers Union had decided to recommend to the Queensland Trades and Labor Council that it convene a meeting of all TLC affiliated unions to consider a total ban on drilling.

In a letter dated January 6 1970, secretary of the Queensland branch of the TWU, Arch Bevis, wrote:

As a result of discussions held at the Queensland Branch Committee of Management of the Transport Workers' Union on the question of protection of the Great Barrier Reef in line with policy formed by the Queensland Trade Union Congress, 1969, the following resolution was carried unanimously:-

That the Transport Workers Union take up with the Queensland Trades & Labour

Council the question of protection of the Great Barrier Reef against the drilling of oil by calling a Meeting of all affiliated Unions with a view to implementing a form of ban on any oil drilling companies on the Great Barrier Reef to see that no drilling for oil take place.

Hoping that the Trades & Labour Council will place this matter before affiliated Unions as soon as possible.¹⁶

The main unions likely to be involved included the Transport Workers Union, the storemen and packers' union, the boilermakers' union, the AEU and the ironworkers' association. The TWU said that unions may also look to the ACTU to approach unions internationally to ban the *Navigator*.

Following the TWU's committee of management meeting, Arch Bevis told the media that the Barrier Reef was one of the wonders of the world:

But neither the State nor Federal Governments has done anything positive to protect this Australian heritage.

It would be too late to oppose drilling for oil on the reef after a blow-out. We want to oppose it before it starts.¹⁷

Mr Bevis, *The Courier Mail* reported, said members of his union's branch management committee did not want

a repetition of the Santa Barbara blow-out in the United States, which did irreparable damage to the coastline.¹⁸

The black ban was backed by left-wing Labor Senator, staunch unionist, and member of the cross-party Save The Reef Committee, George Georges who sent a telegram to Ampol and Japex on January 5 reported widely in the newspapers:

Public opinion is Australia is strongly against drilling in Great Barrier Reef areas...Failure of state and federal governments to act to protect the reef had necessitated direct action.

Therefore, before the *Navigator* leaves for Australia, I warn those in control that I intend to launch a campaign to declare the vessel black and to withhold services of labour and essential goods for its operation.

George Georges told the media that he did not take this stand lightly:

I did it because all other efforts have proved useless, despite the fact that 90 percent of people are against drilling on or near the reef.

Even with members of the government parties opposed to drilling, we are getting nowhere. Now we will take some more militant action.¹⁹

As *The Australian* reported:

He [Georges] said trade unions were ready to join him in the fight to stop the drilling.

The Transport Workers Union would organise to impose the black ban and most other unions had carried motions condemning the drilling proposals.

His move would be the start of widespread union action.²⁰

Doug Sherrington, a Queensland Labor State member, in the same article applauded the stand taken by Senator Georges.

Anything that will save the reef will have my whole-hearted support, particularly if it comes from the trade union movement.

The situation as far as the reef is concerned, demands drastic measures.

Future generations will owe much gratitude to the trade union movement if by implementing the black ban it prods officialdom into direct action.²¹

The call for a black ban was big news not only in Queensland but across Australia and even internationally and had an almost immediate impact.

Environmentalists were ecstatic and relieved. Despite all the campaigning to build public support, the lobbying of politicians, the development of a scientific case, the approaches to the

Commonwealth government to intervene, it was union threats of a black ban that proved to be decisive.

As campaigner John Busst put it, “It has taken us two and a half years to find the weapon. This is it.”²²

The QTLC agreed to call a special meeting of its affiliated unions and its dispute committee to discuss the issue given its importance.

“It seems now that only the Trade Union Movement is capable of saving the reef. Every Union and every Unionist has an obligation to posterity to do just that,” wrote Secretary Fred Whitby in a letter to all affiliated unions. “I appeal therefore to all affiliated unions to ensure that they are represented at this meeting.”²³

With the QTLC special meeting looming, Ampol recommended to Japex on January 13 1970 that it defer the start to oil drilling operations and offered \$5000 towards the cost of holding an inquiry.²⁴

The threat of industrial action was key to their decision as outlined in a telegram Ampol sent to Japex: “In view of grave fears expressed by sections of the community that drilling constitutes a threat to the Great Barrier Reef, it is our opinion now that industrial action will prevent the drilling of this off-shore well by you, when the rig arrives on site.”²⁵

TWU Secretary Arch Bevis greeted Ampol’s “belated interest” in the reef with scepticism and questioned the effectiveness of a committee of inquiry saying,

Far too often committees go on but are not allowed to implement their recommendations.

Committees have a habit of being hand-picked personnel who don’t have any teeth.²⁶

On January 16, newspapers reported that the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen State Council had decided to support the TWU’s resolution:

The union’s state division manager (Mr FE Doyle) said yesterday his council’s decision meant that Queensland railway engine crews would refuse to haul any goods or materials in any way related to Reef oil drilling.

We believe people would not support the State Government’s action in exposing the reef to danger. On the contrary, they would support what the unions are trying to do.²⁷

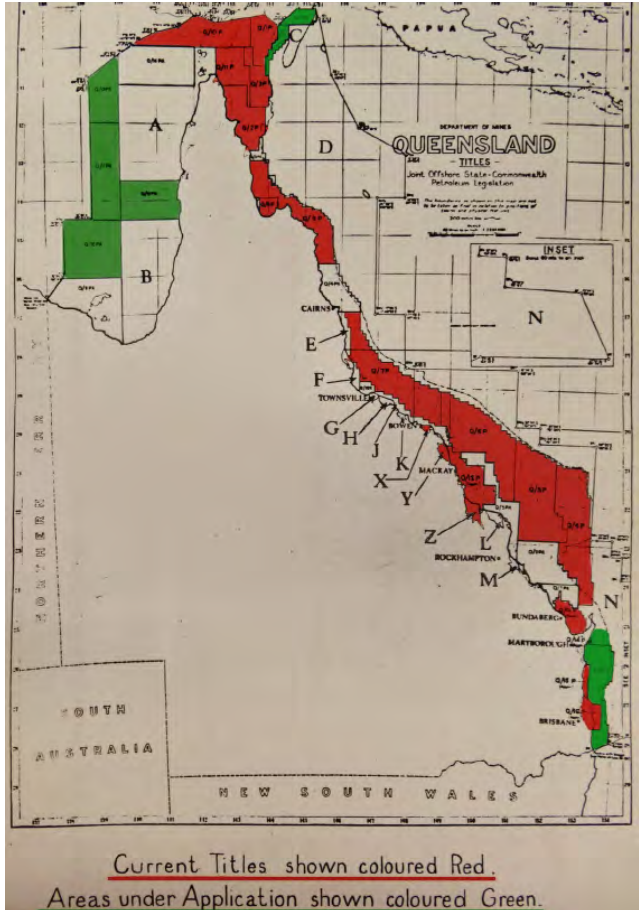
The special meeting of the QTLC took place on January 21 1970 and as expected a total black ban by all affiliated unions on oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef was endorsed.

As Judith Wright says in *The Coral Battleground*, “We were saved by the

bell.” The union black ban on the Mackay drilling was “spectacular and unprecedented”.²⁸

The QTLC received massive public support for its stance. Encouraging and congratulatory letters flowed in as well as donations for the cause.

Even *The Australian’s* editorials were in favour of the union bans. On 7 January 1970, it said that the public had been forced to take direct action: “The black ban proposed by Senator Georges to abort drilling plans will have an unprecedented measure of public support and will probably succeed. It deserves to.”²⁹



Map showing areas held under petroleum exploration titles off-shore and areas off-shore which were under application in 1970. c/o Appendix D in Statement of AW Norrie, NLA, MS 3990. Exhibits of the Royal Commission, 2/3 (ii), Exhibit 80. Modified by Coreen Wessels

The Queensland branch of the Postal Telecommunications Technicians’ Union wrote to the TLC on February 13 1970 to inform it that the branch had passed two resolutions

That the Queensland Branch support Senator G Georges,

the Transport Workers Union and other Queensland Unions on the action taken by them to prevent Private or Public Companies oil drilling on or about the Barrier Reef.

That the Queensland Branch be

authorised by Federal Council to use Industrial Action if necessary against public or private companies or government instrumentalities who attempt to drill for oil on or about the Great Barrier Reef.³⁰

The Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union of Australia also sent its support:

Dear Fred [Whitby],

At a recent State Council meeting of the above Union, discussion revolved around the question of the Save the Barrier Reef Campaign, and I advise that the following resolution was carried:

That the Trades and Labour Council and Unions concerned be congratulated in their stand in the preservation of the Barrier Reef and the complete ban on Companies interested in drilling for oil in this region.

Best wishes

Yours fraternally

H Mellor

Branch Secretary³¹

Both federal and state opposition Labor Party leaders (Gough Whitlam and Ed Casey) had come out in opposition to drilling on the reef and called for national park protection.

The Queensland government admitted that there was nothing that they could do about a union back ban.

Queensland Minister for Mines and Energy Ron Camm, whose electorate was the Whitsundays where the drilling was to take place, said:

If the trades unions want to deprive the people of Mackay of the money that these drillers would pay for their supplies, they can go ahead.

These people are simply standing in the way of progress, and they want Queensland to be the only state without off-shore exploration.³²

He was well aware of the power that the unions had.

When Ampol called for Japex to defer drilling, Camm responded,

If the company concerned declines to go ahead with the project, that is its responsibility. I realise that it could not continue with this threat emanating from Senator Georges and the unions.³³

The Queensland government was impotent in the face of the black bans.

Unions in general were on the offensive. In the previous year, draconian anti-union laws embodied in the Penal Powers had been smashed when more than a million workers struck to free the Victorian tramways union secretary Clarrie O'Shea jailed for refusing to pay fines incurred under the laws.

The opposition to drilling and the outpouring of support for the unions' stand put Prime Minister John Gorton under pressure to act. The Commonwealth government decided to shut down drilling in the Gulf of Papua which was under its control at the time.

It then proposed that a committee of inquiry be established, jointly convened by the federal and Queensland government, into the issue of drilling on the reef.

The Queensland government refused to concede and was adamant that drilling should proceed.

But as Rohan Lloyd writes in *Saving The Reef*, "The black ban...provided the necessary political capital for the Commonwealth to intervene and leverage a general postponement of all oil drilling on the Reef."³⁴

Prime Minister Gorton wrote to Bjelke-Petersen that:

The proposal before us now is that drilling be suspended on or near the Reef pending a truly joint Commonwealth/State inquiry which will report to both our governments and which will make public its reports.³⁵

All but one of the six oil companies awarded permits agreed to suspend operations while the inquiry took place.

Japex did not. It had already spent a lot of money in preparation and the rig was now on its way from the United States. Japex wanted Ampol to reimburse it for expenses.

On January 25 1970, it was reported that the Repulse Bay project was likely to be abandoned. By February 14 Japex announced that it would defer drilling in Repulse Bay. The contract with the *Navigator* was terminated.

Just six weeks from the announcement made by the TWU calling for union bans, the drilling operation in Repulse Bay was dead in the water. And all other operations had been halted.

Busst celebrated the black ban with Judith Wright, declaring:

The submission I wrote some time ago for the A.C.T.U eventually stirred things up, as did my hasty dash to Townsville to see Whitlam, to ask him to put a ban on the rig. It has taken us 2 ½ years to bend this weapon—this is it, and the screws can be tightened still further, if the government inquiry is not over and above board ³⁶

On January 29, the composition of the inquiry—subsequently upgraded to a Royal Commission—had been announced. It was as Arch Bevis from the TWU had predicted. Its members were indeed hand-picked to give

drilling for oil on the Reef a favourable hearing.

The inquiry would be headed by a three-person committee: a judge, a marine biologist, and a petroleum engineer.

Rohan Lloyd reveals that Bjelk-Petersen vetoed candidates proposed by the Commonwealth because he felt they would not be sympathetic to the Queensland government's position.

The Commonwealth had put forward Mr AD Acuff as the engineer. But he was considered unacceptable by the Queensland government because of his participation in the inquiry into the Santa Barbara oil spill and in the subsequent rewriting of the US's offshore drilling regulations.

"I feel that in Mr Acuff there is a person who would come to the Committee with at least some pre-determined views which would be detrimental to our position," Bjelke-Petersen told Cabinet.³⁷

No environmental scientist or organisation was represented. There was no funding for independent scientists to be brought in as witnesses. It was only ongoing campaigning and publicity that forced the Commonwealth government's hand in this regard.

The *Navigator* eventually arrived in Brisbane on March 11 to wait for a new assignment.

The unions maintained a very watchful eye and restated their commitment to banning any activity connected to drilling.

In May 1970, the Seamens Union state branch wanted written assurances that the *Navigator* was not to be used to drill for oil anywhere near the Reef until the inquiry was completed.

The union's state secretary J Steel said that until such an assurance was received, a black ban placed on the ship would remain in force. Otherwise, the union could prevent the rig sailing by Brisbane tug crews refusing it service.³⁸

And they indeed received a written assurance!

Dear Sir,

RE: D.V. Navigator

This will confirm my telephone assurance on behalf of the owners, Zapata (Aust) Pty. Ltd. Regarding this Oil Drilling Vessel. Following the cancellation of the original contract, there is no intention for this vessel to operate in the Barrier Reef waters.³⁹

The unions continued to remain wary of accepting the outcomes of the Royal Commission. Fred Whitby, the general secretary of the QTLC told the *New York Times* in September 1970, "The decision of the commission won't alter our attitude a bit."



The article continued:

He thus indicated that the unions would continue to immobilise any oil operations in the vicinity of the reef by boycotts as long as the labor leaders considered that there is an element of risk in the drilling.

Protection of the reef “is probably the most popular decision we have ever taken,” Mr Whitby remarked.⁴⁰

The Royal Commission took several years to hear all the evidence and bring down its findings. When it did in November 1974, the three commissioners were split between one who argued that all drilling should be postponed until research had been conducted and two others who felt that drilling could go ahead “with stringent conditions.”

As Judith Wright notes,

it seemed to us that the Commissioners had too much accepted the view that their terms of reference were to state where and how the Reef could be drilled—not whether it should be protected from drilling.⁴¹

The Queensland government made it clear in any case that it would ignore any finding made by the Royal Commission to stop drilling. It was not only politically committed to exploitation of natural resources for the development of Queensland capitalism; its members had very close ties to mining interests. Half the state cabinet held substantial shares in mining companies which had dealings with the government.

It remained unmoved by oil spills that even directly affected the state: off

Townsville and near the Torres Strait.

While the Royal Commission was undertaking its hearings, Gough Whitlam's Labor team was swept to power in 1972. Labor had gone to the election with the promise to protect the Reef by making it a national park.

In 1973, the Whitlam government enacted legislation to claim federal jurisdiction over off-shore regions and associated resources below the low-water mark. But this was challenged by the Senate which removed the sections regarding the mining code.

The states went berserk. They launched an appeal in the High Court against the legislation. In fact, they did not wait for the High Court's ruling and, ignoring Whitlam's legislation, decided to unilaterally renew offshore drilling permits without consulting the federal government.

The only state that did not do this was Queensland.

Whitlam did not wait for the High Court finding either. In mid-1975, he brought in Labor's promised legislation, enabling the declaration of a marine national park covering the Great Barrier Reef and the setting up of an authority, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, to advise the government on its management.

But then Whitlam was dismissed by

the Governor General and Labor lost the ensuing election. Malcolm Fraser became prime minister.

After Whitlam

It was not the Royal Commission's findings which resulted in protection of the reef. Even Whitlam's legislation, while a huge step forward, may not have protected the reef from further exploitation.

While the High Court eventually found against the states and ruled that the Commonwealth had jurisdiction beyond the low-water mark, Fraser was open to relinquishing Commonwealth rights.

As late as 1979, there was speculation about the potential for drilling and mining on the reef. Federal and state government ministers were meeting to discuss a joint program of 'development'. This meeting was expected to consider "guidelines to define areas where exploratory oil drilling could be allowed".⁴²

The one constant which prevented drilling from going ahead was union power.

When it was reported that Fraser might allow drilling, the ACTU immediately reconfirmed the union commitment.

The *Courier Mail* reported on May 16 1979 that the ACTU had placed a total

ban on all drilling and mining operations on the Great Barrier Reef:

The A.C.T.U. president (Mr Hawke) said last night the ban was effective immediately.

He said that the Barrier Reef was a natural resource of inestimable value.

It should be preserved at all costs—and forever...

Mr Hawke said that the A.C.T.U would seek the support of international union organisations for its reef ban.⁴³

This action by the ACTU had followed a request from the Queensland TLC with Secretary Fred Whitby reiterating that there would be no compromise by the union movement within Australia on drilling of the Reef.⁴⁴

The decision was praised in a letter from prominent environmentalist Vincent Serventy, President of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia, to the TLC:

Our Society welcomes your reaffirmation of the ban on drilling on the Great Barrier Reef. As you know this was the first time anywhere in the world, where the union movement had taken direct action to protect the environment and signalled the birth of the 'green ban' movement, though in your case it might more aptly be described as a 'blue ban'.⁴⁵

The continued threat of union action, the intransigence of environmental activists and overwhelming public expectations that had been crystallised by the bans meant that drilling on the reef was now well and truly off the agenda.

Reflection

The incredible action taken by unions in 1970 has so much relevance for today.

Unions had the power to protect the Reef. Alongside uncompromising environmental activists, they pushed back governments which ignored public opinion and the science.

The Great Barrier Reef, with its diversity of life, is again under threat—this time by climate change.

The Great Barrier Reef is a unique environmental treasure, but it is also a canary in a coalmine. It is warning us of a catastrophic future if we do not act.

We have already witnessed the destruction and loss of life and livelihoods caused by unprecedented fires, floods and famine induced by global warming.

Governments, both conservative and Labor, are not prepared to do what is

needed to protect the reef or our society.

Their over-arching concerns are for the coal mining companies and their profits and maintaining the “confidence” of corporations to invest. Just like the Joh Bjelke-Petersen government, they are ignoring popular opinion and the science. The Queensland Labor government endorsed the massive greenhouse gas emitting Adani coal mine.

Unions could play a key role like they did in 1970.

In 1970, Queensland unions took unprecedented action to protect the reef. Some of these unions had members directly involved in the oil and mining industries. But they stepped outside those immediate interests and acted for the whole of society.

That sort of union action is needed

now to demand an end to fossil fuel exploitation, the transformation of our economy with new jobs that will not leave any worker worse off.

Of course, there are differences between then and now.

Union coverage today is much lower, and unions are hindered by laws which constrain industrial action. But the stakes are higher.

In the 1970s, unions were on the offensive in fighting for pay and workers’ rights and not afraid to take industrial action regardless of its legality.

Meanwhile it is also essential for environmental activists to see the potential in an alignment with the union movement and the power that unions represent as the activists in the WPSQ did in the 1960s.

Alison Stewart has been a socialist activist since the mid-1980s. She is an original member of the Cloudland Collective (CC), established in the wake of the election of the Newman government to oppose its neo-liberal agenda. Since then she has been involved with the CC organising forums on issues such as climate change and the role of unions. She helped organise the 2021 joint forum with CC and the BLHA on slavery in Australia following Scott Morrison’s scandalous and ignorant comments that no such thing existed here.

Notes

¹ Judith Wright, *The Coral Battleground* (West Melbourne, Vic.: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 152.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Rohan Lloyd, *Saving the Reef* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2022).

⁴ Wright, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷ Lloyd, 119.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 120. Lloyd quotes from James Cook University holdings: Busst to Whitlam, September 5, 1969, JCU, Busst Papers, 2/16.

⁹ Lloyd, 120. Lloyd quotes from Queensland State Archive holdings: Garland (Commonwealth Secretary AEU) to Bjelke-Petersen, September 16, 1969, QSA, SRS 1043, ID 538155.

¹⁰ Wright, 92.

¹¹ Amalgamated Engineering Union, Submission to the 1969 ACTU Conference, quoted in Wright, 92.

¹² Wright, 104.

¹³ Minutes of the second session of the 44th Queensland Trade Union Congress, October 16, 1968, pages 2-3, Trades and Labor Council Collection, University of Queensland Fryer Library, 118, Box 9.

¹⁴ Decisions of the 45th Queensland Trade Union Congress, page 19, TLC Collection UQFL118, Box 90.

¹⁵ Courier Mail, January 6, 1970, TLC Collection, UQFL. 118, Box 328.

The TLC clearly felt that their actions around the Great Barrier Reef would be historically important and set aside everything in this folder that they thought was related: newspaper clippings, flyers, letters, press releases.

¹⁶ TLC Collection UQFL118, Box 328.

¹⁷ TLC Collection, Box 328.

¹⁸ TLC Collection, Box 328.

¹⁹ *The Australian*, January 6, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

²⁰ TLC Collection, Box 328.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Wright, 105.

²³ Letter from Queensland Trades and Labor Secretary Fred Whitby, January 14 1970 TLC Collection UQFL118.

²⁴ Courier Mail, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

²⁵ *The Australian*, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

²⁶ Courier Mail, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

²⁷ Courier Mail, January 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

²⁸ Wright, 120.

²⁹ *The Australian*, January 7, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

³⁰ Letter from Merv Vining, Acting Secretary, QPTTU, to the Queensland Trades and Labor Council, February 13, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

³¹ TLC Collection, Box 328.

³² Courier Mail, January 7, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

³³ Courier Mail, January 14, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

³⁴ Lloyd, 132.

³⁵ Telegram from Gorton to Bjelke-Petersen, January 19, 1970, Queensland State Archives, SRS 1043, ID 538159 as quoted in Lloyd, 133.

³⁶ Busst to Wright, February 4, 1970, JCU Busst Papers, 2/13 as quoted by Lloyd, 141.

³⁷ Cabinet Minute, Decision 14082, Committee of Inquiry – Barrier Reef, February 1970, p. 2. Quoted in Lloyd, 151.

³⁸ Courier Mail, May 6, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

³⁹ A. Flynn, letter to Fred Whitby, Secretary QTL, May 7, 1970, TLC Collection, Box 328.

⁴⁰ "Drilling for Oil Poses New Threat to the Great Barrier Reef." *New York Times*. September 4, 1970, p. 10. <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/04/archives/drilling-for-oil-poses-a-new-threat-to-the-great-barrier-reef.html>

⁴¹ Wright, 175.

⁴² Courier Mail, May 16, 1979, TLC Collection, Box 328.

⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ Courier Mail, May 12, 1979, TLC Collection, Box 328.

⁴⁵ Letter from Vincent Serventy to Queensland TLC, May 16, 1979, TLC Collection, Box 328

Towards Sixty Years of Maritime Unionism: an Interview with MUA Member Mike Barber Part 2

Jeff Rickertt

The previous issue of *The Queensland Journal of Labour History* (number 35) featured an interview by Jeff Rickertt with seafarer and radical Maritime Union of Australia member Mike Barber.

Mike went to sea from Merseyside, England, in September 1964. After working for 13 years as a cook and steward on British and New Zealand vessels, Mike moved to Australia in 1977 where he became a staunch activist in the Seamen's Union of Australia and then the MUA.

This is an edited transcript of Jeff's second and final interview with Mike.

Action and not just Words

Jeff: Mike, last time we talked about some of the industrial struggles you have been involved with and we focussed on the '66 seafarers' strike in the UK, the strike in New Zealand and the fight that you were directly involved in to save the *Australian Enterprise* when you were on the crew. Are there other industrial or political campaigns that you were involved in that you would like to mention?

Mike: Two come to mind. One was the picketing of the offices of the Columbus Line in Sydney in the early 1980s. The Columbus Line operated a consortium of four

vessels, one German, one British, one Swedish and one Australian. Australian National Lines (ANL) supplied the Australian ship, the *Allunga*, to this consortium. We believed at the time that ANL's manager, Max 'the Axe' Moore-Wilton, wanted to prove ANL an unviable business and remove the *Allunga* from the consortium as one of many steps towards selling off the ANL fleet. Both issues were on the agenda of both the Coalition and the Labor Party. We knew the end of ANL meant the end of guaranteed employment opportunities for Australia seafarers.

We picketed the Columbus Line offices because we believed a commitment from them to retain the *Allunga* as an Australian-crewed vessel would scuttle Moore-Wilton's plan. And it worked, up to a point. We were successful in pressuring the Columbus Line manager into agreeing to retain and crew the *Allunga* with Australian SUA members. This would have made it harder for those pushing for ANL's privatisation and eventual demise.

However, there was a catch. The Columbus Line manager wouldn't agree to use Australian officers and engineers, and for that reason, my understanding is that [SUA Federal Secretary] Pat Geraghty refused to take the deal.

Now, you could say that that's a principled position, but the world changes. When the French took over the vessel *Australian Enterprise*, we were sailing with overseas officers and engineers. So, to me it was a bit of a contradiction; you can do it for that ship, but you couldn't do it for a Columbus Line vessel.

Jeff: There was a picket in Sydney? Tell me a bit more about that.

Mike: The picket line was down on George Street at the offices of the Columbus Line, organised by the SUA Sydney branch. We still had the roster system in those days. So, all of us who were on leave and looking for work – 20, 30 or 40 of us perhaps at the most – would attend the office in Kent Street [as required to register for work] and then we'd head down to George Street and protest for a couple of hours, mainly around lunchtime, loudly protesting and handing out leaflets to save Australian crewed shipping. Then at one stage a delegation went upstairs to Columbus' head office, and a deal was worked out.

We didn't seek to have additional ships, we just wanted to keep the one we had as it appeared to be under threat. But from memory, I don't think that there was any report back about the deal to the members at stop work meetings. It may have been that there was no other deal available or no deal along the principal lines. But there was no discussion about it: should we do that, or should we carry on or should we accept? There was no decision that I remember that rank and file members could take part in.

Jeff: So, the deal was on the table but was knocked back because it didn't allow for employment of Australian officers and engineers? And it was knocked back without consultation with members?

Mike: I think so. There may have been information saying what had taken place between the manager and presumably the federal secretary and others. But not a lot of information about whether the deal was acceptable or not acceptable, there were no options discussed around that decision.

So that was that. By picketing we succeeded in getting agreement to protect SUA members' jobs, but in the end the agreement was

knocked back by our own side. This outcome signalled the start of a downward spiral of all Australian shipping sectors. All ANL coastal and overseas trading ships came under renewed attack and were eventually scooped up by overseas multinationals like CMA-CGM.

The other dispute that comes to mind was a more recent one, during [Queensland MUA Secretary] Bob Carnegie's term in office from 2015 to 2019. It involved mining company Rio Tinto. We held a rally and a sit-in at Rio Tinto's offices in Brisbane. We were threatened with arrests and gaol, but we didn't baulk. Bob was lying in the middle of the floor! There was a good solid support of at least maybe 60 or 70



Former MUA Queensland Secretary Bob Carnegie leading an occupation of the Rio Tinto office in Brisbane image c/o Mike Barber



MUA members outside Rio Tinto in Brisbane, demanding more employment opportunities for Australian seafarers image c/o Mike Barber

of our own members plus CFMEU people, ETU representatives, and Michael Clifford from the Queensland Council of Unions.

Jeff: Take me through the issues at stake in that dispute.

Mike: Well, the issue at stake really stemmed from the fact that on the coastal run delivering bauxite from Weipa to Gladstone, Rio Tinto was managing only four ships that were Australian-manned. There were also six or seven, up to eight, foreign-flagged ships and crews doing the same run, which meant there was plenty of Bauxite being shipped out, and room for increased Australian-manned vessels. So, inevitably,

Rio Tinto was getting undercut on those Aussie-manned vessels even though they benefitted from the cheap overseas labour delivering bauxite to QAL in Gladstone. Then through the crews' management company, ASP ship management, pressure was applied to members crewing their four ships to reduce conditions and wages. They claimed that a reduction in labour costs was the only way they could retain the four vessels. Apparently, Bob had had earlier discussions with Rio Tinto, and he said to us, at branch meetings of members, "we're going to take this fight on".

Bob argued we should have another couple of ships, at least.

My understanding was after that rally and sit-in, that's what was promised. We saw that as a success. It was April 2019 when that was achieved.

We also had a sit-in with another company which was in some other trade that involved us, and we took over those offices too and barred anybody going up to the manager's floor. Again, police were there, and threats of arrest were made. But that's the difference in leadership between then and now. Bob's leadership was instrumental in getting the members to come and support the issues and to stand fast when the going got tough. We didn't get going, we sat there and were well-prepared for arrest.

Jeff: How long did the Rio Tinto sit-in last?

Mike: Probably about two hours or so, not including the couple of hours or so taken up by marching to their offices and the rally outside beforehand. A few people spoke at the rally: the QCU's Michael Clifford, Peter Ong from the ETU, and Bob of course. But you cannot fight with words only; you must fight with action and that's what we did. We occupied the foyer of

the office until Rio Tinto agreed to discussion. Then we cleared the place. But it all fell apart once he lost office.

That was one of the major achievements of Bob's term in office. The other, of course, was the successful struggle with Hutchison when they sacked their workforce by text at midnight. Bob had only been in office two months when this occurred. He won it by his skills and the organisation of rallies at the gate entrance. He not only ensured the members received subsistence while locked out, he reached a settlement. All members were returned to their positions within the company, except the lead delegate Damien McGarry.

Think Globally and Understand Capitalism

Mike: You cannot just fiddle around the edges without understanding the global phenomena that's going on. Capitalism is not a singular domestic issue. It's a broad worldwide economic and political issue, and it has always been two steps ahead of the working class, always. And we struggle to understand how they manage to defeat us so easily. Because we're ill-



BLHA Patron Uncle Bob Anderson addressing MUA picketers outside Hutchison Ports after the company sacked the workforce by text, Brisbane, 2015. (image courtesy Lachlan Hurse)

prepared. We're not being informed or organised enough. Left wing voices in social democracy are not heard nor loud enough. There is not enough avenue there to do it. This is a role for unions but if they've lost their political voice or it's suppressed from within our own side, then how do working class people form an understanding of this global phenomena?

Capitalism is an imperialist system. It doesn't care about national boundaries. It cares about profit, where they can gain it the most

and whose workers' rights they can ignore, undermine or squash the easiest.

Jeff: The globalisation aspect of this is really important, and of course that goes to the heart of the shipping industry because it is a global enterprise. Do you think it is actually achievable to have a global shipping industry in which workers do enjoy a living wage, and we don't have the situation where workers in one section of the maritime industry are competing against workers in another section? Do you think it's feasible?

Mike: Not under capitalism. Take China. The massive and rapid development of China is based on transferring industry there for cheap labour initially. Their wages were fairly poor. No doubt capital will shift to wherever it can find the cheapest wages whenever it happens. If China's workers' wages rose too fast or become 'uncompetitive', corporations will go somewhere else without blinking an eye.

That's the inherently competitive nature of capitalism. It's got to find a cheap workforce and continue to expand cheap production. If it cannot move because of the nature of the industry, it's got to suppress the workforce where it is located. So, that downward pressure is always there.

I think the International Transport Federation (ITF) does a good job for foreign seafarers. We see good successful results here in Australia because we have good ITF representatives who consistently do the job that we understand it to be, and that's to improve wages and conditions or ensure those people who arrive here on foreign vessels

are getting the wages that the ITF has determined for them. We know that doesn't always happen, but they do achieve many publicised positive outcomes.

But I don't think the ITF has any direct influence on rebuilding something like the strategic [Australian national] fleet, because that's a political decision. That might happen, not because the Labor government is supportive of, and anxious about, Australian seafarers, but because it's what capital in Australia needs. They need that certainty of supply, and certainty of export and import, and the government now says, obviously with some pressure from our union, that that's best served by Australian ships and Australian seafarers on those ships. There's nothing wrong with that in principle but I don't think that's an ITF matter. That's a national seafaring matter and I think if you look at the state of Australian seafarers around the country – I can only speak for what's going on in Queensland – we're pretty disillusioned that for the last ten or 15 years so many ships have disappeared with only token resistance from our side.

Sticking Up for Principles and Policy

Jeff: Bringing it back to a personal level, what has been the cost to you personally of the collapse of working opportunities in seafaring for Australian workers? How has it affected you?

Mike: Well, it's affected me tremendously, because I followed the principles that I understood our union upholds and I've taken on companies when issues need to be taken up. It's been a cost to me because the last time I did that, I had to take the company to a civil court at a cost to myself of nearly \$50,000.

Jeff: Tell me about that experience. What was that about?

Mike: Well, I'm not supposed to name the company because of the terms of settlement, although I don't suppose they're going to sue me now! It was an offshore company I was working for, and I'd been with them maybe eight years and I was on the consultative committee comprising management and workers' representatives. Through it, we negotiated with management. Being a cook, I pushed not to accept

reductions in budgets for supplies on the ship. There is constant pressure to do so but there was a union letter posted to everyone in the offshore vessels, stating that we should not allow reductions in food supplies and to report it to the union if you came under such pressures. Victuals are part and parcel of your living conditions and wages. Companies see those provisions as 'non-productive' and are an increasing cost to purchase and supply, and so easy to benignly attack within the Enterprise Agreement.

On one occasion, we decided to stick the ship up in King Bay awaiting a store order. We'd run out of certain essential items. We're not talking about what they class as luxury items, but essential items. So, I put a store order in; it was knocked back. We had a meeting of MUA members on board the ship. All agreed that we weren't going to sail until our entitled supplies were provided, and this was supported by the entire MUA crew. We forced the issue; we rang the local branch which you're obliged to do, whatever port you're in. We were supported by the branch secretary at the time, and he made sure we got those stores.



*Mike Barber 2022
c/o Jeff Rickertt*

We were supposed to sail that night but then there was what they call a ‘hot shot order’, which is an urgent mechanical requirement for the rig or wherever we’re going to. So, we stayed overnight. We didn’t delay the vessel but a later charge against me said we had.

When I was due to return to the vessel after my leave, I was informed by the general manager that I was not going back, because, he said, “you can’t go sticking ships up.” I enquired whether he had sacked all five union members aboard that ship, or just me. He said, “No, just you.” I said, “Well, that’s a discrimination issue.” And I said, “I’m not accepting that.” But when I informed the Sydney branch, their

response was, “I told you to keep your head down and not get into trouble. We saved your arse and got you the permanent job with the company and you should have kept your head down.”

I was then notified by the company that I was going to another vessel, so I went to another vessel, and they just made my life hell. They criticised my catering ability and everything I did. And this after successfully serving on their vessels for nearly eight years consecutively. I think there was a deliberate undermining of my position by the officers and engineers and some of the crew to find any excuse to say I wasn’t doing my job properly. So, I got the sack off that one for whatever reasons they conveniently conjured up. I said, “I’m not happy or accepting this and I’m going to take this to the Fair Work Commission.”

Initially I was supported by the Sydney branch but only to one level. When nothing could be done at the Commission level and it would have to go to a federal level, they dropped off. So, I thought, “Well, I’m not copping this, you’re supposed to be defending me, I’m defending a union position.”

Jeff: That's the key point. You were only defending what is the position of the union.

Mike: Yeah, exactly. That's when my disillusionment kicked in. What is the point of the union having a policy if they're not going to support the members who defend it. This is a problem—delegates don't seem to get defended unless it suits the officials. No wonder members are increasingly disillusioned. No wonder nobody wants to take on union delegate or other shipboard representative roles. In essence, as I've often said to officials and members at Branch monthly meetings, the so-called 'collective' aboard vessels has disintegrated from fear of employer attacks and lack of official union support.

Jeff: So, you took this on yourself?

Mike: Yes, I sought a barrister's assistance, here in Brisbane. We took it as far as we could go. I believed I had a good chance of winning that dispute on the grounds of 'adverse action' under the Fair Work legislation. The problem was my case hinged on a supportive letter by members on a particular ship. Their letter supplied evidence of

facts completely at odds with what I believe the company had forced the skipper to fabricate. But the letter was not signed. It was well-written, it established that I'd done nothing wrong, that I was getting on with everybody, that the food was great, everybody was happy. It just appeared to be vindictiveness by the skipper, obviously doing as he was asked to do [by his superiors]. But (the supportive letter) wasn't signed, it was just a type-written letter.

So, my barrister said unless you can get that signed, it's worthless, even though it's accurate. I was still technically employed by the company at this point and attended an offshore conference. One of the other co-delegates on the consultative committee was there—his son drafted the supportive letter—but he refused to sign it, in essence out of fear of reprisal by the same company. So, I said, "Well, that's not what the principles are about here."

But that's where it was left. Subsequently I was successful in getting the support of the branch secretary in WA who was going to go to court with me.

At the 11th hour he rang me at home and told me he had got agreement from the company to pay me a year and a half's wages, and the removal of the leave accumulated in the red. Otherwise they would have taken that back and I'd get nothing. To take the offer, of course, I had to leave the company.

The problem was that other offshore companies do the same as any employer; when you apply for a job, they ring your former company, get the run-down on you, and the phone doesn't ring again. So, that's ten years that I've been without work apart from two four-week swings in 2018. Since that 2012 settlement I have been redrawing all my Super to pay-off my mortgage and ongoing bills. That's the financial impact. No Super left and depending upon work to rebuild that lost savings in super.

Then there is the emotional impact. The lack of support by the Union in assisting me to find work has taken its toll. Even appealing directly to the National Secretary has made no difference. My disillusionment led me to jettison my lifelong SUA/MUA Sydney Branch membership

and change to the Queensland Branch.

Mike: Ten years. Other than a four-week swing on *Northwest Stormpetrel*—one of the gas buggies, as they call them. I think I could have had a permanent job there because I did a good job as a steward, but I had a run-in with the chief steward who subserviently reported me to the captain. So, my future with that particular company was over before it started. [laughs]

Jeff: It's a big price to pay.

Mike: That's the price I paid for my principled positions. I haven't weakened from that; I know who I am. The biggest price has been my total disillusionment with the Union as a representative body allegedly protecting my interests as a member. That doesn't mean I was then or am now disillusioned with trade unions or being a member of a trade union.

Jeff: So, you don't regret taking those stands?

Mike: No, no. How can you? They were principled stands in defence

of the Union policy and members' interests.

Where to for the Workers' Movement?

Mike: When I first arrived in Australia, geez, the obvious strength of the union movement was in your face. There was industrial action going on here, there, and everywhere and it was tremendous, just like it was in New Zealand where I first experienced that sort of strength in unionism. It was fantastic. I think what's happened since then, apart from the external issues we've outlined [anti-union laws, globalisation], which are obvious and do impact, there's generational change, in fact second generational change. From the 1970s to 2022 is a big jump.

I think there's been a shift back to a craft unionism mentality, rather than working class solidarity. One of the failures of unionism a hundred years ago was that craft unions dominated. I think in some ways we've slipped back to that. The Electrical Trades Union is a good left-wing union, or central-left union. But it's still technically about electricians. Ours is still about wharfies and seafarers. The

construction section of the CFMEU is about the construction sector. They purport to represent the working class but I think the leadership in them in general has slipped into craft-based struggle rather than working class-based struggle. And more generally, there are also careerists in union leadership positions. Many union structures have become bureaucratised, and leaders often consider themselves as economic rationalist partners with capital, a relationship they express politically through their uncritical support for social democracy [ALP].

More generally, people are satisfied with less in the sense that if that's what they're struggling about and they get it, they're happy. They don't want to go beyond immediate wage and conditions terms. They don't want to challenge their union's leadership to go beyond those limits, and I think that's what reducing the effectiveness of and the reduction in membership.

Jeff: So, we're not articulating a program that's in any way ambitious. We're just...

Mike: We're just holding the fort. And keeping within social



*A section of the demonstration at the March 11, 2023 NHS rally
c/o www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/03/12/nhsd-m12.html*

democracy's expectations. I think we have to get out of that. That will take a determination by leadership to back working-class struggle and class politics. We seem to have lost that in the MUA except in the form of repetitive rhetoric.

You've only got to look at the current situation on the Australian coast where unfortunately we've had ten years of LNP governments just dishing out licenses to foreign ship owners like confetti at a wedding and there's been no orchestrated opposition to that. Yes, there's been rhetorical opposition but there's no demands. We've gone down to Canberra and attended rallies, and they look good. But they're

ineffective, they've not changed legislation. Even now when a Labor government is in, same as before. We've not changed the big legal obstacle of 45D and 45E [legal sanctions against solidarity strikes] secondary boycott legislation. There is only superficial support for 'the right to strike'.

You cannot offer us a right to strike and still have that secondary boycott legislation sitting there ready to be used by all those companies you're opposing when you do come and strike or you take industrial action. That's got to be sorted. I think this restriction to take an industrial action only when you're in a negotiation is another

limit. We've only got to look at Europe. Did the nurses who are now going on strike worry about secondary boycott or worry about legislation that prohibits them from doing so or the RMT or Unite or any of those other unions that have come out, barristers, journalists?

So, there's a strong sense that working class people, whether it's in this country or Europe or anywhere in the world, you see it in the results of the elections in South America recently and Brazil particularly, and other left-wing candidates there, that the working-class members of any union or not even unions, they are starting to find their voice.

The first signs I've seen of it are not here, but during my recent trip to the United Kingdom. In my brief five weeks over there, I saw such tremendous strike activity going on. It's not just about Boris, it's not just about Liz Truss. Workers there are suddenly finding their voice, they're not copping this capitalist-imposed austerity—reductions and reduced wages, lack of understanding about

working people in general. All the major [UK] unions are now doing what they should have been doing years ago.

Here in Australia we don't take up issues politically. I remember going down to Canberra when we were in the SUA and rallying outside of parliament. I've been there several times over demands relating to shipping and industrial rights like the 45D and 45E laws. Those laws are still there.

Why aren't we focusing on these things that restrict our ability to do the things that as a trade union we should be doing?

Yes, there are legal obstacles. But legal issues did not stop Paddy Troy. Legal issues don't stop people who get out there on the street.

They didn't stop Bob Carnegie organising a sit-in in Rio Tinto's office and achieving an outcome. That's what it's about; determined working-class struggle, action along with the rhetoric.

Jeff Rickertt is a radical historian, activist and librarian, and a former BLHA president and editor of this journal. He contributed to *Radical Brisbane: An Unruly History*, and authored *The Conscientious Communist: Ernie Lane and the Rise of Australian Socialism*.

Revolutionary Rehearsal: The 1912 Brisbane General Strike

Matthew Mercer

The 1912 Brisbane general strike was a dramatic chapter in Australian labour history, as one of the few moments in which working-class revolution presented itself as a serious threat to the capitalist establishment. The strike ultimately went down in defeat but posed the potential to escalate in a more radical direction at various points. This article asks if the strike was a revolutionary threat and why it was treated as one by the Queensland state government and employers.

The decade prior to 1912 had seen an uptick in the strength of industrial unionism in Queensland. The growing momentum of the union movement, particularly with the hard-won victory of the 1911 Sugar Strike, produced a feeling of intense optimism among Queensland unionists. This optimism found its mirror image in the concern of employers and the Queensland government, who were increasingly concluding that unionism in Queensland had to be crushed.¹ Premier Digby Denham

had already attempted to check unionism's growth previously by attacking its legal rights to organise.² These years of tension set the stage for a generalised conflict over the right to unionism in Queensland.

The general strike itself emerged out of a dispute between the Australian Tramway Employees' Association and the Brisbane Tramway Company. 480 tramway workers donned their union badges on January 18 and were suspended by the intransigently anti-union company manager, Joseph Badger. Badger's actions were interpreted by much of the union movement as pre-empting sweeping attacks on unionism across Queensland. To confront the danger, all forty-three Queensland unions struck on the 30th, bringing out over twenty thousand workers.³ In initiating a general strike, the union leaders had unleashed a conflict which brought much more than unionism into question.

The general strike forced the

emergence of important questions around political power and economic control, but not on an abstract or ideological basis. Rather, it was the social dynamics unleashed by the strike which caused these questions to arise. The concrete, economic pressures levied upon the strike movement compelled the newly-formed Strike Committee headed by Queensland union officials to make incursions into the arena of political power and economic control. These incursions presented a *de facto* threat to capitalism, regardless of the intentions of the Strike Committee's leaders. They signalled the potential for the Brisbane strike to mount a revolutionary challenge to the State.

With economic life at a standstill, the Strike Committee was compelled to restart some aspects of production and distribution under its own auspices. This was partly in order to ensure that the necessities of life were still provided to Brisbane, but it also served a functional purpose for the strike, to guard against the possibility that the workers would be starved into submission. Dozens of butchers, bakers, cafes, restaurants, grocers, and hairdressers reopened only under conditions set by the Strike



Australian Tramway Employees Association badge
c/o The Australian Tramway Employees Strike
in January 1912 (pdf) - The Brisbane Tramway
Museum Society

Committee.⁴ As a Strike Committee permit issued to an unknown business ordered:

Sir, - The provisions governing the enclosed permit are as follows:-

- (1.) All work to be carried out solely by Unionists.
- (2.) The said Unionists not to receive any remuneration direct from you, but such remuneration to be forwarded to the Strike Committee, who will pay strike allowance to such employees on application, providing they produce fidelity vouchers signed by you.

Any infringement of the above provisions will render the permit liable to forfeiture. The Committee hold the right for the withdrawal at any time of this permit.

J.A. MOIR, Sec.⁵

Various permits and exemptions were granted by the Strike Committee to authorise the continuation of work. An extended episode saw the manufacture of ice for hospitals disrupted by the strike, with ice production and delivery then restarted with union labour.⁶ At the Brisbane General Hospital, the Strike Committee made an offer to continue construction on an urgently needed pavilion under union provisions, which was denied by the employing contractor.⁷ A permit of particular importance was granted to the Mount Crosby engineers to ensure the continued supply of water to Brisbane.⁸ The Committee even distributed coupons which could be exchanged for foodstuffs at union-run shops in place of paper money. These interventions were pragmatic but pointed in the direction of a far more radical possibility – the emergence of an embryonic dual power in Brisbane.

The Brisbane general strike

predated Vladimir Lenin's theory of "dual power" by half a decade, yet the concept holds relevance in identifying the dynamics which the Strike Committee had unknowingly set in motion. The essence of a dual power situation is the "destruction of the social equilibrium [which has] split the state superstructure. It arises where the hostile classes are already each relying upon incompatible government organisations...which jostle against each other at every step in the sphere of government."⁹

The Strike Committee in Brisbane was certainly discussed in such terms by those hostile to it, as a "rival and hostile authority, which had taken upon itself to...make and enforce its own laws."¹⁰ The key governmental function in dispute was the regulation of the economy. When an organisation like the Strike Committee begins to determine the conditions of economic production across society, even if in an informal or *ad hoc* manner, there is certainly an argument to be made that it has entered the realm of playing a governmental role. The enrolment of Vigilance Officers by the Strike Committee to maintain order is also an indication of a potential challenge for governmental functions, in disputing the

traditional role of the police. This dispute was recognised consciously by Police Commissioner Cahill:

I have now to inform you that the preservation of public order is entrusted to me by the Government of this State, and I will not allow any interloping or interference with my functions. I have now to direct you to withdraw the [Vigilance Officers] from the streets, otherwise the Police will be ordered to treat them as street-loiterers.¹¹

However, the potential of this latter challenge remained unfulfilled, as a serious clash over which body would keep the peace never occurred. In fact, the Vigilance Officers were proactively instructed by Strike Committee President Harry Coyne to “offer no resistance whatever” if arrested.¹²

Any potential dual power in Brisbane was clearly far from developed. The Strike Committee by no means had the capacity or intent to rule society, nor was it based on any democratic control by the workers as the Russian Soviets later were. Both capacity and intent would have been required for a serious, revolutionary challenge to State power. Of equal importance

was the subjective aspect. The politics of the strike leaders and the consciousness of the workers were factors which set limitations vis-à-vis the prospect of revolutionary upheaval – this will be explored in more depth later. As a result, the Brisbane strike appeared not as dual power, but as the *potential* for the emergence of an *embryonic* dual power. Regardless, even this potential challenge for the reins of power sharply caught the attention of the strike’s opponents. The government and employers used the Strike Committee’s interventions into the economy to argue that Trades Hall intended to usurp the government by revolutionary means.

The employers and government were alarmed by the threat the general strike posed and used every means available to end it. What is less clear is exactly what kind of threat the capitalist establishment believed the strike to have represented – was revolution considered a serious prospect, or it was just politically expedient to claim that it was? Much of the rhetoric and behaviour of both the press and establishment does seem to indicate that an escalation of the strike was genuinely anticipated, particularly before the violence of



Official Strike Bulletin No. 1 issued during the Brisbane Tramway Strike, 1912
 “The domineering BADGER has driven home to them what they might expect were they placed at the mercy of himself and his money grabbing syndicate.”
 c/o <https://qalbum.archives.qld.gov.au/qa/official-strike-bulletin-no-1-issued-during-brisbane-tramway-strike-1912>

February 2, “Black Friday,” after which the momentum of the strike movement began to decline.

The tone taken by prominent politicians demonstrates that an uprising of some kind was expected among the higher echelons of the State. The Governor considered the Strike Committee to be revolutionaries, sitting “under the red flag” in Trades Hall, preparing their “reign of terror and intimidation,” while Premier Denham declared Brisbane to be in “a state of siege...a state of war.” Police Commissioner Cahill also believed that the strike was

not in fact over the principle of unionism but was intended as “a revolution and an insurrection” from the beginning, a belief which directly precipitated the refusal to issue procession permits and the subsequent repression on Black Friday.¹³ Press reporting elaborated on the government’s train of thought. In response to a deputation of striking Government printers, Treasurer Barnes directly referenced the Strike Committee’s forays into organising food supplies as indicative of their seditious intent:

The Treasurer said, as servants of the Government,

the printers entered into a movement which had directly for its object practically the overthrow of the Government, as far as the requirements of the city were concerned. They had even gone so far as to block food supplies...

...The Treasurer: You come here and practically say you have been rulers so far as the city of Brisbane was concerned and everybody else.¹⁴

The Minister for Lands, E.H. MacCartney, took a similar tone:

Apparently, a new power has come upon the scene – a power which has claimed all the right of government, and which comes from a centre known as Trades Hall. It seeks to direct the movement of this community, of every individual in it – employer, manufacturer, and employee.¹⁵

It was certainly a recurring theme in the pro-capitalist press that the general strike was an immediate precursor to the implementation of a proletarian dictatorship over Queensland. The dangers of a revolutionary threat were usually the ideological basis for the media's continual vitriol and denunciation of the strike. Much is made of the

supposed true intentions of the “seditious strike leaders”¹⁶ to launch a general strike intended as “neither more nor less than an attempt at revolution [as] a challenge to constituted authority.”¹⁷ A litany of alleged crimes inflicted upon the population were hurled at the Strike Committee:

The paralysis of trade, the starvation of innocent children, the merciless persecution of the sick and dying throughout the capital city, the wilful destruction of property, and the open defiance of all law and order are factors of this absolute dictatorship and features of this Reign of Terror.¹⁸

The intent of such accusations was to politically isolate the strikers, by framing them as opposed to the interests of the broader community. This argument from the capitalist establishment was crucially important to win exactly because it was untrue. In reality, “a considerable section of the community seemed to be on the verge of actual revolution,” meaning this false opposition between the strikers and the ‘community’ had to be hammered home strongly and repeatedly for it to become convincing.¹⁹

One could argue that this rhetoric was cynical, intended to demonise the strike, and should therefore be dismissed. While this has an element of truth, the government figures' assessments of the strike are not entirely unreasonable ones. If such an impressive and novel strike can be launched at will by the union leaders over abstract principles, it is not necessarily a radical step to conceive that it could be escalated further at the union leaders' will. Even short of revolution, the growing attempts by some workers to forcibly close still-operating businesses, which on several occasions produced riot conditions, also certainly would have been seen as the precursor to a more generalised disruption of the social order.²⁰

Importantly, it was not only the establishment's rhetoric which suggests that they were genuinely gripped by the fear of revolution. Words were followed by action, both in responding to the immediate manifestations of the strike and in preparing for future escalations. Denham's repeated pleading for military support is difficult to explain without appreciating the government's state of mind. These requests were initially directed to the Federal Government but were

rebuffed by Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher. Denham, along with Governor McGregor, also appealed to the British Colonial Office to have a warship standby off the coast of Queensland in preparation for an uprising, and even discussed landing sailors from a nearby German vessel on Australian soil to confront the strikers.²¹ These preparations, while fruitless and ultimately unnecessary, unavoidably lead to the conclusion that the State was preparing for a violent conflict.

A military response, had it occurred, could potentially have shifted the terrain of the struggle in a revolutionary direction. Such was the analysis of the Victorian Socialist Party, who (from afar) considered the Brisbane strike to be "a rehearsal for the revolution" as it existed, as emblematic of a greater potential:

The revolution may be precipitated at any moment by the spreading of a general strike and the intervention of the military. When the final crisis comes, every bit of knowledge and experience gained in previous strikes will tell.²²

The most effective action taken by the State was the enrolment of three



*Police officers and Special Constables mass in Market Square now King George Square, in preparation for 1912 general strike marchers. Looking north towards Turbot Street
c/o The Queensland Police Museum <https://mypolice.qld.gov.au/museum/2022/01/25/from-the-vault-brisbane-general-strike-1912>*

thousand “Special Constables,” ostensibly to augment the police and maintain order. They assisted both in breaking the strike on Black Friday and in helping to reopen Tramways and businesses across Brisbane as the strike faltered.²³ This recourse to expanding the State’s capacity for brute force is indicative of a mindset which saw the halting of the strike’s momentum to be of the utmost necessity. This strategy found its clearest practical expression on Black Friday, in the deliberate infliction of terror on the strikers by police and Special Constables to break workers’ morale:

The people were ridden down on the footpaths by armed

police officers...men, women and children were chased and ridden at, or beaten with batons...A dent in the skull, a half-paralysed arm, absence of teeth, an injured eye will all serve as life-long remembrances.²⁴

The talk of revolution and socialism was not one-sided. The politics within the union movement had also given the employers cause to suspect it was motivated by revolutionary intentions long before 1912.²⁵ The real presence of an influential syndicalist current within the unions was of particular note to the establishment, given that syndicalism as a tendency

strongly favoured the general strike as the ultimate weapon in the class struggle.

The prevalence of syndicalism within the Australian working class was clearly influenced by the growth of revolutionary syndicalism abroad, particularly in Europe.²⁶ The *Melbourne Age* recognised the European syndicalist influence, referencing the 1909 general strike in Sweden, while also comparing the Brisbane events to the French revolutionary syndicalist movement, both of which the paper naturally predicted to be “doomed to failure.”²⁷ *The Darling Downs Gazette* also repeatedly linked the Brisbane general strike to pre-existing syndicalist ideas throughout its coverage, as “that latest development of Continental Socialism, which is becoming more and more apparent” within the Australian union movement.²⁸

In Europe, the syndicalist conception of the general strike was inseparably connected to the desire for socialist revolution. The role of the general strike in the traditional syndicalist schema was to be “a means of inaugurating the social revolution, in contradistinction to the daily political struggle of the working class.”²⁹ Given that

the discourse of syndicalism and the general strike abroad was explicitly revolutionary, and that this tendency had a real presence in Australia, it stands to reason that the employers’ concerns about the forces of Australian syndicalism wanting to overthrow the government were not necessarily cynical ones.

These fears were no doubt reinforced by the rhetoric of the Strike Committee’s leadership, who heavily leaned into syndicalist themes in both their public oration and in the published articles of the daily *Strike Bulletin*. Bombastic *Strike Bulletin* articles proclaimed, “Socialism Your Only Hope!” to the workers, in their “never-ending struggle of our class for emancipation from the domination of Capitalism.” The general strike was only “the latest phase of that struggle,” a struggle with far higher aims.³⁰ Strike Committee leaders such as Secretary John Moir (also the secretary for the Tramway Employee’s Association) made public speeches arguing for the reversal of class power in society, asserting that “the political machine should be subservient to the industrial machine.”³¹ However, similarly to the capitalist press, much of the public rhetoric of the

Strike Committee leadership also served an argumentative purpose - to maintain the confidence and support of striking workers. There was some genuine syndicalist influence, disorienting enough for the employers and government to have taken it at face value, but beneath the radical veneer was a political strategy far more conservative than it purported to be.

Much of the responsibility for the failure of the general strike to escalate, and for its defeat in general, can in fact be attributed to the conservatism and restraint of the allegedly revolutionary Strike Committee leaders. The crux of the failure was their unwillingness to physically challenge the State's control over Brisbane, particularly on Black Friday and the subsequent day. On February 2 itself, strike leaders tried desperately to avoid a confrontation between the fifteen thousand gathered workers and the police, after the unions' daily procession permit had been denied by Police Commissioner Cahill. Even before the workers were attacked, Harry Coyne frantically dissuaded the agitated workers from defying the State. As the *Strike Bulletin* boasted the next day:

He rushed into the space in

the street, between the armed police and unarmed civilians, and addressed the seething mass of excited people. He exhorted them to act as peaceful citizens and led them from the points of the hungry bayonets.³²

It was only through the "bravery" of Coyne's intervention that "serious consequences [were] averted at a very critical time," according to the *Strike Bulletin*.³³ Perhaps the most insightful contemporary commentary on Black Friday came from an article in *The Bulletin*, ironic given the paper's strident anti-strike position. Dave Bowman, the Queensland State Leader of the Labor Party and an influential figure at Trades Hall, was considered to have played the pivotal role:

The fate of the Brisbane general strike – regarded as a "general" affair – was probably decided when David Bowman surged up, a hatless but honest man, between the strikers' procession and the police, and urged that the law should be obeyed, and all violence carefully avoided. By that decision that was then arrived at, his party abandoned the only weapon by which it could possibly achieve a victory.³⁴



*This poster was a reproduction of Jim Case's cartoon on the front-page of 'The Worker'. "Case's depiction of a shocked maiden 'Australia' drawing back the Queensland curtain to reveal the police brutally clubbing Brisbane workers on 'Black Friday' during the 1912 general strike became a classic among Australian political cartoons." - Australian Dictionary of Biography Online ed. This poster had the Queensland shield on top of the curtain and the Australia emblem hang on her waist.
c/o State Library Queensland Digital Collection: <http://hdl.handle.net/10462/deriv/234417>*

This analysis is entirely correct – at that moment, the Strike Committee had effectively surrendered their physical control over Brisbane, giving the State a free hand to gradually restore the status quo and break the back of the strike in the process. William McCormack, a leader of the Amalgamated Workers' Association and veteran of the 1911 Sugar Strike, identified the alternate possibility Black Friday had represented. He argued that “the crowd should not have been restrained at all in Brisbane on Friday,” and regretted that “something extraordinary” had not been done the following day. If the workers have been given a lead, “we could have heard a different tale from Denham...a start would have been followed up by the mob and then goodbye the specials.”³⁵ Such a lead was not given, and the decisive opportunity to preserve the momentum of the strike through escalation was squandered.

A sympathetic paper, *Truth*, echoed this argument, making the case that such an attack by police in any other country “would quickly lead to an insurrection,” referencing the revolutions of 1848 in Europe as examples.³⁶ The difference, *Truth* contended, lay primarily in the political interests of the strike's

leadership:

There is a very great difference between the insurgent workmen of Paris and the striking workmen of Brisbane. The former were organised in revolutionary societies by conspirators who risked their lives; the latter are organised in unions by men who risk little, and most of whom would certainly not do anything that would jeopardise the getting, or holding, of a paid position in Parliament.³⁷

The self-defeating restraint of the Strike Committee was certainly not an accident or an oversight. It flowed naturally from a reformist political outlook, which saw the ultimate goal of the labour movement as electing the ALP into government. Queensland unionism had long since been aligned to the Labor party, and this alignment played out in the politics of the strike's leadership. The Labor Party stood to benefit electorally from a show of union strength (which they in fact did in metropolitan areas, despite the strike's defeat).³⁸ However, they were also keenly aware that Premier Denham also stood to benefit from the polarisation a general strike could cause, by running a law-and-order electoral campaign against

them in response. These electoral considerations, as well as the threat the strike posed to Australian capitalism generally (a system which the ALP intended to manage in government), encouraged the strike leaders' emphasis on respectability and undermining of militancy. Therefore, despite the strike leaders' syndicalist trappings, they made explicitly reformist arguments to workers, preferring voting to revolution as the chosen strategy to achieve emancipation: *The Strike Bulletin* argued that:

The elections are drawing near. Let us not forget to attack the stronghold of Capital with the full force of the BALLOT and call to the bar of public opinion the wreckers of our rights and hard-won liberties.³⁹

The Strike Bulletin also frequently lauded the peacefulness and self-control of the workers. Aggressive actions by the police were attempts "to incite the people to rebellion."⁴⁰ These supposed provocations, signalling that the State was regaining ground, were interpreted as demanding further restraint to avoid more conflict. Even the initial processions and mass meetings outside Trades Hall were designed to restrict workers' active participation and involvement in the strike. The

daily meetings were top-down affairs in which the strike leaders speechified (often dishonestly stoking workers' illusions about the strike's deteriorating condition), while the processions were little more than a "valuable safety valve," in the words of Dave Bowman, to "keep the men orderly and under discipline."⁴¹

This strategy ensured that the strikers, who had threatened to explode on February 2, remained firmly under the Strike Committee's control. This was successful from the narrow perspective of the union leaders but undermined the strength of the strike. The lack of any organised response to Black Friday demoralised and demobilised workers, whose militant activity and industrial power had frightened the employers and government to begin with. While speculation is not a useful endeavour, several factors were perhaps lacking for the strike to have overcome its subjective political hurdles and reached towards revolution.

The first of these missing factors was an alternate political leadership to challenge the politics of the existing Strike Committee. While contemporary socialist groups existed, their forces were too far

away to intervene. Groups like the International Socialists or the Victorian Socialist Party supported the strike but were based in NSW and Victoria respectively. The syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World union, influential in later struggles of the decade, appears to have had no meaningful presence in Brisbane either. The IWW did not launch their paper, *Direct Action*, until 1914, and so offered no commentary on the Brisbane events. What an alternate leadership strategy would have looked like concretely is also unknown. The critiques provided from afar were admittedly vague, as revolutionary socialist commentary tended to focus on drawing out positive lessons from the strike. *The International Socialist*, for example, limited itself to writing about the Strike Committee that:

It is true that all the methods of the Brisbane Strike Committee will not appeal to Socialists. A committee of Socialists would probably have conducted the strike along far different lines to those along which it is being conducted. But this is not the time to level critical discussions at the Strike Committee.⁴²

The second factor was the necessity for workers to consciously recognise

that victory required the reassertion of their own power over Brisbane. On the question of revolution however, the prerequisite conditions for workers to have radicalised *en masse* implies far-reaching changes to the entire historical landscape. In Lenin's famous formulation, a revolutionary situation requires a severe social crisis, in which workers and capitalists are unable to live, or to rule, in the same way. Only in such a revolutionary situation could workers see revolution as a necessity to overcome the crisis.⁴³ This crisis, suffice to say, was non-existent, though the general strike demonstrated the potential for working-class revolution in its absence.

Not all the limitations on the possibility of victory, or revolution, were subjective ones. Objective factors, particularly Queensland's regionality, played an important role. A regional strike on such a scale required solidarity from the national union movement. Some workers struck in Queensland localities outside Brisbane, such as Ipswich and Townsville, but these strikes were short-lived. No serious support was provided from the southern unions at all. In fact, the union leaders around the country appear to have been

even more conservative than their adventurist Queensland counterparts. While the Transport Workers' Council in New South Wales declared their sympathy to any unions "resisting oppressive regulations or conditions," they were "not in sympathy with the principles of general strikes. They are illogical, and injure indiscriminately and wantonly destroy amicable relations." The Council executive accordingly forbade any workers from taking industrial action in solidarity with the Brisbane strike.⁴⁴ This lack of support permitted the Queensland government to ship goods across the country unimpeded as part of restarting the economy, which compounded the growing sense of defeat and demoralisation among workers in Brisbane, further reversing any possibilities of a recovery and victory.

Despite its failure, the Brisbane general strike had been a tangible and potentially revolutionary threat to the established order in Queensland, a fact which was recognised by both the employers and the Denham Government. That the strike stoked fears of revolution is attested to by the political discourse and actions of the capitalist establishment, despite the often

cynical bent of their argumentation. However, the politics of the Strike Committee, alongside other subjective limitations and objective circumstances, ensured that a revolutionary challenge did not emerge in reality. The general strike was defeated, but for this very reason provides insights into the trends within the early Australian labour movement, as well as into the universal dynamics which emerge in the course of generalised class conflicts.

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A Short History of the 1912 Brisbane General Strike

Neil Frost

Neil Frost is a former industrial officer at the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and The Services Union. For the past 15 years he has been a Modern History teacher at a number of High Schools across Queensland. As part of a recently completed Master of History from the University of New England, Neil undertook a research project into the contribution of a number of people buried at South Brisbane Cemetery to the development of workers, socialist, and radical movements in Queensland during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This formed the basis of a BLHA walking tour led by Neil in August 2022.

Two articles by Neil follow, a history of the 1912 Strike, and further information on two of the 1912 activists buried at the South Brisbane Cemetery. Neil is a member of the BLHA Management Committee.

The events leading to Australia's first general strike started on 18 January 1912, when members of the Australian Tramway Employees' Association were stood down for wearing union badges, signifying their support for the right to form a union and to have it recognised by their employer.¹ The union members had taken this action as the private company which ran the Brisbane tramways had refused to recognise or negotiate with the Tramways union.²

Tramways management responded

to the wearing of union badges by dismissing any employee wearing a badge.³ The unionists who had been dismissed and their supporters then marched to Brisbane Trades Hall and held a meeting in its large dance hall, with this meeting leading to a large public protest the same evening in what is now known as King George Square, with an estimated 10,000 people attending.⁴

A stalemate occurred over the following week, with the Tramway company refusing to negotiate with the Australian Labour Federation

(ALF), the peak union body to which the Tramways Union was affiliated. Due to this failure to negotiate, delegates from the forty-three unions affiliated to the ALF met at Trades Hall on 28 January and voted for a general strike, resulting in most of the Brisbane workforce, an estimated 22,000 men and women, walking off the job from 30 January.⁵

In developments that would be echoed five years later in Russia, the workers organised a Combined Strike Committee, which in many ways became an alternative government. The Committee issued their own currency to people participating in the strike, coupons that could be exchange for essential goods, and an Exemption Committee issued permits to some businesses such as butchers and bakers to allow them to continue trade.⁶ Most other businesses in Brisbane closed their doors, including most places of entertainment such as hotels and theatres.⁷ In an effort to keep strikers and their supporters up to date on events and to rally support, the strike committee began production and publication of what effectively became their own newspaper, the *Official Bulletin*.⁸ The unions even established their

own emergency services, creating an Ambulance Service and their own public order force of five hundred Vigilance Officers in an effort to prevent intimidation of strikers and prevent theft from the closed businesses.⁹ These efforts to form an alternative power structure were perceived as a revolutionary challenge to the existing order and led to a swift response from the Denham Liberal government and employers.¹⁰ Denham's government recruited and swore in over 3000 special constables from the urban middle class and rural communities surrounding Brisbane and deployed them against the striking workers.¹¹

This confrontation between the forces of labour and capital came to a head on the streets of Brisbane on what became known as 'Black Friday' on 2 February 1912. On that day, a crowd of 15,000 strikers and their supporters meeting in Market Square came under attack from police and special constables, armed with rifles with fixed bayonets, leading to a significant number of injuries on both sides.¹² At the same time a group of women led by Emma Miller attempted to march from Market Square to Parliament House, seeking a meeting with Denham.¹³ This march was attacked by police and specials, resulting in

a substantial number of protestors sustaining injuries. Emma Miller, at this time a small woman in her seventies, stood her ground during this altercation, and as the mounted police closed in, she jabbed her hatpin into either the Police Commissioner's horse, or the Police Commissioner himself. In either case, the Commissioner fell off the horse and walked with a limp, because of his injuries, for the rest of his life.¹⁴ The violence of 'Black Friday' was widely criticised in the press, resulting in public pressure for the dispute to be settled.¹⁵

The strike effectively ended when on 6 March, the Employers Federation, representing the Tramways company agreed that the strikers could return to work without being victimised for their involvement in the dispute.¹⁶

The importance of the general strike is remembered within the Queensland labour movement to this day. The Emma Miller Awards, which were established by the Queensland Council of Unions in 1987, are awarded annually to women who have made an outstanding contribution to their union at a grass roots level.¹⁷ In the short term though, the strike was considered a defeat for the union

movement, with union badges on uniforms continuing to be banned by the Tramways company and many of the workers not being re-employed.¹⁸

Digby Denham won the state election held in the aftermath of the dispute, largely because of increased support in regional and rural areas of Queensland after running a campaign around the theme of law and order.¹⁹ After the election victory, parliament passed legislation restricting union rights.²⁰ However, the Labor Party increased its support in Brisbane where the strike largely had the support of voters, and were able to capitalise on this support, winning the subsequent election by a wide margin. The new Labor government passed legislation in 1916 which restored trade union rights.²¹

References follow on page 81

Activists in the 1912 Brisbane General Strike: From the South Brisbane Cemetery Tour

Neil Frost

Ellen Hewett

While the involvement of figures such as Digby Denham and Emma Miller in the 1912 Strike is remembered, and in Miller's case commemorated, the contribution of other participants in the dispute (particularly women) is less well known. One such participant buried at South Brisbane Cemetery, who played a leadership role in the dispute and made a significant contribution to the early Labour and socialist movements in Queensland, is Ellen Hewett.

Born in England, mother of nine, Hewett arrived in Queensland in 1887 aged thirty-two.¹ By the time of the outbreak of the strike in 1912, she was the President of the Buranda Branch of the Workers' Political Organisation (the then name of the Queensland Branch of the Labor Party).² Given the male dominated nature of the Labor Party and the labour movement generally at the time, this in itself was a substantial achievement.

Emma Hewett is recorded as being present at a number of the daily public rallies and demonstrations organised during the strike, although the extent of her involvement requires further research.³ What is clear is that during the dispute, she played an important role as a propagandist for the striker's cause, writing regularly for the *Official Bulletin*. It is not possible to fully assess Ellen Hewett's contribution in this regard as not all editions of the *Official Bulletin* survive, however a significant number of them are located and accessible in the Fryer Library collections at the University of Queensland.

Several examples of Ellen Hewett contributions to the *Official Bulletin* were found in these surviving editions. Firstly, in a 'Letter to the Editor' from 1 March 1912, Hewett relates a story involving a man claiming to be a government representative, Emma Miller, and

herself.⁴ Hewett framed the letter as a warning to the workers of Brisbane to be on their guard against a man who claimed he was employed by the government going house to house surveying people about their views on the current events. In the letter, Hewett states that she reminded the man that elections in Queensland were conducted by secret ballot. Hewett relates that at this point Emma Miller arrived at her home and quickly identified the man as a former police officer, and after further conversation identified the man as being of Irish birth.⁵ Hewett states that they then told the man that as an Irishman he should be ashamed to be working for a government that was doing in Australia what the English were doing in Ireland. When the man defended the police and specials for preserving law and order and preventing acts of violence by the strikers such as the use of dynamite, Hewett stated that if the specials were anything like the ones she had encountered in her local area during the dispute, they would have a great deal of difficulty 'finding dynamite or anything else.'⁶ Hewett finished the letter by relating how, after ending their conversation with him they left the man on her veranda with her daughter, with him stating

to her daughter as he was leaving: "Those two are too much for me".⁷ The letter not only shows that Ellen Hewett was a woman with a strong personality and sense of humour, but it also reveals a close relationship with Emma Miller.

In a second letter to the editor on 6 March 1912, Hewett complained about the harassment of women and girls by police and specials, and the undemocratic actions of the Denham Government in refusing permission for striking workers to hold a mass meeting the week before.⁸ She expressed the hope that the strike would open the eyes of workers to the actions of the 'Capitalistic Press' as defenders of privilege. She finishes her letter with the rousing call to arms: 'Courage Workers! Keep firm and true to each other, and no matter what obstacles are put in the way by our enemies, we will win in the end.'⁹ In the third of Hewett's letters located that was published in the *Official Bulletin*, on 19 March, she attacked the government for its lack of concern about the plight of striking workers and their families, and accused Premier Denham personally of cowardice for failing to intervene in the dispute at the beginning and for not forcing the

Tramway to recognise the union and negotiate in good faith.¹⁰ It appears that Hewett played a valuable role as a propagandist and participant in action throughout the 1912 General strike.

Hewett's role in the labour and socialist movements continued well after the end of the General Strike. She was a key figure in the founding of the *Daily Standard*, a pro-Labor and pro-union newspaper, published in Brisbane from 1912 to 1936.¹¹ Hewett personally ran a bazaar to raise 200 pounds to fund the establishment of the paper, founded to counter the perceived anti-Labor bias of the existing daily newspapers in Brisbane.¹² The year after the strike, she helped to found the Socialist Christian Brotherhood and was elected to the executive of the new organisation which was described as a union formed in the service of those who suffered to work for the welfare of humanity.¹³

Further newspaper articles show that Hewett continued to be active in the labour movement over the following years. In April 1917, she is recorded as a prominent participant at a rally of women in support of the Labor Party's Federal Election campaign held in Brisbane,

with her addressing the meeting to second a vote of thanks for the Federal Leader Frank Tudor.¹⁴ In an article from the *Daily Standard* from November the same year Hewett is recorded as the Secretary of the Labour Womens' Vigilance Organisation (LWVO).¹⁵ The article makes it clear that Hewett was at the forefront of the LWVO's campaign as a spokeswoman for the LWVO against the Hughes Government's second referendum to introduce conscription during the First World War.

Hewett also played a role in the Women's Peace Army, an organisation dedicated to opposing the war and campaigning against conscription, helping to organise and publicise its activities.¹⁶

Towards the end of her life she was less politically active, suffering from health complaints including asthma and bronchial problems.¹⁷ When she passed away at the age of seventy-nine in 1934, the significance of her contribution to the labour movement was acknowledged in the *Daily Standard*, the paper she had played such a significant role in establishing.¹⁸

Perhaps symbolic of sexism in

labour history, the headstone of the grave at South Brisbane Cemetery in which she is buried does not record that she is buried there, only indicating that it contains her husband Henry, who died eighteen

years before Ellen. The reason for this oversight is unclear, however it may be the result of the general sexism of the time, or it may be that the Hewett family lacked the resources to alter the headstone.



Ellen Hewett's grave at South Brisbane Cemetery. Location 6-236. image c/o Neil Frost

Maggie Finney

While there is significant surviving evidence of the contribution of figures such as Ellen Hewett, due to her role as an office bearer of several organisations during the period of the general strike and afterwards, less evidence is recorded of the

activities of rank-and-file activists such as Maggie Finney. Maggie was twenty-eight years old when she was buried at South Brisbane Cemetery, only a matter of metres from the grave of Digby Denham.¹⁹ A significant amount is known

about her mother and father, both prominent activists in the labour movement.

Her father, Thomas Finney, was born in Manchester, England, in 1863 and came to Australia in 1881.²⁰ He helped to found several unions including the Shop Assistants Union, the Warehousemen Employees' Federation and the Clothing Workers' Union. He held office, and was the caretaker of the Trades Hall, as well as the President of the Shop Assistants Union during the general strike.²¹ The union Finney led appears to have played a significant role in the strike, with its activities being featured in the strike committee's *Official Bulletin* on numerous occasions.²²

Maggie Finney's mother was a Labour activist in her own right. Years before the strike, in *The Worker* she described leaving her husband and children at home and organising on behalf of the Labor Party during the 1903 State Election, bringing women to vote 'all day'.²³ During the same period, Mrs Finney worked with Emma Miller and others to help to form a union of female factory workers, helping to organise a meeting that formed the union attended

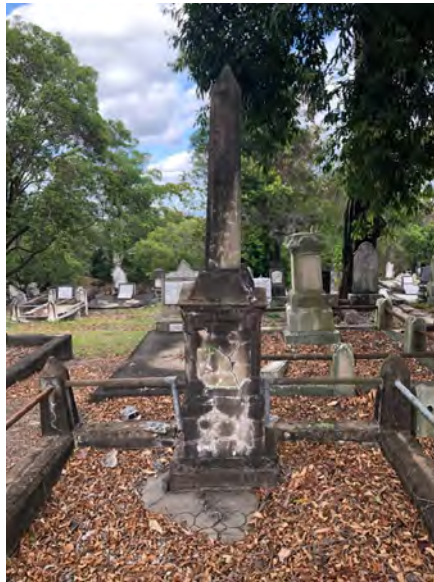
by over five hundred women.²⁴ By 1910, she was an organiser of the Shop Assistants' Union, and in one example of her work, travelled to Toowoomba to form a branch of the union.²⁵ During the general strike itself, Mrs Finney was still an organiser for the union and in this capacity, participated in a number of public activities alongside Emma Miller and others, having her contribution recognised in an article in the *Worker* on 3 February.²⁶ The *Official Bulletin* also records that she organised the distribution of union badges to hundreds of members of the union to wear when they returned to work after the strike so that Brisbane shoppers could be sure that 'they were being served by a unionist'.²⁷

The significance of Mrs Finney's contribution to organising during the strike was recognised when she was amongst a small group of women given the honour of helping Emma Miller to unfurl a number of union banners at the 1912 Labour Day March, and to make a speech to the assembled workers.²⁸ After the strike she remained active in the labour movement and helped to found an anti-conscription campaign in Queensland along with Emma Miller.²⁹ When, on

22 October 1922, a bust of Emma Miller was unveiled in the social hall of the Trades Hall, Maggie's mother had a place of honour on the podium, and was described as amongst those who 'who for long years had worked side by side with Emma Miller'.³⁰

In contrast to her parent's contribution, Maggie Finney's work as a rank-and-file activist in the movement has not been as celebrated. Most of what is known was recorded in the obituary published after her burial at South

Brisbane in 1915. The article in *The Standard* described her as someone who had made a great contribution to the political and industrial wings of the labour movement despite her young age, as a 'sterling and self-sacrificing worker'.³¹ During the strike, she worked behind the scenes taking the lead role in preparing the meals of the strike committee as they met to plan tactics and make decisions about the course of the strike. With the trams out of action due to the strike, she walked long distances with her mother at night to attend meetings of striking



Maggie Finney's grave at South Brisbane Cemetery. Location 2E-302. image c/o Neil Frost

workers in the suburbs.³²

The *Standard* article records that during elections Maggie Finney would undertake hours of electioneering amongst women in the suburbs of Brisbane on behalf of Labor candidates.³³

There was a crowd of mourners at her funeral at which dozens of messages of condolence were received, and over forty wreaths laid on her grave, including from the Trades Hall, the Workers Political Organisation, members of parliament, and other Labour Movement comrades.³⁴

As can be seen in the photo of Maggie Finney's grave, it appears not to have been well maintained in the years since her burial. Tree roots have damaged the monument on her grave over the past 110 years, to the extent that the headstone with her name and details have fallen off

In many ways, the current state of Maggie Finney's grave is symbolic of the lack of recognition of the contribution of rank-and-file members, particularly women, to the history of this pivotal event in the history of the Queensland labour movement. She is a prime

example of 'the disinherited' that Peter Howard identified as normally being excluded from heritage projects, and every effort should be made to ensure stories and perspective of people like Maggie are included in any future work on the 1912 Brisbane General Strike.³⁵

Notes

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⁴ Ellen Hewett, 'To the Editor Strike Bulletin', *Official Bulletin* No.27, Brisbane, March 1 1912.

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⁶ *Ibid.*

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⁸ Ellen Hewett, 'Lessons to be learned', *Official Bulletin* No.30, Brisbane, March 5 1912.

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¹⁰ Ellen Hewett, 'An Open Letter to Mr Denham', *Official Bulletin* No.40, Brisbane, 19 March 1912.

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¹³ Anon. 'Socialist Christian Brotherhood', *Daily Standard*, 17 February 1913, p.2.

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- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p170.
- ²⁶ Worker, in Young, *Proud to be a Rebel*, pp.179-180.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p188.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
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- ³⁰ Daily Standard, in Young, *Proud to be a Rebel*, p233.
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- ¹ Pam Young, 'The Hatpin -- a Weapon: Women and the 1912 Brisbane General Strike', *Hecate*, 1988 Vol.14, no.2, p.8; Pam Young, *Proud to be a Rebel: The Life and Times of Emma Miller*, St Lucia, 1991, p.173; and Dennis Murphy *The Tramway and General Strike*, 1912 in *The Big Strikes: Queensland 1889-1965*, St Lucia, 1983, p.117.
- ² *Ibid.*, p.6.
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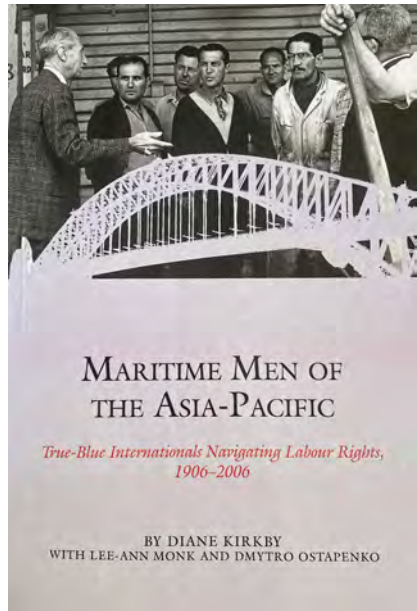
Book Review

Maritime Men of the Asia-Pacific: True Blue Internationals Navigating Labour Rights 1906-2006
by Diane Kirkby with Lee-Ann Monk & Dmytro Ostapenko
Liverpool University Press
(2022)

Reviewed by **Jeff Rickertt**

The central theme of *Maritime Men of the Asia-Pacific* (MMAP) is union internationalism. As the introductory chapter explains, ‘this book draws a new circle of connectedness between Australia and Asia, and around geopolitical realities, in a story that also decentres Europe.’ (p. 5)

This is a big topic, and in the context of intensifying imperialist rivalry between the United States and China, an important one. The book was prompted by a conversation between lead author, Diane Kirkby, and the National Secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Paddy Crumlin, who is also the president of the



International Transport Workers Federation (ITF). The project was funded by an Australian Research Council grant with La Trobe University and the MUA as project co-partners.

As the sub-title implies, this is not a history told from the point of view of Asian trade unionists, or even from the perspective of Australian unions positioned as one element of a broad Asia-Pacific working class. This is about ‘true-

blue' internationals, connoting an Australian-centred narrative. In the authors' words, 'centring the study on Australia enabled a much-needed regional (Asia-Indo-Pacific) perspective to be brought to the existing history of international maritime organisations...' (p. 5)

This approach derives from the book's institutional focus. It is principally a history of the evolution of the ITF from a Euro-centric organisation to a body through which, so the argument goes, the potential for genuine union internationalism in the Asia-Pacific region is now being realised. It offers a success narrative in which the Seamen's Union of Australia, the Waterside Workers' Federation and their merger organisation, the MUA, play a crucial role and, overcoming their own racialised ways of thinking and national imperatives, emerge as ITF leaders in regional union co-operation. An important supporting character in this tale is the International Labour Organization (ILO), the tripartite UN body where many of the negotiations for minimum maritime labour standards have played out over the decades.

For a book concerned with

struggles for labour equality in the region, there is something of an irony in reducing the topic of regional labour internationalism to the history of Australia's rise to pre-eminence in the ITF. Australia is Europe's most dominant settler-colonial state in the Asia-Pacific, a nation with an advanced capitalist economy and a long history as a regional imperialist power in its own right. This reality has inevitably influenced the material interests and outlook of its union movement. Consequently, the complexities of empire, nation, race, geo-politics and divergent economic situations are replicated, not eradicated, by replacing Europe with Australia at the centre of the narrative.

If the authors have failed to come to terms with Australia's place in the region, they have not been able to avoid some of the barriers this reality has placed in the way of genuine solidarity. The racism of elements of the early Australian union movement is the most obvious of these. The disparities in economic status have also caused problems, even after the racism abated. The section on the ITF's campaign against Flag of Convenience (FOC) vessels is

particularly illuminating. FOC is a strategy of private shipowners to lower labour costs by registering their vessels in countries where labour standards are lower than in the jurisdictions where they operate. This undermines the wages and conditions of seafarers employed on national fleets and potentially renders national fleets economically uncompetitive. As the authors explain, the WWF and the SUA, with ITF and ACTU backing, launched a campaign to withhold services to FOC ships in Australian waters until the crews were covered by ITF agreements on wages and conditions of safety, repatriation and other rights. Within a few months, the ban had won ITF contracts for crews of South Koreans, Filipinos, Ghanaians, Indians, Chinese, Argentinians and Thais on 11 ships in Australian ports. (p. 254)

Indian seafarers' unions, however, were not impressed. In a section of the book sardonically subtitled 'Maritime Men Thanked?', the authors acknowledge that ending FOC shipping by imposing ITF standards potentially meant unemployment for Indian seafarers as there were not enough vessels sailing under the Indian flag to

absorb every Indian worker in the industry. As the Indians pointed out, 'to Asian trade unions, flags of convenience were in actuality 'flags of need.'' (p. 256)

The solution proposed by the National Seamen's Union of India was the concept of total crew cost (TCC), which would require shipowners to pay into a welfare fund the difference between the ITF wage rate and the actual rate paid. The fund would be used to employ more seafarers from the source nation. In 1976 the ITF rejected the proposal in order, the Indians argued, 'to save western jobs'. (p. 257) Three years later, in 1979, the ITF Congress belatedly adopted the scheme. In the book's account of the breakthrough, the ITF, not the Indian Seamen's Union, receives the credit. The ITF, we are informed, succeeded in 'satisfying the Indian and other Asian affiliates' concerns.' (p.258) Indian readers are unlikely to miss the note of paternalism.

Another problem with framing the ITF as the pre-eminent force for transnational maritime labour solidarity is that much important history is missed or obscured. The book charts a network of solidarity



*SUA Secretary Eliot Elliot (centre at rear) with Chinese Guests
(Noel Butler Archives K2788)*

extending slowly and often hesitantly outwards from Europe and Australia to the region's Anglo-American centres of capital: India, China, Hong Kong, Japan and the American west coast. Even on the fully-rendered version of this map, the large maritime labouring classes of Southeast Asia and the western Pacific barely make an impression despite their rich history of informal and formal contact before, during and after the colonial era. The direct role of Australian organised labour in the development of maritime unionism and labour standards in Papua New Guinea and Fiji, for example, is not mentioned.

Furthermore, the ITF-centric approach leaves us none the wiser about efforts by the maritime workers of India, China, Hong Kong and Japan to reach out to each other and Asian workers in general, independently of the ITF and Australian labour. The important role of the Australian-based Chinese Seamen's Union in support of Indonesian independence, for example, is passed over. These omissions would not be an issue for a book explicitly pitched as a history of the ITF. But they are for a book purporting to discuss the history of 'maritime men of the Asia-Pacific'. (There were of course also women.)



Chinese Seamen's Union meeting in Sydney 1944
(State Library NSW FL1266507)

As tends to happen with institutional histories, *MMAP* is at times ponderously heavy with detail about the interactions, allegiances and negotiations of the organisations and their leading officials. The livelier sections are those where workers themselves make an appearance, usually during strikes or when, as seafarers, they find themselves prosecuted for their industrial action and stranded in Australian ports. For example, the book reveals the little-known fact that Indian members of the crew of the *Dalfram* supported the famous 1938 WWF ban on that ship leaving Port Kembla with pig iron bound for fascist Japan. For his troubles, the leader of the Indian

crew in the stokehold, Mahomet Goula, was even accused by the company of opium addiction and was incarcerated in an institution for the mentally ill, despite the local SUA secretary testifying he was entirely sane and in perfect health. (p. 164).

We learn, too, of the remarkable 1939 strike of the Indian crew of the *Speybank*, who refused to sail from Wollongong until their captain agreed to a 100 per cent increase in their wages as compensation for the risks created by the war. (p. 165)

This inspired other crews in ports around Australia to take similar action. When war was declared in

Europe, Chinese seafarers in Port Kembla also refused to sail into the war zone (p. 185). In all cases, local unions reached out to provide support.

We are also informed of solidarity in the opposite direction, most notably the American west coast longshoremen (wharfies) who held up or turned away ships loaded by scabs in Australia during the 1998 Patrick lockout (p.282).

One particularly topical theme of the book relates to the fractures within the ITF and global unionism more generally as a consequence of national labour movements aligning with ‘their’ capitalist states as they split into rival camps during the two world wars and the Cold War. Similar pressures on organised labour are emerging again today in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the polarisation of global capitalism behind China and the United States. In this respect, the history of the ITF as an entity with state-oriented nodes of power provides a case study

for workers in what not to do in the event of conflict between the capitalist nation states where they happen to reside.

Despite its shortcomings, then, there is much to learn from *Maritime Men of the Asia-Pacific*. It offers a wealth of information about international labour solidarity, maritime unionism and the struggle for minimum wages and rights on the docks and in the sea lanes of our part of the world. It reveals how Australian unionists have played far-reaching roles in fostering solidarity across national and empire boundaries.

It leaves the reader wanting to know more, not only about the history of Australian labour internationalism but also the history of the working class of the region. A truly decentred history of regional labour solidarity – one told from the perspective of Asian and Pacific maritime workers – would add immeasurable richness to our understanding of this topic. If no such project is in the pipeline, perhaps the ITF or the MUA could fund one.

Jeff Rickertt is a radical historian, activist and librarian, and a former BLHA president and editor of this journal. He contributed to *Radical Brisbane: An Unruly History*, and authored *The Conscientious Communist: Ernie Lane and the Rise of Australian Socialism*.

Obituaries

Bernie Neville 1938-2022

by Ian Curr

Bernie Neville

born 24/10/1938, died 10/09/2022

Bernie Neville grew up in Leeds in England during World War II and had good working class ethics from an early age. He was a trained cutter of men's suits and remembered fondly his Jewish employer who was so impressed by his skills that he paid Bernie an adult wage while still a minor. This helped Bernie's family as his father died young as a result of harrowing experiences at Dunkirk during the war.

With his wife Mavis, Bernie migrated to Christchurch in New Zealand and worked in the clothing industry. Looking for sunnier climes, Bernie and Mavis came to Brisbane in the 1970s. Bernie learnt a new trade as a cable joiner in the electricity distribution and supply industry in South East Queensland ending up being employed by South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB).



*Bernie Neville (2007)
photo by David Jackmanson*

As a union activist, Bernie did not sit on the sidelines as a commentator but endeavoured to fix things in a practical way. This won him many allies and staunch supporters including his much loved wife, Mavis (May) who sadly passed away in the 1990s. May was out there helping Bernie poster up with a glue pot in hand during the 1985 SEQEB dis-

pute where over a thousand workers, including Bernie, were sacked by the Bjelke-Petersen government.

Bernie led the Electrical Trades Union rank-and-file strike committee during the SEQEB dispute (1985-86). In the end, all that Bernie and SEQEB workers wanted was their jobs back, with their superannuation and long service entitlements intact.

Bernie got neither. Along with a number of other underground workers (cable jointers), Bernie was black banned by his employer. Underground and cable jointing work is highly dangerous because of the high voltages of electricity involved. Doing this work, Bernie was thrown across a basement room in Q1 building on the Gold Coast by thousands of volts of electric current. There had been a breach of health and safety rules by a contractor that caused Bernie to be injured.

Some days during the SEQEB dispute, Bernie believed that he would not make it home at night, so brutal were the personal and physical attacks launched against him. Death threats were made to both Bernie and his family. Senior figures in politics attempted to bribe him to stay out of the dispute. But Bernie stood

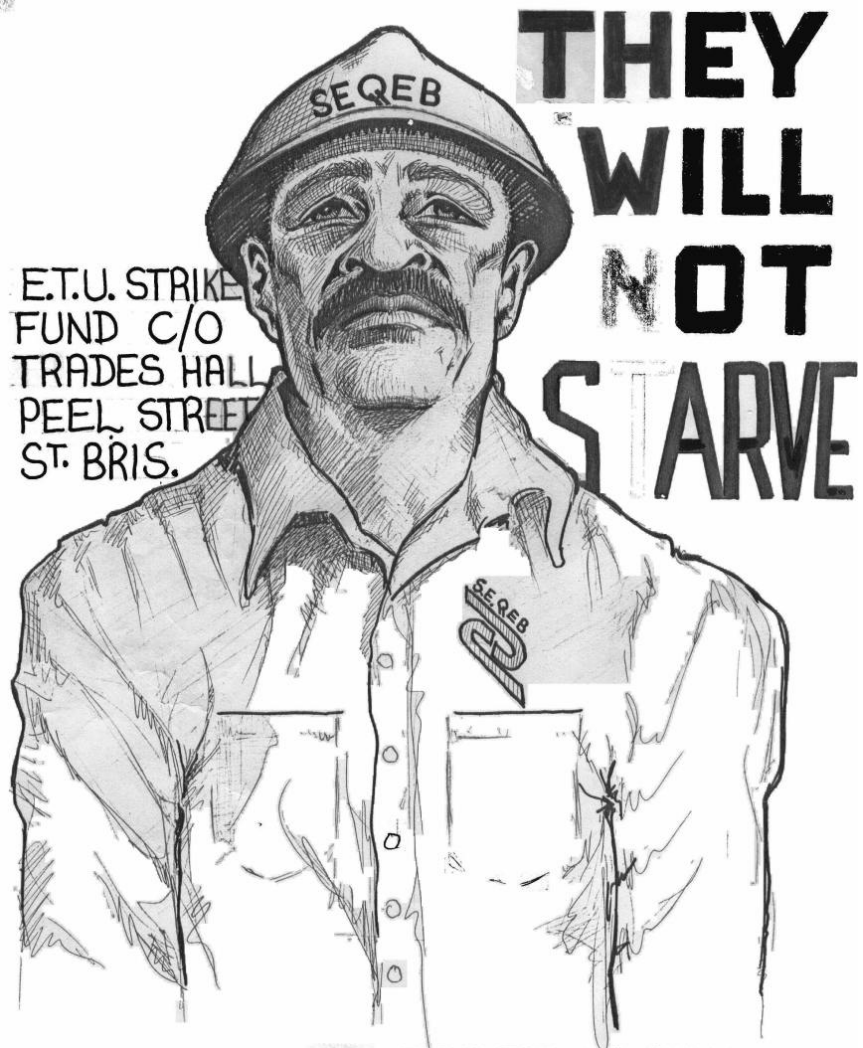
firm. More has to be said about this, but not now.

Bernie was very clever. He formed a great partnership with Phil Perrier who had a talent for depicting on posters what Bernie said in words.

Both Bernie's sons supported him from when they were young. At the height of the SEQEB dispute, his son Michael, still in primary school, locked two scabs in a tunnel only to be brought home by two coppers. Bernie's response was to say: "Good onya, son" and, in the same breath, told the police to "F*** off" slamming the door in their faces.

I first met Bernie in a police van. It was June 1985. We had both been arrested outside the executive building of the Queensland government. Bernie found my arrest to be comical. In the police van with us was Tony O'Gorman, brother of civil liberties lawyer, Terry O'Gorman, and of former police union secretary, John O'Gorman.

Bernie saw me crash tackled from behind by two police officers, Walsh and Monley, as I was holding a red banner with the words "Joh Must Go!" painted in yellow, the slogan of the street march campaign from 1977 till 1979.



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NOT
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STRIKE FUND
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Poster by Phil Perrier c/o workersbushtelegraph.com.au

What Bernie found so funny was, after Walsh executed the flying tackle we hit the pavement together and became rolled up in the banner, end over end, right up to the door of the Lands Office hotel. Both Walsh and Monley lost their caps in the melee.

From that day forward Bernie and I had an unspoken agreement that we would endeavour to make the bastards who were responsible pay for what they did to ordinary workers in Queensland and elsewhere. I know that Bernie lived up to his side of that pact that bound us. I can only hope that I can live up to my side of the bargain.

After the dispute was lost Bernie was forced to take up contract work. He was black banned from employment with SEQEB and never received his proper entitlements of superannuation and long service etc.

One of those contracts was to lay electric cable on the soon-to-be opened refugee detention centre on Christmas Island. Bernie was curious about the nature of this project which he initially thought may have been the building of both a refugee centre and later a military compound. He wanted to get his hands

on the plans so he asked a supervisor to see the plans for the entire facility. When challenged as to why, Bernie said that he could not lay the cables properly without an understanding of the entire complex. Bernie described to me of how he looked over the new compound from a distance. He was challenged by a federal police officer but Bernie did his best to hide his curiosity. Given reluctantly, Bernie received a hard drive containing the complete plans to Christmas Island. The plans showed a nursery for babies where they would be separated from their parents in a compound behind locked electric controlled doors. On his return to mainland Australia, Bernie made sure that these plans were exposed and senior politicians were asked questions about the purpose of confining babies in a separate nursery.

These plans were shelved. It was Bernie's curiosity and determination to expose the truth about Christmas Island that had helped prevent this from happening.

In recent years Bernie campaigned tirelessly for the West End community house at AHIMSA and for people who were taken advantage of by the Public Trustee. Bernie and Maggie could be seen on a stall at

the West End markets for weeks on end getting 600 signatures for a petition to the Queensland Parliament to save AHIMSA house and exposing the Public Trustee's role in its demise and the abduction and locking up of its former owner, Ross Taylor. Bernie was Ross's power of attorney and tried desperately to have him returned to his family home on Mains Road, Sunnybank.

The campaign "You cannot trust the public trustee" became a national campaign to correct the abuse of elders and vulnerable people in the community at the hands of the public trustee. A committee was formed to build the campaign with a lot of grass roots organisation that eventually attracted the attention of the mainstream media including the ABC's Four Corners program. Bernie was an active participant in a group led by Roslyn Mirciov exposing maladministration and corruption by corporate bodies set up to self-fund what should be a free public service, the making of a will by the poor and the vulnerable. Instead the Queensland Public Trustee exploits the free will service to extract fees from the estates of ordinary people.

Vale Bernie, I will miss your good humour and humanity greatly.

Under this globalised capitalist system, everyone pays a price. Bernie and his family were no exception. My condolences to his two sons, Brent and Michael, and their families. My condolences also to Bernie's friends and comrades.

Ian Curr is a lifelong union member. He was sacked from the Commonwealth Public Service after 21 years for organising against the introduction of contract labour in Australian Taxation Office call centres.

Curr was an activist in Queensland's democratic rights struggles in the 1970s and 80s.

He has been a member of the Technical and Laboratory Assistants Association, the UQ Student Union, the AWU, the Australian Clerical Officers Association and Commonwealth Public Sector Union, and the NTEU.

He is still active and helps organise the Big Ride for Palestine (Australia) in active partnership with APHEDA (Union Aid Abroad). He is a long-term member of LeftPress Printing Society and is editor of Workers BushTelegraph - a website dedicated to workers control and the abolition of private property.

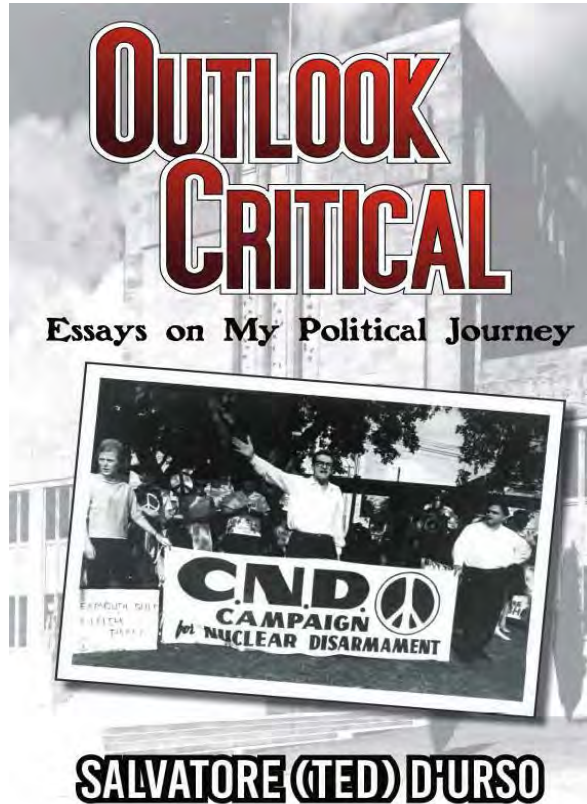
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Outlook Critical: Essays on My Political Journey

Salvatore (Ted) D'Urso

(Brisbane Labour History Association, 2020)



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Jeff Rickertt interviews MUA Member Mike Barber on Sixty Years of Maritime Unionism

Matthew Mercer and Neil Frost on the 1912 Brisbane General Strike

Ian Curr remembers his comrade Bernie Neville

