

The Queensland Journal of Labour History

No. 3

September 2006



The Brisbane Labour History Association



Brisbane
Labour
History
Association

President: Dr. Greg Mallory
(tel 0407 692 377)

Secretary: Ted Riethmuller
(tel 07 3351 4462; tedr@bigpond.net.au)

Web site: <http://www.connectqld.org.au/>

EDITOR: Dale Lorna Jacobsen

Design and Layout: Dale Lorna Jacobsen

Production Assistance: Janis Bailey

Cover Design: Debbie Price, Ted Riethmuller, Janis Bailey *et al*

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To join, contact:

The Secretary
Brisbane Labour History Association
PO Box 5299
West End QLD 4101

Contact details for Editor of next issue obtainable from President or Secretary.
See inside back cover for *Editorial Policy* and *Notes for Contributors*.

**Front Cover: Seamen's Union of Australia Float.
Mayday 1965**

Photo: Grahame Garner

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No. 3, September 2006

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Editorial

Dale Lorna Jacobsen

Welcome to the third edition of *The Queensland Journal of Labour History*. I am delighted to have as our major article Humphrey McQueen's paper *Lessons from Defeat: the 1927 Claim for a 40-hour Week by Queensland Building Industry Unions*. This is a preview of a manuscript on the unofficial history of the ABLF, commissioned by the CFMEU, which Humphrey will be delivering at the end of April 2007.

This is an important part of Queensland's Labour history, one that should not be buried in the past. By coincidence, this paper addresses similar issues to my article in the March 2006 issue of this journal (*The ALP and the ARU: How Personal Vendettas can bring Down a Government*). It demonstrates how the McCormack Labor Government sided time and again with the employers at the expense of the workers.

Included in this issue are two excellent book reviews: Richard Giles' in depth look at *Henry George's Legacy in Economic Thought*, edited by John Laurent and Edward Elgart; and Bob Reed's

comprehensive review of Trotskyite, *Comrade Roberts*.

We say a sad farewell to three of our Folkie friends: Bill Scott, and Denis and 'Jacko' Kevans. How important is it to celebrate those who acknowledge the workers in their songs and poems. And that is exactly what the BLHA is planning with its *Rekindling the Flames of Discontent* Conference, Dinner & Concert planned for September.

This is your journal. We welcome contributions from members and anyone else who wishes to document the history of Labour and other social movements in Queensland. I particularly wish to thank each contributor to this issue; for their professionalism in their writing and in adhering to my strict cutoff dates. You have made my job as editor a pleasure.

As you read Ynes Sanz's poem, *This Woman is Harmless*, reflect on the files that ASIO still hold.

Lastly, many thanks to Janis Bailey for her willing advice and assistance.

* * *

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I wonder if any BLHA members remember Jackson's Estate on the outskirts of the old Cribb Island town-ship (long ago destroyed for airport extensions) in north-east Brisbane.

Jackson's Estate was a motley collection of dwellings built from old packing cases etc. on land donated by a Mr. Jackson at the end of World War 1.

Returned First World War 'diggers' were allowed to build whatever shanties they could in appreciation of their service to King and Country.

I first saw Jackson's Estate when campaigning for the late Frank Doyle, Federal Labor Member for Lilley, 1972-74. I had not led a sheltered life but Jackson's Estate was a real eye-opener for me.

Obviously, most of the WW1 'diggers' had moved on but the shanties were still occupied in the 1970s by new generations of luckless battlers. Maybe we will see settlements like Jackson's Estate on the edges of all our cities if Howard's Way prevails.

Yours faithfully,

Don Dwyer



A meeting organised by the CPA after the war to address the housing shortage. (From the collection of Connie Healy)

* * *

Federal ASSLH

President's column

Rae Frances

I am very pleased to bring you the first edition of 'President's Column', which aims to keep members of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH), in touch with activities of the Society. This first column will also introduce members to the structure and functions of the Society as well as provide an update of recent activities.

Origins and Functions of the Society

The ASSLH was formed in 1961 and serves as an umbrella organisation for each of the regional groups, of which there are now seven: Sydney, Canberra, Illawarra, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. The Society acts as a lobby group on issues of concern to labour historians, such as opposing the proposed closure of the Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour. Much of the regular business of the Society is carried out by the executive committee, known as the Federal Executive to distinguish it from the branch executives. The Federal Executive is responsible for managing the business activities of the journal, *Labour History*.

Recent Activities and Initiatives

1. Foundation membership of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS). This is new peak body whose mission is to promote an appreciation of the value of the humanities, arts and social sciences in Australia, especially at the Federal Government level.

2. Foundation membership of the International Social History Association. This organisation was formed in Sydney in July 2005. Membership is open to both individuals and organisations and currently has members based in France, the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Sweden, the USA, Italy, Japan, Hungary, the UK and India as well as Australia.

3. Website: at www.asslh.org.au.

4. Conferences: As many of you will be aware, the Ninth National Labour History Conference was held in Sydney in June/July 2005, jointly organised by the Federal Executive and the Sydney Branch ASSLH with the support of Unions NSW and the Business and Labour History Group, School of Business at the University

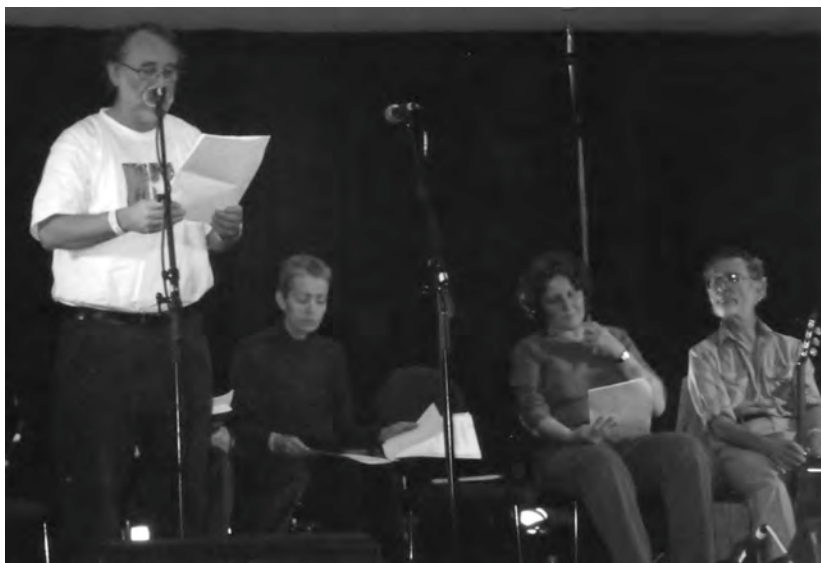
of Sydney. The next national conference will be held in Melbourne in 2007 under the auspices of the Melbourne Branch ASSLH. We are also working with labour historians in New Zealand to organise a trans-Tasman labour history conference in early 2007.

5. Assistance to Branches: The Federal Executive recently voted to establish a special fund to provide financial assistance to branches. This fund, named after labour historian, Bede Nairn, will be used in the future to assist branches with activities such as conference organisation and publishing.

6. Future Activities: In the current political and industrial relations climate, we are aware that there is a need for a greater appreciation of Australian labour history in order to effectively meet the challenges which lay ahead. Several branches have already organised conferences which seek to bring together academics and activists for a profitable sharing of knowledge and strategies. The ASSLH would like to take a more active part in this process of disseminating labour history in an accessible way to activists and the general public. We are working on several ideas ourselves but welcome suggestions from individuals and branches on this issue.

Rae Frances

* * *



President Greg Mallory at *Reds & Rednecks* with Ann Birmingham, Helen Rowe and John Dengate.

BLHA

President's Column

Greg Mallory

At the May General meeting I reported to members on the healthy state of our Association. I wish to discuss some issues arising from this report and some other matters.

Federal Relationship

In July I attended the Federal Executive meeting of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) in Canberra and raised the issue of the relationship between the Federal body and the branches. In an earlier Federal Executive meeting it was decided that \$1000 would be set aside per year for branches to help with the running of their events. This was to be administered under the 'Bede Nairn Fund'. It was decided at the July meeting that the \$1000 would be available each calendar year. The BLHA will be using these funds for the *Rekindling the Flames of Discontent* event in September. The July meeting also decided that it was important for branches and the Federal body to develop closer links, and one way this can be practically

achieved is to help fund the travel arrangements of branch delegates to the Federal AGM in November each year. I feel there is a lot more work to be done in relation to the whole question of Federal/branch relationships. I have spoken to the Canberra branch and will be talking to other branches in order to ascertain their ideas on how this relationship can be improved.

Incorporation/Constitutional Changes

The BLHA Executive is currently examining the ways the Association can become an incorporated body. At our AGM, which will be held before Christmas, the procedures for incorporation will be presented to the meeting, as well as any other necessary constitutional changes.

'Housing' of Archival Material

This has been an ongoing item on our agenda since 2000. A lengthy discussion at the May General Meeting did not resolve the issue but gave us some directions for the

Executive to consider.

Future Events

We are currently publicising the *Rekindling the Flames of Discontent* event in September. Work will begin in November on planning for the *Sport and Working-class Culture* Conference to be held in June 2007. We are also committed to holding a social history seminar on the Brisbane Exhibition (the Ekka) next year. John Kellett, former Secretary of the BLHA, and author of *A Fighting Union: A History of the Queensland Branch of the Transport Workers' Union, 1907-2000*, will be editing the March edition of the *The Queensland Journal of Labour History*. This edition will be devoted to the Transport Workers' Union, who are celebrating their centenary.

Memberships

Our membership continues to grow and it is pleasing to report that we have at least seven institutional members, unions and various branches of ASSLH.

Thanks

I would once again thank the members of the Executive and Committees for all their hard work in making the Association a success. I would particularly like to thank Dale Jacobsen for her work in the past six months as editor of *The Journal* as well as organizing the *Rekindling the Flames of Discontent* event. She has worked on billeting the performers, tickets arrangements, flyers, programs

and other assorted arrangements. She has been supported by a committee, of which I am a member, and also includes Doug Eaton, Lachlan Hurst, Sue Monk, Frank Forrest and Ann Kerins.

Reds and Rednecks

I cannot finish this column without mentioning my first performance at a folk festival [see photo p5 – Ed]. Two BLHA members, Frank Forrest and Ann Kerins, wrote a play called *Red and Rednecks: Some Political Extremes in Queensland History*. It was performed at the National Folk Festival in Canberra in April. I was a commentator to folk artists who sang around the various themes of 'left' (reds) and 'right' (rednecks). It commented on various political figures and events in Queensland's political history; Bjelke-Petersen, Pauline Hanson, Rona Joyner, Fred Patterson, Emma Miller, street marches, working conditions etc. Some of the singers who performed were Ann Birmingham, Margaret Walters, John Dengate, Helen Rowe and Peter Hicks. It was extremely well received and I have encouraged Frank and Ann to organise a performance in Brisbane under the BLHA banner.

Greg Mallory

In Memoriam

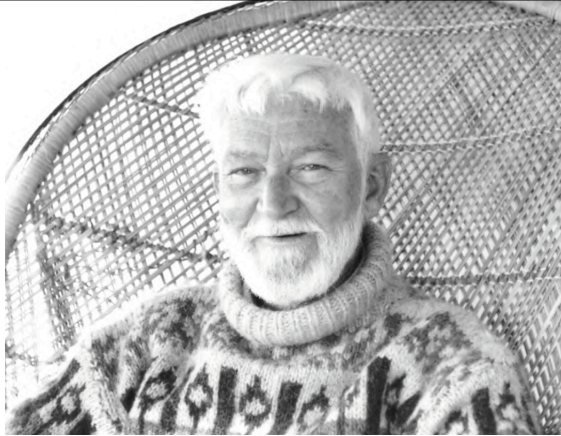


Photo by Penny Davies

Bill Scott OAM

Australia's Foremost Folklorist (1923 – 2005)

Bill Scott, folklorist and writer of Australian folk classics such as *Hey Rain!*, *Where the Cane Fires Burn*, *Bundaberg Rum*, and *The Monkeys Sing Soprano*, and author of many books, including *The Complete Book of Australian Folklore* (Ure Smith, 1976), died in Warwick Hospital on 22 December 2005, after a long illness. He was eighty-two.

Born in Bundaberg in 1923, Bill Scott grew up in the Queensland bush, left school at 14, and at 18, joined the Navy, where he served during World War II on the *Bungaree*, a mine layer. He transferred to *Fairmiles*, serving in the Pacific and New Guinea.

Following his discharge from the Navy, Bill subsequently worked as a canecutter, seaman, steam engine driver and miner. His book, *Tough In The Old Days* (Rigby, 1979)

documents many of the experiences of his early days. He then became a bookseller, and editor and publisher with Jacaranda Press, before devoting his time to fulltime writing at age fifty-four.

In the 1950s, with Stan Arthur and Gary Tooth, Bill formed the Moreton Bay Bushwhackers, and as a founding member of the Queensland Folk Federation, was instrumental in setting up the Folk Centre in Brisbane.

Bill Scott was awarded an OAM in 1992 for his services to folklore and Australian literature. A collection of his songs, *Opal Miner: The Songs of Bill Scott*, was released on CD in 1999, and a film about his life in music, *Hey Rain: what good is your life if it isn't a song?*, was produced in 2000 and to date has been aired

three times on ABC television. *Hey Rain: The Bill Scott Songbook* was published by Restless Music in 2002, and by Timberhead Music in the USA in 2003.

In the last couple of years, though seriously ill, Bill derived enormous pleasure from – and made invaluable contributions to – a small local poetry group, and the Warwick Folk Club.

Bill made a lasting contribution to Australian culture, devoting much of his life to folklore and folk music. He also wrote novels, short stories, verse, biographies, magazine articles, anthologies and songs. His poetry and short stories have been widely anthologised.

Bill Scott is survived by his wife, Mavis, his son, Harry, and four grandchildren.

ROGER ILOTT

* * *

The Kevans Brothers

Denis (1939 – 2005)

Tony ('Jacko') (1942 – 2005)

The Kevans brothers contributed greatly to Australian folk culture through their music, songs, poems and political activism.

Denis was born in Canberra in 1939 to Mick and Betty Kevans. His brother Jack was born in 1942. Mick

was descended from Irish settlers and convicts who had lived in the Ginninderra area since the late 1830s, and Betty's parents, Alf and Emily Knight, were English migrants who lived at old Westlake. Alf was a bricklayer who worked on the provisional Parliament House. When Emily died in 1928, the community spirit of Westlake and Kingston rallied and helped Alf to raise young Betty.



Denis Kevans

(1939 – 2005)

*Online at the National Library of
Australia - 4 June 2001*

Denis was a Unionist, teacher, political activist and agitator, sportsman, singer, songwriter and poet – Australia's 'Poet Lorikeet' – died in Sydney on 22 August 2005 following complications arising from heart surgery.

Denis' poems appeared frequently in *The Building Worker*, the ACT CFMEU Journal, and celebrated a strong working class culture and agitated for better environmental

protection. Denis had been closely associated with the cultural Left and the Union movement since the late 1950's, and he won a number of literary awards. He was a prolific writer and versifier, writing radio scripts, plays, songs and poems; his

works were capable of stunning sarcasm and scorn, yet he was also able to write gentle and moving verses and songs. Denis is survived by his daughter Sophia, and partner Sonia.

*



Sydney 1978: L – R: Seamus Gill, Chris Kempster, Declan Affley, Tom Rummery and ‘Jacko’ Kevans.
Photo by Bob Bolton

Tony (‘Jacko’ or Jack) was wonderfully encouraging to young and learning players and was always prepared to take the time to give advice. He played in a number of Canberra bands, including the ‘Monaro Boys’, which included Bob McInnes, Ian Drynan and Jim Fingleton. The group made an appearance at the first National Folk Festival in Melbourne, in 1967. The ‘Monaro Boys’ later evolved into ‘The Wild Colonial Boys’, and this group included, Jack, Jim Fingleton, Bob McInnes, Tony Lavin and Bill Morgan. The group only made one recording, ‘Glenrowan To The Gulf’, and also appeared in the 1970 Tony Richardson directed film *Ned Kelly*, starring Mick Jagger.

In the early 1960s, Jack lived at the Kingston Guest House, and was completing his degree at the ANU and learning to play the piano accordion, an instrument that he would always be associated with. He later leaned to play the Anglo concertina and the fiddle. ‘Jacko’ became a teacher and later retired to live in the Nimbin area. When he was diagnosed with liver cancer, he was spared the long drawn out battle through the intervention of a heart attack. At his funeral, there were many tributes made, including comments from his son Kieran and daughter Kate, and a eulogy from his brother Denis, who described some of the Kevans family history in Sydney and Canberra.

Colin McJannett

Fair Play Cabaret Review



Fair Play Cabaret – Brisbane
(Photo: Ted Riethmuller, personal collection)

Think back to May/June this year and imagine yourself sharing a nice meal with me in a beautiful setting, being hilariously entertained by biting satire and enchanted by the harmonies of the Brisbane Combined Unions Choir presenting their **Fair Play Cabaret** aimed at the Howard Government's IR 'reforms' (read: 'smash work conditions back to the 1880s'), supported financially by the Queensland Government and the Queensland Council of Unions. Many folk were involved with the Choir in developing the Cabaret. Great show!

You missed it? Well here's a brief taste:

*... it's so simple and so clear
How money, wealth and power
Trade on fear*¹

*The corporate gangsters will not win
when we stand side by side*²

*Past vict'ries turn to sand
Again we heed the call
To resist the hand that would
Divide us all
... remember we can change
The roads we tread.*³

GET THE CD!!

From:
Brisbane Combined Unions Choir,
PO Box 3574,
South Brisbane Qld 4101.

\$15 (inc. p&p) with song words AND
a mini colour version of the above
shot.

Quoted songs by:
1&3 Sue Monk and Lachlan Hurst in
collaboration with the Choir.

2 Paul King *The Eureka Song*.
Yes, the Stockade!

Bob Ross

Mayday in Brisbane 2006 – an historic event



This photograph, taken by Grahame Garner in 1965, shows that only some of the goals of the union movement have been achieved.

Today's news is to-morrow's history. On Mayday in Brisbane this year labour history was made when thousands of unionists and their families marched in record numbers through city streets. They were enjoying the beautiful spring sunshine and celebrating worker's solidarity but also protesting against changes in Industrial Relations legislation. Work Choices has put in jeopardy all the gains the working class has achieved since the first Australian Mayday march that was held in Barcaldine during the shearers' strike in 1891.

On that day in Barcaldine 1,340 people marched: in Brisbane in 2006 on the Labour Day holiday on 1 May many more took to the streets. The Queensland Council of Unions, planning a demonstration in opposition to Canberra's anti-union legislation hoped that 20,000 would attend. This number was well exceeded.

The tradition of celebrating labour movement achievements and voicing unionists' aspirations on the Labour Day holiday is well established in

Brisbane where the first march took place in 1893. The history of this tradition is a turbulent one and a study of it is well worthwhile because it touches on most of the political and industrial issues at the heart of the workers' movement. In exploring this tradition researchers will now be able to view hundreds of Mayday photos taken by Grahame Garner between the years 1963 to 1971 in the Fryer Library. Assisted by the Brisbane

Labour History Association, Grahame has placed his collection of Mayday and Peace Movement negatives in the library for the benefit of all of us.

One such photograph [see p 12 – Ed] taken by Grahame 1965 reminds us that only some of the goals of the union movement have been achieved.

Redreunion



Builders Labourers opposing Work Choices legislation – Exhibition Grounds - Mayday 2006. Photo from Redreunion

'this woman is harmless'

by Ynes Sanz

for Eva Robinson née Julius

here's a black and white photo of a woman getting into a car

here's a photo of the woman getting out of a car

here's a photo of the woman standing next to a car

here's a photo of the same elderly woman walking away from a car

here's another photo of the same elderly woman getting into a car squinting

here's a photo of the same elderly woman getting into the now familiar
FJ Holden

here's a photo of the same elderly woman getting into the car
and clutching the door trim for support

here's a photo of the same elderly woman leaving the same car
with her rubber-tipped walking stick

here's a photo of the same elderly woman opening the door of her car
in a plain dress home made for her heavy body

here's a photo of the same elderly woman getting into a taxi
with a dainty wristwatch manicured hands and a white handbag

in this underexposed photo of the same elderly woman
getting into the usual car (or getting out of it)
her face is strained

in this photo
the woman is looking steadily into the lens

in this photo
you wouldn't expect to be able to see all the shelves of files

in this photo
you can almost hear the clicks on the line

in this last photo
is the photographer's shadow
you can see it stretching beyond the frame
to stain the ground at our feet

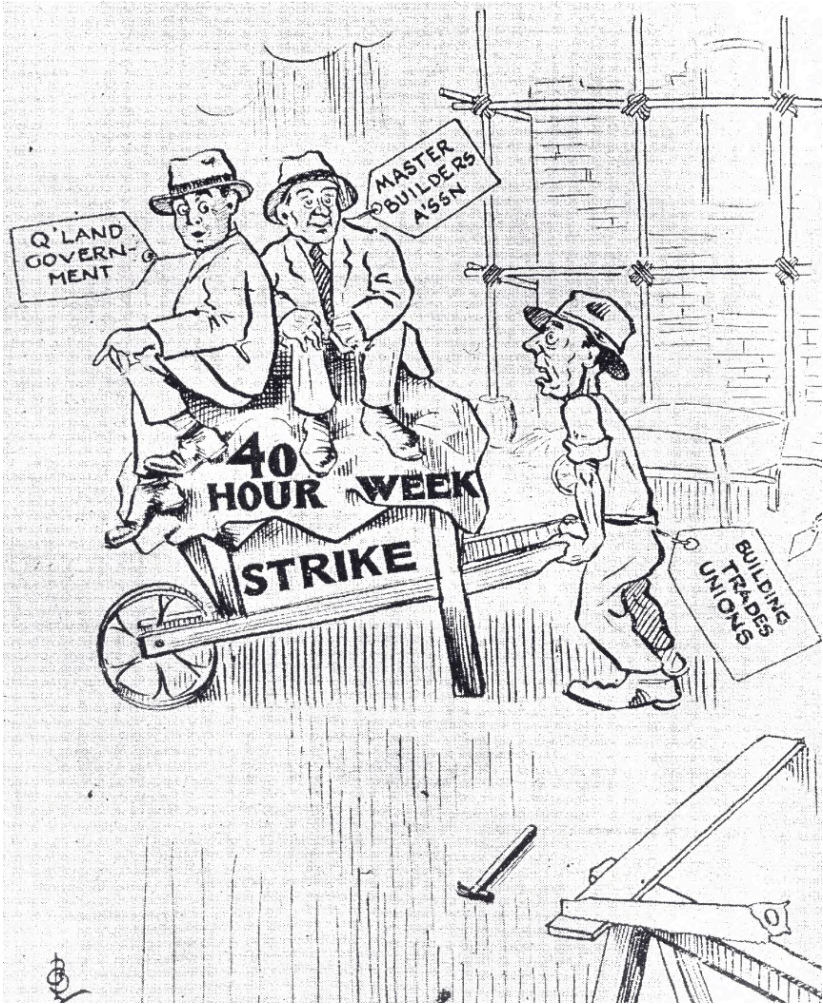
* * *

National Archive of Australia ASIO surveillance photo collection:
Title ASIO surveillance photograph of Eva Robinson, Series
number A9626 Control symbol 120 Contents date range 1939 -
1954 Access status Open Location Canberra Barcode no 7883480



This poem is about Eva Robinson who came from a well-known Brisbane Julius family of communist intellectuals. She and her husband Albert Robinson were part of the struggle from the thirties to the late 1970s. It was a common experience for activists of all kinds to be tailed, photographed and have their phones tapped by Special Branch police. Much of that surveillance material is now in the public domain via the National Archives of Australia Security and Intelligence collection. The title is a quotation from a note scrawled on her ASIO file - someone disagreed so they kept on watching her into her old age ...

Ynes Sanz



I might have managed one, but I cannot manage two.

Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland 10 February 1927, p. 42

Lessons from Defeat: the 1927 Claim for a 40-hour Week by Queensland Building Industry Unions

Humphrey McQueen

O put not your trust in princes ...
for there is no help in them.
Psalms 146

Summary

A 44-hour week became all but universal for workers under Queensland Awards from 1 July 1925. The building trades already enjoyed the shorter week. They moved to retain that advantage by requesting 40 hours. On being refused, four of them decided to absent themselves on Saturday mornings from January 1927. Three blows befell them: the employers locked them out; the Unemployment Council denied them relief; and the Board of Arbitration deregistered them. The unions held out until 19 March.

Outline

The article opens by recalling the prominence of building unions in the struggle for shorter hours. Three arguments for a shorter week are considered against the need of the employers to control labour time.

How Labor governed before and after 1926 is sketched. The dispute is traced through the problems created by the contentious nature of the ballot held by the Building Trades Group (BTG), which added to the confusion about a trade-off between shorter hours and wages. The ragged and precipitate start to the stoppage was followed by the lock-out, de-registrations and the denial of Unemployment Insurance, which required the unions to collect relief funds, with uneven results. The account then notes the weakness in picketing contrasted with the vigour in disciplining wayward members. The collapse is tracked across the State.

The aftermath is examined from four angles, two industrial and two political. First, the dissolution and remaking of the Building Trades Group is presented within the dream of a single industry union. The second industrial aspect specifies the responses of the four unions. On the political front, the investigation shows how the dispute deepened the divide between the Industrial unions and the AWU-dominated Labor government. Finally, that tension added to the impetus for the Communist Party to end its courting of the Labor Party. The article concludes by projecting the unions' strategy against the il-logic of capital and their expectations of an easy win.

*

‘The Boon’

The Australian labour movement cherished no victory more than the 8-Hour Day initiated by stonemasons in 1855-56. Some building workers in Queensland had achieved a 44-hour week around 1880 by arguing that white men needed more rest in sultry climes. The reduced hours were not observed universally until 1919 when the Industrial Court confirmed them in its Building Trades Award. That year, and again in 1922, the Court refused those unions a 40-hour week.¹

In March 1923, Queensland’s Labor-in-Politics Convention instructed the Theodore cabinet to legislate for 44 hours. The Premier argued that neither the government nor the State’s economy could afford that reform. After months of turmoil, Theodore agreed to introduce 44 hours, which took effect from 1 July 1925. The building trades responded by claiming a five-day week of 40 hours.

Why a shorter week?

Proponents of the 40 hours presented three reasons for their claim. A shorter week would (a) create jobs (b) constrain the rate of exploitation (c) reduce exhaustion. Whether shorter hours shared the work depended on how the other two factors played out.

The stonemason, J. B. Miles, put forward that trio of arguments when he became the unpaid organiser for

the dispute committee of the Building Trades Group during 1927. The appointment of this Communist indicated a militant temper among building trade officials. When the half-day stoppages began in January 1927, Miles was back working as a stonemason. Although his union held aloof, he refused Saturday work. This solidarity earned him the sack.² His pivotal place in organising the unions’ campaign makes his understanding of the hours’ question worthy of analysis. No official had a keener grasp of the issues.

In advancing the claim for shorter hours, Miles accepted that reforms in capitalism could be no more than partial and transitory. For instance, wage rises chased prices. The struggle for shorter hours, therefore, took precedence over wage demands: A pay increase would soon be whittled away. By contrast, a cut in hours was harder to remove, and would be defended more ferociously. Hence, the demand for 40 hours was a direct challenge, not only to Arbitration, but to capitalism.³

Miles did not acknowledge that the force of that challenge also meant that capitalists had to be more ferocious in response. If they could not prevent the reduction in the working week, they reacted by intensifying their discipline over labour time. For example, they pushed for piece work, another device for paying only for the labour time that was adding value. Miles recognised that technical

changes had increased profits by stepping up the pace of operations so that the workers needed more rest. He failed to connect previous reductions in hours with that intensification. Nor did he point out that a reduction in hours did not create job opportunities if output were maintained by intensification. He told a Toowoomba meeting 'that improved methods of production would enable the building employers to give them 40 hours without suffering any loss'.⁴ This suggestion ignored the forces of competition that compelled capital to innovate. By stressing the political contest against Arbitration, he avoided the economic roots of the struggle between and within classes.⁵

Messrs Construction Capital

The struggles by workers make no sense outside the needs of the system that exploits them. In *Capital*, Marx provided much of what we need to know about the experience of workers through his analysis of the discipline that capitalists must impose on the labour power that they buy. That approach also recognises the state as an instrument of class power. Hence, the present account takes up the needs of the employers. A materialist investigation of how capital expands must proceed through the specifics of sector, time and place. The circumstances of Messrs Construction Capital in Queensland in the 1920s extended from their organisations to climatic and economic conditions.

Contractors in Brisbane had set up the

Master Builders Association (MBA) in 1882 to sort out squabbles among themselves, notably over price-cutting. They also reacted to the workers' demands for the eight-hour day and a 44-hour week. Splits persisted between the inner-city builders around the MBA, who controlled the larger projects, and members of the Suburban Master Builders Association, who were more often running up houses on spec. The capitalists were divided further by trade and locality. This diversity of interests was handled by a number of bodies: the Queensland Employers' Association, the Timber Merchants Association, the Brisbane and District Joinery Association, the Master Plumbers and the Master Painters. The employers remained divided because they competed with each other for the surplus value added by the workers, while striving to swindle each other out of the resultant profit.

The absence of a single organisation among employers had not disadvantaged them for as long as the machinery of the state was in the hands of politicians sympathetic to their needs. With the election of a progressive Labor government in 1915, capitalists could no longer rely on those instruments or agents of the state to serve their interests in the short to medium term. In particular, Labor replaced the Industrial Peace Act that had been enforced after the 1912 General Strike. To the Presidency of the Industrial Court, Labor appointed T. W. McCawley, a

disciple of the British champion of National Insurance, William Beveridge.⁶

Before the 1920s, the organisations of Queensland building employers had been under-resourced. Their associations got along with voluntary officials who relied on their own office staff to conduct the correspondence and keep the books. By 1927, the MBA Secretary, H. H. Gayford, had brought Messrs Construction Capital closer together to rival the organisation achieved by their labour force. For instance, in 1922, the MBA, in association with the Institute of Architects, backed a monthly periodical, the *Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland*. Behind them, stood the state.

How Labor Governed

After a decade of Labor governments, workers in Queensland owed as much to legislation as to Industrial Awards. The most recent advance had come in 1924 with the Act to install a 44-hour week. When E. G. Theodore quit the premiership for Federal politics early in 1925, the battle lines widened between the Industrialists and the AWU-dominated party machine. The Industrialists in caucus supported a farmer, William Gillies, to defeat AWU hard man, McCormack. Gillies settled a strike by restoring 5s to the basic wage in September 1925. No sooner had Gillies made this concession than McCormack forced him out.⁷ Gillies became a member of the Board of Trade and Arbitration,

which had replaced the Industrial Court. The President was a progressively-minded judge, William Webb. The third position became a sinecure for retiring AWU Secretaries, starting with W. J. Dunstan.

The achievement of the shorter week and more pay proved to be the last benefits wrung from the parliamentary party. Yet, those victories encouraged the industrial unions to expect more of the same. The McCormack government did more for the building employers than they could have done for themselves. The unions underrated the Premier's determination. He accused their leaders of 'cheeky insolence', of talking 'rot', and of setting themselves up 'as Poobahs of what the Labour platform is.'⁸ This abuse came from more than his bully-boy nature, or the tussle between the AWU and the industrial unions for coverage across the State. Economic contraction gave his outlook and personality an institutional impetus.

The 40-hours Ballot

Because Brisbane contained only a third of the State's population in contrast to the average for capital cities of 48 per cent, its building industry contributed less to the State's product than elsewhere. During 1926, however, the value of building approvals for the metropolitan area

had reached £3.4m, due in part to the amalgamation of all suburban municipalities into the Brisbane City Council in 1924. The new administration embarked on two major projects, a City Hall and a second river crossing. Other building activity peaked in 1926.⁹ The demand for building workers encouraged six of the building trades unions to renew their claim for a 40-hour week. This urban splurge ran counter to the impact of the drought, which had cut revenues. A budget shortfall led the cabinet to reduce expenditures by squeezing government employees.

In February 1926, the unions applied to the Board of Trade and Arbitration for 40 hours, with no reduction in the weekly rate of pay. The Board rejected the claim in September, reasoning that, if the legislature had wanted to cut four hours off everyone's working week, it would have said so itself. In response to this rebuff, six of the building unions asked their rank-and-file late in 1926: 'Are you in favour of the forty hour working week?' Of the 2,843 who responded, 2,329 said yes. About 60 per cent of the 7,500 members had not voiced any opinion.¹⁰ Few of the 14 per cent who voted 'No' had a principled objection to a shorter week. Rather, they were reluctant to strike.

The wording of the 1926 ballot is crucial to understanding the course of the dispute. The officials had not asked their members to approve a

withdrawal of labour, as required by law. Some staunch unionists resented this underhand approach. Yet, it seems likely that rank-and-filers would have read between the lines and so were not deceived. Nonetheless, the phrasing of the question put the unions at a moral disadvantage with some of their members, and at a legal one before the Board of Arbitration.

The officials had sought to get around the requirements for engaging in an almost legal strike. The right to strike in Queensland was ambivalent. The Arbitration Act did not require a union to register. Once it became part of the system, it was obliged to conduct a ballot to gain approval for a cessation of work. A majority in favour of withdrawing labour did not make a strike legal.¹¹

Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) members were in a difficult position. In return for preference, their union had agreed in 1919 not to strike. Justice McCauley recognised that preference held an extra attraction for labourers. Its provision offered 'a means of preventing an unnecessarily large number of labourers from attaching themselves to the industry'. Henceforth, those 'who usually follow the occupation' could expect 'more regular employment.'¹²

Three weeks into the 1927 dispute, on 2 February, Justice Webb asked the union officials attending the Board's hearing whether they would 'now

take a secret ballot on the question, submitting it separately to each section of the building trades group.’ BLF Secretary Carleton asserted: ‘The position would be just the same after the ballot’ because the unions had been pressing for ‘a 40-hour week for some years past’. Cornered by Webb to declare whether he would ask his members ‘Are you in favour of returning to work under the award?’, Carleton could reply only that ‘[t]he Federal executive would not agree to a ballot like that being taken.’ The Carpenters’ Secretary, L. English, evaded questions about majority rule by asking the employers whether they would grant the 40 hours until the vote could be taken. ‘Certainly not’, shot back MBA President McDonald.¹³

Dispute committee organiser Miles was forthright in his resistance to majority rule. Union members who had never been to a meeting should not be allowed to vote. He was ‘not going to allow “scab” votes to decide as to how they should behave. Neither were they going to allow the minions of bosses to record their vote.’¹⁴ Such reliance on the militancy of a minority indicated a failure of mass work in the build-up to the stoppage.

When the dispute was over, the State Management Committee (SMC) of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners of Australasia (ASC&JA) had to defend itself to its Federal Council against the charge of having ordered a cessation of work

without conducting a ballot. The officials denied ‘that they had declared a strike.’ Rather, they alleged that the MBA had introduced the word ‘strike’ in order to justify their lock-out. The disingenuousness of this explanation became blatant when the Federal Council required proof of the Branch’s having polled members about withdrawing their labour. The SMC could forward only the ballot paper asking carpenters whether they favoured a 40-hour week.¹⁵

The slight-of-hand in the conduct of a ballot masked more than the eagerness by a section of the leadership for a shorter week. Behind that wish hovered a rejection of compulsory arbitration in favour of direct action. At the start of the fourth week of the stand-off, the Trades and Labour Council (T&LC) congratulated itself for ‘the pioneering effort of industrial unionism, fighting as a group towards the 40 hours, breaking from the Arbitration Court, realising it is only a creation of the employing class’. Miles welcomed deregistration as a break from Arbitration, praising the men for striking against arbitration itself.¹⁶

All Out!

The form of the ballot contributed to the shaky support for the withdrawal

of labour. Miles recalled that the ‘Plumbers failed to reach a decision and the carpenters were changeable.’ Indeed, the ASC&JA tried to negotiate with the MBA. As a result, ‘[t]he building workers then did not know where they stood’. Notwithstanding this muddle, the Bricklayers determined to move ahead. A meeting of BTG members on Thursday evening, 13 January, supported imposing the ban from Saturday, 22nd. According to a police report, 600 unionists attended, of whom 300 were likely to be affected by the dispute; of the latter, 150 voted to strike and 100 to wait.¹⁷ The Bricklayers’ officials thereupon announced that, irrespective of what their allies decided, their members would be staying away a week earlier, from 15th — less than 36 hours away. Three other unions — the Carpenters and Joiners, the Painters and the Builder’s Labourers — fell in behind. The activists had taken most of their fellow members by surprise.

ASC&JA members who were summoned to explain why they had worked on the 15th were excused if they said they had not heard when to start staying at home. A few had not waited for the call. The Railways Commissioner sacked two because they had not come in on Saturday. The SMC sought to have them reinstated because those stay-aways had been under the ‘misapprehension’ that the call extended to carpenters employed under the Railways Award when it applied only to the Building

Trades Award.

The precipitateness of the move became apparent outside Brisbane. The Rockhampton Carpenters complained about ‘too little information’. Although their SMC sent telegrams around Queensland on Saturday, 15 January, the Townsville sub-Branch asked for instructions about the starting date. Building workers there did not meet until January 22, when they voted 150 to 46 to end Saturday work. Not until a month after the dispute had begun did the Toowoomba BLs and Bricklayers agree not to report for work from the following Saturday, 19 February.¹⁸

The proponents of the industrial action had assumed that they could have their whole Saturday off and live on their wages for the rest of the week. On Friday, 14 January, the employers warned that if the men did not appear at 8 am the next day, they would not be readmitted on Monday. The unions alleged that they were being ‘Locked Out’. Instead of inconveniencing their Masters, while enjoying a second full day of rest, the workers found themselves without wages. Carleton told Townsville BLF branch secretary, Stan Gallagher, that the extension of the dispute had been ‘caused by the obstinacy of the Master Builders in locking out the building trade workers because they had the audacity to refrain from working on Saturday morning.’¹⁹

As the employers’ spokesman,

Gayford could boast that he had ‘never upon any previous occasion ... known the building trade employers to have shown such a united front.’ They formed a phalanx which refused to negotiate about any point until the men went back to 44 hours. Protected by the government and the Board of Arbitration, the Masters could afford to sound well-disposed to the welfare of their servants, hoping to avoid ‘bad feeling on either side’. While the employers feigned reasonableness, the *Brisbane Courier* depicted ‘tyrannical’ workers ‘indulging in a lazy strike’, the success of which would be a ‘calamity’ for all industry.²⁰

Backing for the BTG from the T&LC leadership was less emphatic. On 19 January, the Council’s Disputes Committee endorsed the action. The unionists, it said, had been locked out. Faced with the prospect of the unions’ loss of registration, the Council sought to settle. The uncertainties at the T&LC became evident once the BTG’s dispute committee took charge. T&LC President, George Lawson, was uncomfortable when McCormack cornered him into explaining the link between the T&LC and the dispute committee led by the Communist Miles. Lawson prevaricated:

You know ... as a unionist, that when a dispute takes place some governing body must assist, and the Trades and Labour Council has taken this matter up with a

hope of assisting the Building Trades Group, you know also that the men handle their dispute directly, consequently you take your share of the responsibility of the strike.

McCormack would have none of what he called this ‘Jekyll-and-Hyde approach’ of the T&LC towards the BTG’s dispute committee and its Communist organiser.²¹

At the January 13 meeting of the BTG, a BLF delegate, Comrade Keen, had seconded a three-part amendment from a representative of the Carpenters. The pair advocated holding off until three conditions were met. First, the unions had to research their case for the shorter week in order to educate their members; secondly, the officials needed to call shop stewards together to work out methods of action; and thirdly, organisers should attend all sites with ten or more workers to discuss the campaign. That these steps had not been undertaken indicated the helter-skelter nature of the action. Voices cried the amendment down with shouts of ‘No Delay!’²²

The workers had fired their opening shot before securing their lines of supply. The employers and the Labor government were agreed on their orders of battle. When the fight was over, the BLF Secretary alleged that ‘[t]he Master Builders were unofficially told by the Premier

previous to the conference being held that he and the government would stick to them.’ The activists were ill-prepared for such a confrontation. They advocated ‘Down With Arbitration!’, but had little sense of the forces they would be up against once they went outside that system. Despite rhetoric against polities and plutes, the Plebs League had not prepared its students to accept that a Labor government would behave like an executive committee of the bourgeoisie, as *Workers Weekly* quoted Marx’s warning that it must.²³ The failure to integrate the theory of class rule with its practice afflicted the most experienced militants.

Wages/Hours

In addition to the difficulties from the validity of the ballot and the mix-ups over the starting date, confusion also arose about the relationship between the shorter hours and the weekly wage. The 1925 claim to the Board had called for no reduction in pay on the granting of a 40-hour week. The ballot had made no mention of whether the workers would surrender four hours pay in exchange for free-time on Saturday morning. Even if the Masters did not oppose the claim, the workers stood to lose earnings. Some tradesmen might have been able to bear that loss. The most poorly paid of the labourers could not. Miles admitted that ‘there was an element of misunderstanding because they were not demanding the same wages for a 40-hour week.’²⁴

In mid-February, Carleton told the MBA that, in return for a 40-hour week, the unions would accept ‘a reduction of the pay as a temporary expedient.’ They were hoping that the money thus lost would be restored a little later on. Their ‘present objective was to get the 40 hours week.’ This compromise was perilous. On the one hand, it forewarned the Court, the government and employers that a concession over hours would guarantee a struggle over wages. At the same time, Carleton did not want the authorities to think that the men ‘were getting too much pay’. His six-bob-each-way approach highlighted the failure of the activists to clarify the terms of their claim. The offer to accept a pay cut in order to achieve the 40 hours divided the troops. Miles abused the editor of the *Labor Daily Standard* for headlining that the employers were ‘considering’ a working week of 44 hours in five days. This intervention, Miles alleged, had sown confusion.²⁵ If so, the Press report only added to the uncertainties already created by the four unions.

To make matters worse, the activists themselves re-wrote policy in mid-stream. On 26 February, after the dispute had been running for six weeks, a mass meeting voted to demand 44-hours pay for 40 hours work if that demand were not granted by 12 March. Even before that expiry date had been set, the unions were buckling. Hence, at the moment when clarity of purpose was most needed,

the militants further muddied their position. Moreover, those still out were divided over whether to adopt the wage demand.²⁶ If the swings between hesitancy and haste in early January had been disorienting, the backing-and-filling in mid-March over how to balance wages with hours was far more debilitating because solidarity was dissolving.

As a corollary to the unions' shifting about over the weekly rate for 40 hours, they had not thought through the place of overtime. The Proserpine sub-branch of the Carpenters wanted to know whether the demand for 40 hours meant that any time beyond that total should be paid at penalty rates. The SMC took this request as asking whether it was permissible to work overtime at all, wiring back: '40-hours work and no overtime.'²⁷ This ban put off any unionist accustomed to balancing his household budget with a couple of hours at time-and-a-half. Of course, it was not possible for the unions to allow overtime on Saturdays until the 40-hour week over five days had been won. However, the failure of the activists to foresee this complication was another sign that they had embarked on the campaign with an inadequate grasp of its complexities. The root of the problem was their expectation of a pushover.

De-registration

The Board of Trade and Arbitration resisted defiance of its Award. When the unions appeared before it on 2 February, they were surprised to confront all three members. The officials had hoped that the President, Judge Webb, would facilitate a discussion with the Masters, while the unions would get away with offering 'no compromise'.²⁸ Instead, the officials were put to ordeal by fire.

The employers sought to de-register the four striking unions and to suspend the Building Trades Award. The Board declined to be provocative. Webb hesitated to de-register a union because of the behaviour of its leaders. He preferred to have a majority of its members declare that they wanted to operate without his protection before taking so 'very serious' a step. De-registration would 'penalise a large body of reputable men'. Webb suspected that it suited the militants 'for the Board to act precipitately.' Next morning, he announced the de-registration of the four unions. The Board allowed their Award to stand in justice to the Plasterers and Plumbers, and to those members of the four deregistered unions who had continued to work.²⁹

At a mass union meeting on that morning, the door-keepers at the Trades Hall counted 2,140 in

attendance. Miles alleged that the numbers had been swollen by the bosses' encouraging all the 'weaklings' to turn out to sabotage the action. If so, the attempt failed. The meeting remained resolute, refusing secret ballots. A section sang *The Red Flag*. When news of the threatened de-registrations arrived, they rendered a repeat performance. The meeting then resolved: 'Comrades ... to be consistent, let the court do its worst. Let us retain our solidarity, and with the help of our fellows in other unions struggle for victory.'³⁰

Faced with a second attempt by the employers, on 14 February, to suspend the Building Trades Award, Justice Webb continued to be cautious. He removed the Award only from the Bricklayers Society, and only in the Brisbane area where no more than 55 of its members were at work. The MBA had singled out the Bricklayers as the 'source of unrest'.³¹

The MBA thought that its application to suspend the Award should, perhaps, have included the BLF, as so few of its members were working and 'their leaders had backed up the bricklayers.' However, the BLF could be overlooked because 'there were large numbers of men available who would be only too glad to get work of that description.'³² The preference given in the 1919 Award had been lost by deregistration. The work fell to anyone who would take it,

although Award conditions applied to the newcomers.

Temperate rulings by the Board of Arbitration, like strident resolutions by the workers, had become secondary. While the Board of Trade and Arbitration held back from doing its 'worst', the Labor administration felt no such reluctance. Its Public Works Department dismissed anyone who did not report.³³ Even the plasterers, who had kept working, got two days notice.

Unemployment Insurance

In a body blow at the unions' capacity to hold out, the Insurance Council denied sustenance to anyone who refused to work 44 hours. In 1919, the Legislative Council had thrown out the first attempt to introduce insurance against unemployment as the 'Loafers Paradise Bill'. With the Council abolished in 1922, amended legislation began to operate from March 1923. The employer, the employee and the government each contributed three (later four) pence a week. A worker employed for six months was guaranteed a benefit for 13 weeks. The support was about half the minimum wage for a family of five. A single man got 15 shillings.³⁴

From the start of the dispute, McCormack insisted: 'We are not going to give assistance to people that would enable them to fight against us.' Payments would be made only to men 'who were unemployed as a

result of the 40-hour-week dispute, but who are not directly concerned in such dispute, and are not members of the unions engaged in the disputes.³⁵ The government even cut off support from those building trades unionists who had been unemployed before the strike. Those unfortunates now lost their entitlements because they belonged to a defiant union.

A delegation of union officials called on the Premier to find out why support had been withdrawn from deserving cases. Some unionists had got sustenance for a week, only to have it stopped. The spokesperson for the delegation, T&LC President Lawson, sounded shocked. He criticised members of the Insurance Council for “scabbing” on their own mates.’ Even the tory government, he recalled, had not closed the relief depot during the 1912 General Strike. Surely the Premier was not prepared to see women and children starve? McCormack was unabashed:

The Premier: What is the good coming to me if you have that idea? It is only a waste of time. I will make you face the situation as it stands. I am compelled to do so to justify myself. If that is the view of the labour movement irrespective of the merits or the demerits of the strike, and you expect the Government to continue that strike by feeding the people who caused it – well, I want to know if that is your view?

Mr Lawson: My view is that no men or women should be allowed to starve. I would even steal from the Government if I thought I could help those people.

The Premier: That is only heroics!

McCormack accepted ‘the full responsibility’ for denying sustenance to children.³⁶ He then went overseas to arrange loans, leaving deputy-premier William Forgan Smith to enforce Labor principles.

Relief Funds

With the loss of the unemployment insurance, the Building Trades dispute committee issued 500 subscription lists to sustain some 5,000 workers, many with families. To provide twelve shillings to a couple, and three shillings for each child, the committee needed £600 a week.

The four unions called on those members whom they allowed to work to levy themselves 20 per cent of their wages. When the Brisbane City Branch of the Carpenters polled its 2,000 members on that impost, 874 returned ballot papers. Only 104 agreed to sacrifice a pound a week to help out their fellows who were scraping by.³⁷

The Federal Council of the ASC&JA was more generous, sending £500 on 1 February, which the Queenslanders passed along to the dispute committee. Another £500 arrived two

weeks later. By the end of the month, the Carpenters had to ask their Federal Office for another £1,000. The Painters also handed their relief funds, including £100 from the NSW Branch, to the dispute committee. Melbourne and Sydney branches had each sent £50. The Bricklayers also put cash into the common pool.

Money for the BLF arrived from its Victorian Branch in February, while the South Australians also sent £100. The NSW Branch forwarded £100 and levied its members five shillings. Early in March, Carleton despatched an Urgent Telegram to Melbourne: 'Only four days fund left. If hold out ten more could win.' The Victorians donated another £100 and, on 7 March, empowered their Executive to send more.³⁸

Contributions came from around Queensland. A temporary organiser for the Carpenters forwarded £35 from the Innisfail branch of the Labor Party. Supporters in Toowoomba set up a fund-raising committee. Cash from the Australian Railways Union (ARU), the Meatworkers and the Waterside Workers did not arrive until the dispute was almost over. The Sewerage Workers Section of the AWU also subscribed. Even as Miles appealed for more funds from workers across Australia, he could not conceal a loss of drive locally.³⁹

The assistance was far below that given to the timber workers during their 1929 lockout. One difference

was that the timber workers were defending their 44 hours whereas the building trades were chasing a concession that few other workers could expect. Even local activists had grounds for feeling that the Queensland BTG was the cause of its own difficulties. A survey of the unions at the frontline of the dispute adds weight to that suspicion.

Around the Jobs

Among the four unions that had stopped Saturday work, the responses were uneven. The employers reported that of the 75 suburban jobs visited, 50 were in 'full swing', with carpenters hard at it. Carleton countered these claims. Only one job was working. Of the six labourers on that site, the two BLF members were to be expelled for scabbing. The 50 sites identified by the MBA were no more than jerry builders putting up 'humpies'.⁴⁰

Other jobs had been stopped by deluges. The unions had not thought about the wisdom of withdrawing their labour during the monsoon season when work was likely to be shut down anyway. The officials could not have predicted how persistent or torrential the rains would be that year. The worst recorded cyclone hit Cairns, with 39 people reported dead or missing. The MBA joked that even Providence was on the side of the haves.⁴¹

The MBA also pointed out how few

of the joinery shops had gone out.⁴² Although carpenters and joiners belonged to the same union, there were differences between working on site and in workshops. The latter had more continuous employment whereas carpenters chased between jobs. It would be helpful to know how many of 380 'No' votes, out of the 1,682 cast by ASC&JA members, had been cast by joiners. The percentage of negatives was more than twice that of the other unions.

The Plumbers and Plasterers had declined to join the action, although their members had voted as strongly in favour of the 40 hours as had the others. By the middle of February, the BTG wanted the Plumbers expelled from the Trades Hall. Instead, the T&LC voted 27 to 21 to ask the Plumbers' officials to explain their position.⁴³

Pickets

Although the unions thought of themselves as locked out, they made little use of pickets to prevent scab labour or black materials entering sites. Rather, the purpose of the pickets was to collect names to lay charges before the union executives. The gathering of this evidence fell to officials, or to activists paid for their time. Pickets were always an exception. Moreover, they faded away once deregistration removed their legal protection. Miles regretted that the BTG could not prevent scabs from working.⁴⁴

Police surveillance collected further evidence of ineffectiveness. General Instruction No 806 of the Queensland Policeman's Manual required the force to keep watch over industrial disputes for breaches of the peace. The daily reports from station officers did not include political remarks. For instance, the police did not note the presence of known Communists such as Miles. Constable Mahon, who sent in most of the reports, had an informant at the union meetings. Mahon also relied on the Master Builders for his accounts of the outer suburbs, and for his disapproving attitude. For all but two days of the nine-week dispute, Mahon signed off with 'everything quiet and in good order'. He was surprised when even deregistration of the four unions did not lead to any disturbances.

The police reported only two incidents of intimidation, both verbal. On 15 February, a trio of strikers chucked a builder. A scab, Frederick Strutt, was abused as he left home; next day, the New Farm station sent a constable to escort him to work.⁴⁵ Given Mahon's lack of sympathy towards the unions, his account of calm indicates the gap between the rhetoric of the militants at mass meetings and the absence of action around the jobs.

In other respects, the organisation also fell short of the 'wonderful enthusiasm' about which Carleton telegraphed Gallagher.⁴⁶ For instance, after the Women Workers'

Organisation (WVO) met on 28 January to gather support, Miles could note no better than a 'good attendance'. This poor showing, he acknowledged, meant that the next meeting would have to try 'to arouse more women'.⁴⁷ Matters improved after the WVO activists met with the unionists' wives to explain the dispute. The WVO also provided refreshments for the men at threepence, 'ran socials and were a great help.'⁴⁸ The women later complained that the BTG dispute committee always left their shared meeting room in a mess.⁴⁹

Solidarity proved uneven between and within the unions, as evidenced by the Painters and the Carpenters. The former had voted 359 to 56 in favour of a 40 hours week. At the outset, their Management Committee had 'endeavoured to enlist the support of the Plumbers Delegates and the AWU'.⁵⁰ On 11 February, the SMC called a Summons Meeting to deal with the 'lockout'. A majority of the office-bearers remained solid, fining laggards and expelling defaulters, including the deputy premier, W. Forgan Smith.⁵¹ When the Rockhampton sub-branch refused to join the action, the Management Committee acquiesced, with the proviso that, if the rest of the BTG there went out, then the Painters and Decorators must fall in line or 'be dealt with for disobeying the head branch.'⁵²

The ASC&JA's Management Committee had unanimously

endorsed the BTG call on 9 November 1926 for direct action. The determination voiced by the metropolitan officials lost out elsewhere in the State. The Rockhampton sub-Branch was not willing to risk losing Award protections. Further north at Mackay, many carpenters continued to work. Bowen, by contrast, was unanimous in support. At Innisfail, the sub-branch was 'fairly solid', but some members had 'to be dictated to stay loyal'; a few were open in their betrayal.⁵³

On the metropolitan fringe, Wynnum voted to 'take no action ... but to stand firm for Arbitration methods.' Suspicious of how decisions were being reached, Wynnum sent a 'referee' to strike meetings in the city. The SMC then fined the Wynnum secretary £5 for waiting on endorsement by Federal Council before going out. In turn, the sub-branch went to the Federal Council, demanding that the SMC be sacked for its illegal behaviour. The Federal Council found in favour of the complainants, but did not move against the State officials.⁵⁴

Some ASC&JA members were not under the Building Trades Award. In addition, a number of those covered were not being locked out, whether they worked 40 or 44 hours. Some employers had come to accommodations by closing on Saturdays so long as the men put in another two hours during the week.

One joiner found a 40-hour job in Ipswich after being put off in Brisbane for not working on Saturdays.

*Peoples' Courts*⁵⁵

The moral authority of unionism appeared in the willingness of some members facing fines or expulsion to defend themselves before their Executives, even after their unions had been deregistered. These members accepted that their officials could exercise quasi-judicial functions. The corollary was that the union's procedures accord with the rulebook and recognise the civil rights of members. The solicitors for the Operative Painters' and Decorators' Union (OP&DU) advised its SMC to collect evidence of scabbing from pickets, and to give the accused fourteen-days notice to attend a Summons Meeting.⁵⁶

The SMC of the ASC&JA conferred its powers to fine and expel to its sub-branches. The Brisbane City sub-Branch took action against those working 44 hours. Most of those summoned failed to appear. A number who did not show were fined £10, more than a week's wage. Two who presented themselves were expelled for defiance. Was it easier to punish workers than bosses? One defaulter fronted the OP&DU to declare that 'the union could do what it liked' since 'he was going to work and nothing would make him alter his opinion.' Another was more apologetic, if no less determined:

He was not in a position to go on strike. The strike was illegal and he belonged to a society [the union?, or a Masonic Lodge?], by which he was bound to obey the laws of the land and at this late hour he would not come out as he would be a moral coward to do so.

This defence of scabbing on the grounds of manliness inverted the long-standing notion that a scab was not a man. Carleton would report that some tradesmen were 'misnamed' as 'men'.⁵⁷

Others who had kept working raised political arguments. Because the union's leaders boasted that they were not aiming at the 40 hours so much as attacking the Labor government and destroying arbitration, one member refused to stay home because his loyalty to the working class lay with those institutions. The allegation of the strike's 'illegality' was heard more often than pleas of not seeing one's children starve. The dissenters accepted the principle of 'majority rule'. They countered by pointing out that the leadership had refused to hold a ballot on whether to withdraw labour.⁵⁸

Both the stay-puts and the militants were in an unusual situation. Each side laid claim to solidarity and to principle. Had the OP&DU Management Committee won a vote to strike, the defendants would have

sounded less confident. At the very least, the divisions within the movement allowed those who put their self-interest first to gloss their scabbing with a defence based on class interests and democracy. Either way, the mark of scabbing was indelible. In April 1929, two years after the dispute had ended, the BLF debated whether to discipline a good unionist who had unwittingly gone back a few days before the action had been declared off.⁵⁹

Collapse

By the middle of February, the fractures inside the unions were showing. The T&LC Disputes Committee had offered to negotiate. A mass meeting at the Trades Hall on Sunday 13 February heard calls for negotiation, which the chairman of the T&LC Disputes Committee, the Painter's delegate R. J. Gardner, opposed 'as a sign of weakness.' One advocate of compromise countered by pointing out that a 'long drawn-out fight' would weaken the men's resolve after a settlement had been reached.⁶⁰

Carleton told the gathering that the unions' hands were tied until next week when the Federal Arbitration Court decided the claim by the Engineering Union for a 44-hour week. Did he hope that its rejection would draw in support from unions

operating under Federal Awards? A voice from the floor responded that, since the Courts were the agents of the government, which had opposed any reduction in hours, 'the men should not back down'. (In fact, the Court granted the reduction a few days later.) Speakers spurred each other on by recalling their 1924 victory over the Labor government for a 44-hour week, and the 1925 restoration of 5s to the basic wage. The meeting voted its 'express satisfaction' with the BTG's dispute committee. It condemned as 'cowardly' any building worker who moved inter-State during the strike.⁶¹

Despite this bravado, Miles reported the 'outlying areas doubtful'. Cairns would not strike, though it was sending aid. After Townsville voted to return on the old arrangement, Carleton attributed the breakdown in solidarity there to a stacked meeting. In addition, he complained that 'job control' was in the hands of the Masters so that the dispute committee 'cannot place men where best for the union'. For instance, Townsville BLF sub-Branch President, Handley, was a fighter but unable to get work on the biggest job, the Wintergarden Theatre.⁶²

By 7 March, even some bricklayers were asking to be taken back. That night, the T&LC voted 35 to 24 to extend the 'fighting front'. Delegates defeated an amendment to contact the MBA. According to a police report, the T&LC Disputes Committee had

made such an approach during the morning. On Saturday, 12 March, T&LC President George Lawson, as Secretary of the Amalgamated Road Transport Workers Union, instigated a conference at the Board of Arbitration to prevent more of his members being turned out of work because of the dispute. Nothing eventuated. Discussions were postponed till the next Wednesday, 16 March.⁶³

The stoppage collapsed a day later, St Patrick's Day, Thursday, 17 March. Just before the end, some of the leaders had again offered to compromise. The MBA and the Labor government remained implacable. On 19th, the workers gathered at the Trades Hall where they voted to go back. The Bricklayers, who met separately, also gave in. The combined meeting retained Miles as organiser for the BTG, voting to lift the salary proposed from £5 to the £6 3s week. In the wash-up, he continued to work for nothing.⁶⁴

Miles warned unionists against accepting cuts to their conditions in order to secure their previous positions. He acknowledged that once the decision to go back had been made, men would scramble to get taken on first. At the Government workshops in Woolloongabba, thirty-four men started back on 21 March, seven more returned on 23rd once supplies arrived; five single men had to wait until the operations were in

full swing.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the dispute committee had to sustain them and others in the same situation.

Miles acknowledged that to fight on, as some die-hards had demanded, would have been 'folly'. Leadership, he had to admit, required an 'orderly retreat'. He nonetheless claimed that '[t]he men were not beaten now if the committee is allowed to carry on and they return to work solid.' Carleton told the Federal Conference of the BLF in November that 'the men went back to work ... as solid for the 40 hours as when they went out.'⁶⁶ This conclusion slid around the point. Were they solid for striking to achieve the shorter week, or were just in favour of being granted one by the Board or the government?

The manager at the Ipswich Rail Workshops told the carpenters employed there that since the ASC&JA had been de-registered, they were no longer unionists. The State Secretary hit back: 'we were a fighting Organisation a generation or more before an Arbitration Court came into being'. Moreover, 'we should be, under the circumstances, more militant than ever our members have been for some time past.'⁶⁷ This boast lost credibility as the dispute dragged on. Its clarion rang hollow once the campaign ended in a rout.

What had the unionists to show for their sacrifice? They and their families lost the equivalent of three months wages. In monetary terms,

that result was the same as if they had cut their own wages by 20 per cent over twelve months. Heroic defeat is small consolation, no matter how just the cause. What can be valuable is how the workers had organised their actions hour by hour; how they collected and distributed relief; and what lessons they carried forward.

Aftermath

The defeat affected the industrial and the political wings of the labour movement. Among the former, the BTG disintegrated, while individual unions scattered or were shattered. Two days after the return to work, the regular meeting of the Trades and Labour Council lapsed for want of its quorum of forty. The officials put the low attendance down to more heavy rain. In fact, moderate unions were breaking away from the T&LC, with the Stonemasons leading the way. On the political front, the dispute further split the Labor Party leadership from more of the Industrialists. The Communist Party sought to take advantage of this development as it remade itself in the crisis overwhelming world capitalism. Each of these aspects will now be examined.

Building Trades Group

The 40-hour week claim had tested the prospects for an industry-wide union. The action had sundered the building trades more than it had

united them. Sub-branches had gone their own way. When the men went back with nothing gained, the militants looked to a single industry union to bring the moderates into line. The latter hoped that a central body could tighten the leash on the radicals and communists.

The 40-hours contest had coincided with an effort to revive a single industry union. The coming combination was to be called the Building Trades Union of Queensland. The name was grander than the body since only the Carpenters, Painters and Labourers agreed to join. Stonemasons and Plasterers had not even voted. The Plumbers refused to sign up. The Bricklayers said they were in favour of the principle but rejected the version on offer. In addition, not all members of the contracting unions were supportive. Four out of ten of the Painters who voted were against.⁶⁸

At the 1926 Federal Conference of the BLF, the Queenslanders had asked that a whole day be set aside to discuss proposals for One Industry Union in their State. The 1927 and 1928 Conferences reaffirmed the right of the Queensland Branch to draft local rules to prepare for its integration into the new combination.

Early in 1927, the Federal Council of the ASC&JA refused its Queensland Branch permission to become part of a single Building Trades Union. As a

compromise, the Federal Councillors accepted that sub-branches in the State could apply for a referendum on the question.⁶⁹ In the meantime, the members could experiment with composite local committees.

The dispute had sundered the BTG from the start. Defeat splintered what remained. Hence, the BTG itself had to be revived before an industry-wide union could be advanced. On 4 April 1927, the BTG remnant asked the T&LC to be allowed to carry on with only three affiliates: the Bricklayers, Labourers and Painters. Two weeks later, the ASC&JA delegates had the BTG wound up. By then, the Painters had withdrawn from the T&LC.

The Queensland BLF called for the BTG to be re-organised along 'economic and industrial lines'. It endorsed the continuation of Miles as organiser for its dispute committee. The OP&DU's Management Committee declined to 'entertain' the appointment of Miles as BTG organiser, though it had 'no objection to his being appointed to clean up the recent dispute and will recognise our responsibilities in regard to same'.⁷⁰

A year passed before the T&LC called another BTG meeting, in mid-March 1928. Schemes for a single industry union continued to divert officials who had trouble keeping the BTG together. The onslaught of the depression and of an anti-labour State government put paid to plans for an industrial union. When the

Queensland working class did begin its fight-back in 1934, the BTG played a leading role, publishing its own journal from September 1934.

The Four Unions

Such solidarity as remained at the end of the dispute shrivelled in the following weeks. Late in April, Carleton reported that 'the disintegration seems to have set in with a vengeance amongst the building trade Unions.'⁷¹ The four unions went their own ways to cope with internal ructions.

Carpenters

The return to work was not a week old when the Carpenters' SMC unanimously agreed to apply for re-registration. Chastised by the BTG, the union agreed to delay its move for one week so that a collective approach might be made to the Board of Trade. However, the ASC&JA capitulated to the conditions exacted by the MBA for re-registration, by remitting fines and readmitting scabs. The BLF condemned the Carpenters and Joiners for digging a ditch through which the other unions would now have to crawl. The Carpenters secured re-registration in early May. Their union was thus unable to penalise its own scabs. Unabashed, it asked the still deregistered BLF to apply bans in Townsville on its behalf. The workings of the

Townsville BTG puzzled Carleton.⁷²

Painters

The Painters formed a Joint Council with the Master Painters because most of the work was on renovation. The OP&DU, therefore, withdrew from the BTG which had opened negotiations with the MBA. Meanwhile, the Rockhampton sub-branch strayed so far along its own path that the State Branch in Brisbane came close to closing it down in May. In August, the Secretary travelled north to explain the situation as one step towards rebuilding the union. The Board did not reregister the OP&DU until May 1928.⁷³

Bricklayers

By contrast, the Bricklayers' executive continued to antagonise the MBA, which retaliated by cutting their hourly rate from 1 January 1928. The union leadership threatened to stop working on Saturdays, but got little support from the rank-and-file. The Court did not re-register the Bricklayers until March 1928, also restoring their Award coverage. By August, both concessions had been cancelled on the grounds that they had not kept their promises. In fact, the union had refused to readmit a professional scab named Collins. After the 1927 dispute, he had offered to work for less than the Award rate.⁷⁴

Labourers

Enough BLF members braved

thunderly squalls and their disappointment to meet on 22 March. Did their T&LC delegate, Keen, remind them that he had called for more research, agitation and organisation before they withheld their labour?⁷⁵

One activist had already defected to the AWU 'octopus'. By October, the sub-branch had only three members in work; the rest were either in the AWU, or unemployed. Gallagher's misappropriation of £41 during the next year compounded the loss of spirit. The BLF's situation in Cairns was slightly better with ten members, mostly assisting brickies or plasterers. The carpenters' labourers would not join the BLF because they feared the AWU's influence over the State Labour Bureau, which allocated jobs.⁷⁶

The legal standing of the BLF was in limbo. It remained de-registered throughout 1927, although the Building Trades Award was in place. Carleton told the November Federal Conference that the President of the Board of Arbitration, Webb, had warned him that the BLF would get nothing from his tribunal. Notwithstanding this hostility, the Board's findings accorded with its previous decisions about the work appropriate for a builder's labourer. Hence, it ruled that the construction of a tin-hare course was to be paid at labourers' rates. The BLF convinced the Board that petrol bowsers were machines so that their erection was

BLF work, not Plumbers'.⁷⁷

These wins for the BLF were small compensation for the Board's granting, on 14 December 1927, the AWU coverage over builders labourers' work in Cairns, Townsville and Mackay. On 1 July 1927, the Board served notice on the BLF that the AWU had sought preference in North Queensland. Carleton asked Gallagher to organise a petition from the Townville members, recalling that thirty-eight labourers had earlier signed one to ward off the AWU. By now, most of them had gone across to the enemy. Webb intimated to Carleton that he would never have ruled in favour of the AWU had the BLF not got itself deregistered. As far as the Board was concerned, the BLF was 'dead'. Preference would go to well-behaved unions.⁷⁸

To block the AWU, the BLF in Brisbane held a Summons Meeting on 22 December to apply for re-registration. Carleton also hoped to win back the territorial coverage. He expected the re-registration to be straightforward since the MBA would not oppose the application. The employers, he claimed, now recognised that they had made a mistake in pushing for de-registration of the BLF since the labourers had 'misbehaved ourselves more' when outside the Court. Registration was secured on 28 December, by accepting the same conditions as the Carpenters, namely to readmit the expelled and to remit fines.⁷⁹ Despite

this move, the loss of the Northern zone to the AWU became permanent in 1929 when the BLF accepted the loss of work above Mackay.

The costs from an ill-prepared action were institutional as well as individual. Carleton's report to the Federal Conference in November 1927 regretted that 'the union had gone back financially in consequence of the recent strike.' The Branch could pay only £30 of its £160 sustentation fees to the Federal office. By March 1929, funds were so scarce that the BLF could not meet its rent at the Trades Hall, owing £54, more than any other occupant. Although the Left led the BLF until the mid-1940s, apart from a take-over by an unsavoury crew in 1934-35, the Branch never regained the full measure of its militancy.⁸⁰

Political shakeouts

Historians could pass over the 1927 Building Trades action as no more than a clash of wills and poor union organisation had the dispute not happened at a moment when all sections of the Queensland labour movement were realigning themselves. In challenging the Labor government, the defeat of the Building Trades contributed to a redirection of the miniscule Communist Party across the country.

Governing Labor

The clash between McCormack and the Railway Union during the rail strike of August 1927 has become the stuff of legend. According to that version, although the ARU lost badly, the workers took revenge by turfing out McCormack's crew at the May 1929 polls. The Labor vote slumped from 48 to 40 per cent, its lowest in twenty years. True or false, this chain of evidence omits one prior cause of working-class discontent with McCormack, namely, his harshness during the 40-hours dispute. Six months before his clash with the ARU, he had applied comparable measures to break the building trade militants.

Labor Party Branches and affiliated unions protested to the Queensland Central Executive (QCE) about the government's behaviour during the building trade dispute. Another mark of the bitterness that the industrial unions felt towards the Labor Party appeared just after the dispute began. The QCE asked the Carpenters and Joiners for donations to relieve the miners' wives in the UK in the wash-up from the General Strike; the union regretted that it could not oblige because the lock-out meant that it needed all its resources to fight its own Labor government. The Brisbane Branch called for a ballot on whether to disaffiliate. So outraged were the Industrial unions by the Labor government's behaviour that they cancelled the 1927 Labour Day procession in May, along with the

official dinner. They even returned donations from the politicians.⁸¹

Since 1925, Queensland's industrial unions had been trying to set up a new political formation, though not a separate party. Early in 1926, a 'Minority Labor Movement' emerged 'to clean the Labour Movement of the reactionary element which at present controls.' After this body disappeared, the T&LC sponsored a November meeting of the 'Industrial Section' to promote union policies inside and beyond the parliamentary wing. The Industrials also tried to reform the Labor Party from within by supporting militants against sitting members in preselection ballots.⁸² Little came of that effort either, beyond another layer of distrust.

After the McCormack government's assault on the ARU, the BLF joined thirty-seven unions in October 1927 'to discuss relations between the unions and the workers' political party'. Only five or six dissented from the condemnation of McCormack and the QCE over the railway lock-out. Forty-four voted in favour of dumping the Premier and his gang. The meeting divided over why the Labor government had deserted the workers. By 36 to 28, a majority 'declared that the failure of the Labor Party and the QCE is due to reformism and affirmed the class struggle as the basis of political action.' Notwithstanding this rhetoric, the delegates defeated a motion to stand candidates against the Labor

Party at the 1929 elections by 39 to 21.⁸³

Some militants did set up Left-Wing Committees which contested five seats. These 'Left-Labor/Communist' candidates garnered 3,194 votes between them. In Paddington, the left-wing independent Fred Paterson won 28.36 per cent as the sole opponent for the sitting Labor member. For the seat of Brisbane, the Communist Miles took 4.8 per cent which was the same percentage as a Left-Labor man won in a neighbouring electorate. The sample was too small and the results too uneven for the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) to discern whether the label 'Communist' was a liability.

The Red Road

Miles had chronicled the Labor government's outrages for the Communist Party's *Workers Weekly*. His had begun by dismissing the postponements of the half-day stoppage as 'funk' and the case for delay as 'bunk'. When the government blocked unemployment insurance to the unionists, he cut to the chase: 'Thus the reformist legislation of social reform under capitalism breaks down before the hard facts of class struggle.'⁸⁴

Miles's experiences of the McCormack administration during 1927 encouraged the

miniscule Communist Party to abandon its attempts to steer the Labor Party in Queensland towards socialism. From Sydney, the CPA's dominant figure, Jack Kavanagh, favoured moving away from Labor in Queensland. Under his guidance, *Workers Weekly* applied this lesson to the turmoil inside the NSW Labor Party. An Editorial advised everyone to join Queensland's Trade Union Electoral League 'without delay', before moving onto the Communist Party: 'There are no Communists outside the Communist Party.'⁸⁵

Union-bashing by the Labor government coincided with a reformulation of strategy by the international communist movement. Early in 1928, the two Australian delegates to the Red International of Labour Unions returned from its fourth conference in Moscow with the 'Queensland Resolution', which encouraged the Party in that State to put more distance between itself and the Labor Party.⁸⁶ The CPA did not need orders from Moscow to see that the Right-wing Labor leaders were enemies of the working class. Rather, the behaviour of the McCormack regime during the Building Trades dispute added to the willingness of the Queensland Reds to implement the 'Queensland Resolution'.

The next stage in the evolution of CPA strategy came with the Comintern's recognition in 1928 that metropolitan capitalism was entering another deflationary crisis. The

Communists had pointed to the capitalist implosion before the epiphenomena of the Wall Street collapse in October 1929.

Later that year, the Communists twisted their new line from a denunciation of Labor leaders as ‘fakirs’ into the charge that they were ‘social fascists’: socialist in name but fascist in action.⁸⁷ To call McCormack any kind of socialist was to do him too much honour. He opposed not only Communists but also Socialism, which he had expunged from the Party’s list of methods. In early 1927, the Queensland Labor administration had not been fascist but the arm of a bourgeois democracy grappling with a fiscal crisis and facing down a challenge to capitalism’s legal and political order. The Labor leaders delivered what capital needed in the circumstances. Perhaps McCormack fancied himself as another strongman in the mould of Mussolini. Yet, to associate McCormack’s ruthlessness during 1927 with the fascist solution to the inter-war crisis in world capitalism is to misunderstand the nature of democracy in a normal class dictatorship.

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Conclusion

The failure of the 1927 push for shorter hours presaged a run of defeats for workers in every industry across Australia. By 1930, the proletariat had been stripped of its capacity to resist. Pain-filled organisation, girded by a Leninised Communist Party, rebuilt the confidence essential to improve wages and conditions. As part of that process, the debate renewed over whether trade unions were an appropriate vehicle for initiatives against the state.

By April 1927, the only building workers in Queensland entitled to a five-day week were Seven Day Adventists who had gained that dispensation before the dispute began. Late in 1927, the BLF Federal Conference gave members in New South Wales permission to work 44 hours in five days. This decision was an affront to the sacrifices of their Queensland comrades. It also showed that the seventy-year old principle of Eight-Hour Day was not inviolate. Would the Queenslanders have fared better had they negotiated for a five-day week of 42 hours, as Carleton told his Federal Council had been adopted by several employers?⁸⁸

Alternatively, should the Queensland building unions have avoided the confrontation? Direct action for a shorter week was not in itself

misguided. The failings were threefold. The first concerned political nous. As Carleton admitted to the BLF Federal Conference in November: 'a grave mistake had been made in depending upon the Labor government.'⁸⁹ The militants had been oblivious to the Psalmist's warning not to place their trust in princes. The second weakness was the want of preparation. The defeat demonstrated how right the advocates of research, education and agitation had been in January. Finally, nothing had been gained by the duplicity in wording the ballot question. On the contrary, the results from a vote to strike might have convinced officials of the need for better organisation. At least, the unions would not have lost the moral authority over those who voted 'No'.

The tug-of-war over the 40-hour week lasted another 20 years. Early in 1931, amendments to the Industrial Act allowed the rationing of work to limit unemployment. Three years later, the Court rejected a claim from almost all of the State's unions for a 30-hour week, although it favoured 'spreading the available work.' A new Building Trades Award in 1935 allowed for a 40-hour week on-site, but with the set weekly pay reduced by one-eleventh. In 1936, the building unions thought that the four hours pay ought to be restored while the employers wanted a return to the 44 hours.⁹⁰ The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) called for a stoppage on 15 September 1937 to

press for a 40-hour week for all workers. Most Australians had to wait until 1947, when the Federal Arbitration Court granted the reduction under pressure from the ACTU, which had called for a national stoppage to be followed up by workers' refusing to come in on Saturday mornings – a reprise of the Queensland action. The difference was that the unions had grounded their claim in evidence and unity.

The length and intensity of the working week is determined by the relative strengths of the contending classes, industrially and ideologically. The 1927 dispute in the Queensland building industry demonstrated how an industrial tribunal buttressed by the Executive arm of government could organise Messrs Construction Capital and disorganise the proletariat. When the unions were about to capitulate, one of their leaders, J. Read, admitted that, although they had undertaken 'a revolutionary strike against the capitalist class, ... they were not organised to carry on such a stupendous fight.'⁹¹ Their defeat was another reminder that, for as long as the capitalist class retains state power, direct action alone can not proceed far or succeed for long.

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Humphrey McQueen back at UQ, May 2006. Photo from Redreunion.

Endnotes

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3. *Toowoomba Chronicle* (hereafter *TC*) 15 February 1927, p. 5 e-g.
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machinery. He contended that ‘over-capitalisation of industry in Queensland’ was ‘greatly responsible for the unemployment. It is well known that many companies are over-paying dividends through over-capitalisation.’ (*Report of Conference*: 14 June 1929, of trade union leaders with Minister for Labour, H. E. Sizer, p. 16) Carleton’s remarks suggested some acquaintance with Marx’s analysis of the organic composition of capital. (*Capital*, I, p. 574) Carleton might have acquired this approach at classes conducted by the Plebs League, which his union supported.

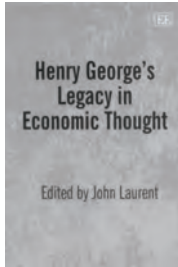
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11. *QIG*, January 1920, p. 29.
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17. *TC*, 15 February 1927, p. 5f; P. C. Mahon to Police Commissioner, 15 January 27, General Correspondence, Police Department, Queensland State Archives (hereafter QSA), RS113214.
18. Stan Gallagher to George Carleton, 23 January 1927, Australian Builders' Labourers Federation (hereafter ABLF) (Queensland Branch) Papers, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, UQFL 166, 1 (8); *TC*, 15 February 1927, p. 5e-g; 21 February 1927, p. 4g.
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20. *ABJQ*, February 1927, pp. 33 & 36; *Brisbane Courier*, 3 March 1927, p. 12e.
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22. *DS*, 14 January 29, p. 6d; Editorial, 18 March 1927.
23. ABLF Federal Council Minutes, November 1927, p. 199, Butlin Archives, Australian National University, N130/1; *WW*, 25 March 1927, p. 2.
24. *TC*, 15 February 1927, p. 5f; McCormack asked the union leaders how they were 'going to reconcile their present demand for 40 hours with a demand for a higher basic wage. Did not that suggest that the unions were getting out of their depth?', *ABQJ*, March 1927, pp. 24 & 26.
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32. *ABJQ*, March 1927, p. 19.
33. *DS*, 17 January 1927, p. 1a-b.
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Review of
**Henry George's Legacy in
Economic Thought**

**By John Laurent and Edward
Elgar (Eds.)**

Cheltenham, UK, 2005.

\$US110, hardcover, vii + 271 pp.

(\$71.50 if ordered from
publisher prior to 31 December)

This, and other recent books, marks a revival of interest in the writer of *Progress and Poverty* and founder of the 'single tax' movement, the 19th century American Henry George (1839-97). The editor, in his introduction, uncovers an unexpected legacy of policies and persons influenced by George's theories, including the curious fact that Billy Hughes was once the President of the Balmain Single Tax League!

This book seems to mark a more promising stage in the academic approach to Henry George. Its treatment of him in the past has too often been no more than a cursory and dismissive glance at *Progress and Poverty*. Most chapters in this volume exhibit considerable research. Those wanting to be acquainted with

his basic ideas are recommended to the chapters by Rob Knowles and Terry Dwyer. The first examines the relationship between George and Leo Tolstoy, his most famous disciple. It conveys much about the ethos of George's thinking. The second outlines the essentials of George's thought and applies it to such problems as patents and the privatisation of infrastructure.

Other chapters are more discursive and derivative. The authors take from George some aspect that falls within their own interests and develop it.

Erin McLaughlin-Jenkins, for example, takes as her starting point two articles written by the biologist Thomas Henry Huxley for *The Nineteenth Century* in 1889, attacking George's book *Progress and Poverty*. She explores the possible reasons for Huxley's 'almost hysterical irritation' with Henry George.

John Laurent's chapter takes up the interesting theme of evolution in *Progress and Poverty* and George's other works. It is valuable in pointing to the fact that George regarded society as an organism evolving by the division of labour toward ever greater complexity and interdependence. Laurent might have taken the argument a step further to point out that George regarded the mainspring of that evolution to be natural or equal rights, so that he defines the law of progress as 'association in equality'.

The chapter by Warren Samuels and others, investigates the political and economic power of land ownership. It is a telling analysis, though it is more Marxist than Georgist. They describe developments leading into the late 19th century, for example, as ‘coming to be seen as the consolidation of the rule of capital in both economic and political matters’ (p. 107).

The most controversial essay is that by Laurence Moss since he argues that landowners, in the guise of developers, are entitled to be repaid for their shopping malls from the land values that they ‘create’. That, Moss writes, is ‘turning Henry George on his head’ (p.163). Many would agree with him.

The two chapters written by John Pullen are thought-provoking. He argues that George might have served his own cause better had he treated his ‘single tax’ as a restriction upon private property rather than attacking it. In the other chapter, he discusses the criticisms and defences of the ‘single tax’. A more probing analysis of the basic principles underlying George’s thought may have led to a more effective defence of George’s philosophy and fiscal policy.

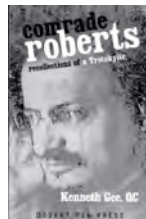
After pointing out the need to moderate both speculation and land price inflation, Frank Stilwell and Kirrily Jordan try to find a larger place for land tax in our fiscal policy. Land tax is a ‘big’ tax, and a more uniform land tax, they suggest, even at a very modest level, might more

than replace Stamp Duty in NSW. They suggest that the myriad complexities in the way rating and land tax are levied might be cleaned up by a national uniform land tax with a tax-free threshold, which would replace rating. One important contribution they make is to demonstrate that, despite its fiscal, social, and environmental advantages, land tax revenue is fast falling behind increases in land values. The political challenges facing its extension remain large. It is a challenge, they say, that needs facing.

Phil Day, a Georgist town planner, concludes the book with a description of the evolution of land law and land taxes in Australia. He argues that it is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to gauge the contribution made by Henry George to these developments. In his opinion, the Georgist movement has been largely ineffectual in promoting the merits of land value taxation. His chapter ends with an assessment of betterment and development levies as pragmatic responses to the need by government to capture some part of the economic rent created by the community.

Richard Giles

* * *



Review of
COMRADE ROBERTS
Reflections of a
Trotskyite
By Kenneth Gee QC

Comrade Roberts is a good story. It is also good labour history because it is an eloquent account told first hand. Such gems are rare amongst the accounts of Australian working class history.

The book deals principally with a three-year period during the World War II in which Gee, a self confessed middle class boy from Strathfield (later an eminent barrister and Judge), forsook his role as a solicitor in his father's practice and joined the working class; firstly as a boilermaker's labourer on the Sydney waterfront and then as a 'dilutee' engineering tradesman. His transformation from lawyer to manual toiler is explained by his conversion to revolutionary politics, a process which he says commenced at the Sydney University Law School (where John Kerr was a contemporary), and which led him to the ranks of the Communist League, the Australian branch of the Fourth International and his new identity as Comrade Roberts.

My favourite passages are those in which Gee describes his work with Nielson Brothers, particularly on the freighter *Ville d'Amiens*. The author's storytelling ability and his humanity shine in these vignettes of working class life. The characters, the work, the '6 o'clock swill', the earthy humour — are brilliantly evoked. The stories of his subsequent time as a fitter are less interesting, probably because the characters are less

interesting.

Ken Gee's depiction of his working class experiences are interspersed with two recurrent themes. The first of these is the machinations of the Sydney Trots and their two factions led by the towering figures of Nick Origlass ('the Chairman') and Jack Wishart. Much has been written about Origlass but, to my knowledge, very little about Wishart who by Gee's account was a charismatic hard-drinking lawyer with a font of knowledge and a keen intellect. It strikes me that his contribution to the left wing politics of the period is worth further study and assessment.

The second recurrent theme, and probably the book's least appealing feature, is the author's denunciation of Leninism and Trotskyism from the view point of one who can now no longer understand why such ideologies appeal to him in his youth. The discussion of these matters is somewhat repetitive and turgid.

Any criticisms of the book are minor. It is a valuable contribution to the left wing working class history of the period with which it deals. To the learned Kenneth Gee QC, we thank you.

Bob Reed

CONTRIBUTORS



Dale Lorna Jacobsen is a writer living in the mountains of Maleny in south-east Queensland, prior to which she was an environmental scientist at Griffith University. She was a Queensland delegate to the 1989 Communist Party of Australia Congress in Sydney, at which the vote was taken to wind up the party.



Greg Mallory is an adjunct lecturer in the Department of Industrial Relations at Griffith University. His book *Unchartered Waters: Social Responsibility in Australian Trade Unions* was published in 2005. He is currently working on a history of the Queensland Coal Miners' Union for the CFMEU. Greg is also a sports historian and is currently working on a history of the Brisbane Rugby League. Greg is President of the Brisbane Labour History Association.



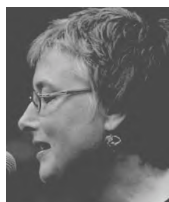
Rae Frances is President of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. She has been an associate editor of the *Labour History* since 1992 and is a past president of the University of New South Wales branch of the National Tertiary Education Union. She currently teaches history at the University of New South Wales.



Colin McJannett undertook field collection of songs and music from 1969 to 1980, extensively recording Harry Cotter of Binalong, NSW. Much of this material is in the National Library. He was Chairman of the Australian Folk Trust when the decision was made, in 1991, to locate the National Folk Festival in Canberra; subsequently elected Chairman of the Board of the National Folk Festival Ltd.



Roger Ilott is a professional musician, songwriter, recording artist, producer and studio engineer, working mainly in the field of Australian folk music. With **Penny Davies**, his wife and musical partner of 30 years, he has released a dozen albums. Together they run Restless Music, Australia's second largest folk music label.



Ynes Sanz was privileged to have Albert and Eva Robinson as parents-in-law for some years. She won the 2005 Arts Queensland National *Val Vallis Award* for her *Quandamooka Suite* — an affectionate reflection on Brisbane past and present. Her chapbook *Lady with Weasel* was published in 2005 by SweetWater Press. She is a Committee member for the Queensland Poetry Festival.



Emeritus Professor Bob Ross, retired academic, Hon. Life Member NTEUnion. Only his most trivial academic qualification relates in any way to the title. Now living up the hill from Nimbin thereby fulfilling his colleague/staff member's description of him, over many years, as a hippie. He considers his most important claim to be that of father to a CUC chorister.



Humphrey McQueen is a freelance historian working from Canberra. The CFMEU has commissioned him to write an unofficial history of the ABLF. He will deliver the manuscript at the end of April 2007. For more details of his writings see www.alphalink.com.au/~loge27



Richard Giles was a History Master at Catholic Colleges in Sydney until his retirement in 1990 when he became Secretary of the Association for Good Government, a body propagating the teachings of Henry George in New South Wales. He is author and editor of several publications, including the Association's magazine, *Good Government*.



Bob Reed currently practises as a barrister in Brisbane, principally in the areas of industrial and employment law and criminal law. From 1977 to 1988 he worked as a painter and docker in the ports of Brisbane and Sydney and from 1995-1999 as a research officer for the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union.

Noticeboard

EXHIBITION

Collaborating for Indigenous Rights: an exhibition exploring the history of black and white Australian activism, 1957-1973.

September 2007

The Project

Dr Sue Taffe, located in the School of Historical Studies, Monash University, is the Chief Investigator for an exciting research project (funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC)), to mark the 50th anniversary of a unique collaboration in Australia's history. The purpose of the exhibition is to celebrate the achievements of activists – through photographs, audio and video clips, maps, documents, music and the visual arts. While the project will showcase the work of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) it will be broader than this, culminating in an exhibition, both actual and on-line. The exhibition will open at the National Museum in Canberra in September 2007 after which it will travel to all state capitals

Contact information

If you wish to know more about this project, would like to lend materials or would like to make any suggestions please contact Sue Taffe at:

Email sue.taffe@arts.monash.edu.au

Fax 03 9905 2210

Telephone 03 9905 9150

School of Historical Studies,

Clayton campus,

Monash University, Vic 3800

Australia

* * *

***Queensland Journal of Labour History* – March 2007**

The March 2007 edition of the *Queensland Journal of Labour History* will be devoted to a celebration of 100 years of the Queensland branch of the Transport Workers Union. Dr John Kellett of the University of New England has agreed to edit this edition of the journal. In 2001 John published a full-length history of the TWU in Queensland, entitled *A Fighting Union*.

Anyone interested in contributing to the journal - with an article, review, report, notice or any other material - should contact John asap at the following address:
Dr John Kellett, School of Economics,
University of New England,
Armidale, NSW 2351,
ph: 02 67733563, fax: 02 67733596, email: john.kellett@une.edu.au

* * *

***All the Fun of the Fair* – Seminar 2007**

The BHLA is planning to host a social history seminar in 2007, (working title: *All the fun of the fair*) exploring the history of the Brisbane Exhibition. First held in 1876, the Brisbane Exhibition (Ekka) has become Queensland's premier agricultural show and one of the largest in Australia.

A study of the history of the Ekka provides numerous opportunities to reflect on key themes in Queensland and Australian history, encouraging reflection on the histories of, among many other subjects, voluntary work, technological change, patterns of leisure, masculinity and femininity, the ideology of development, the role of government, and the creation and transmission of values and traditions. There are also insights into groups who were often excluded from mainstream society, or more accurately, there are insights into how mainstream society responded to those groups, including Indigenous people and people with disabilities.

The two presenters, Dr. Joanne Scott (Senior Lecturer in Australian history and Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of the Sunshine Coast) and Dr. Ross Laurie (Australian History and Comparative Studies at the University of Queensland) reflect on the history of the Brisbane Exhibition, including its potential to explore labour history themes.

* * *

CONFERENCES

REKINDLING THE FLAMES OF DISCONTENT: Celebrating a history of collaboration between the Folk Movement and the Labour Movement

23 September 2006

East Brisbane Bowls Club, Lytton Road (next to Mowbray Park)

To celebrate Australia's rich connection between the Labour movement and the Folk Movement — and to foster its future — we at the BLHA we are holding a 1 day conference / dinner / concert on 23 September.

During the conference, Doug Eaton (ex member of the Bandicoots and Communist Arts Group) will speak on the influence of people such as John Manifold; Sue Monk & Lachlan Hurst (Jumping Fences) who have studied music in Cuba and Latin America, will demonstrate how songs actively shape an understanding of international workers' struggle by focusing on the New Song Movement from Latin America; long-time member of the Sydney Realist Writers, Bob & Margaret Fagan are coming from Sydney; as is ex Brisbanite Mark Gregory, who will be speaking on labour and trade union songs; John Warner (Melbourne) has spent a lifetime writing labour movement songs (railways, miners...), which he will perform with Margaret Walters. Absolutely Scandalous will perform during dinner.

The Combined Unions Choir will commence the evening's concert with a bracket of those union songs we all know and love to sing along with. All the conference presenters will perform, plus Sonia Bennett (singing works of Denis Kevans) and Tommy Leonard (singing works of Don Henderson).

Venue for this event is the East Brisbane Bowls Club (next to Mowbray Park). The Conference begins at 1pm (registration 12.30pm) followed by Dinner at 6pm and Concert at 7pm.

There is three tier pricing:

Full ticket (conference/ dinner / concert)	\$40 (\$30C)
Conference / dinner only	\$30 (\$28C)
Concert only	\$15 (\$12C)

Concession prices for group bookings of 6 or more. Please enquire.
Booking for conference and dinner is essential by 13 September (for catering purposes – vego also available)

cheques payable to:
BLHA PO Box 5299,
West End, 4101

Further info available from:
Greg Mallory, 0407 692377, gmallory@vtown.com.au
Dale Jacobsen, sr.music@bigpond.com

* * *

SPORT and WORKING-CLASS CULTURE CONFERENCE

June 2007

The Brisbane Labour History Association (BLHA) in conjunction with the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) will be hosting a conference on this topic in June 2007. The conference will explore such themes as the influence of sport on the working-class both in Australia and overseas as well as working-class attitudes and involvement in sport at various levels in society. An example of one theme could be the role of workplace sport eg workplace football in Victoria, work-based cricket in Brisbane.

The key-note speaker will be Dr Tony Collins, from Leeds Metropolitan University, UK, author of *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football* and *Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain: A Social and Cultural History*.

The Noel Butlin Archives in Canberra have shown interest in supporting this event. Expressions of interest, ideas for papers, presentations and involvement in a planning committee should be directed to Dr Greg Mallory at gmallory@vtown.com.au or Paul Circosta at pmcirstosta@optusnet.com.au

It is envisaged that the planning committee will be set up in early November.

The conference is on the ASSH web-site:
<http://www.sporthisory.org/News.html>

* * *

**SUBSCRIBE TO LABOUR HISTORY –
THE NATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE
ASSLH**



Labour History (ISSN: 0023 6942) is an internationally recognised journal and part of the prestigious History Co-operative of the University of Illinois. It is published twice a year, in November and May, by the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History – a non-profit organisation to which the Brisbane Labour History Association is affiliated.

Members of the **BLHA** who are not already receiving *Labour History* are encouraged to subscribe – the full rate for individuals is \$50.00 (concession rate for students/unwaged is \$35.00). Rates are kept relatively low as ASSLH is a non-profit organisation. New subscribers to *Labour History* receive the current year's journals and a free back issue of their choice.

The support of the journal by individual subscribers makes it possible for *Labour History* to continue to promote and publish labour history research in Australia and beyond. Please send for the *Guidelines* if you are interested in contributing to the journal.

A series of articles on Co-operation and the Politics of Consumption will appear in the November 2006 issue of *Labour History* contributing to our understanding of co-operatives and their role in past and present Australian society. These authors include Patmore & Balnave, Cutcher & Kerr, Darnell. Also in November: *A look at the Right and the ALP between 1917 and the early 1930s* (Kirk); a piece on John Bernard Sweeney QC (Shaw); *Workplace Activism in the NSW Branch of the FEDFA* (Westcott); the *Teaching Service (Married Women) Act 1956* (Dwyer), and more.

You can subscribe from the secure website – **www.asslh.org.au**; or by faxing your credit card details to (02) 9371 4729; or by posting a cheque made out to Labour History or credit card details to: **Labour History, Economics & Business Building H69, University of Sydney NSW 2006**

Enquiries: Tel: 02 9351 3786 Fax: 02 9351 4729
Email: Margaret Walters at m.walters@econ.usyd.edu.au

Contents, abstracts and prices of back issues are available at the web site **www.asslh.org.au** or on application to m.walters@econ.usyd.edu.au

The Brisbane Labour History Association

The Brisbane Labour History Association was formed in 1990 to encourage and promote the study, teaching, research and publication of labour history and the preservation of labour archives. There are no limits on the study of labour history and the diverse membership reflects many different areas of concern.

The Association is affiliated with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The Association 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.

Editorial Policy

The Queensland Journal of Labour History is a journal of labour and social history with a particular emphasis on Queensland history. The history of labour, the classic social movement, is central to our concerns, as are the histories of newer social movements. This journal is committed to the view that history has a social purpose. It publishes articles which, in Ian Turner's words, engage our sympathies, affect present circumstances and suggest answers to present problems. In the words of the Association's slogan, 'The Past is Always with Us'. Material published herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Association or the Editors. The Journal's Editorial Board is the Committee of the BLHA, chaired by the President.

Notes for Contributors

The *Journal* is published in March and September. Articles of up to 4000 words may be accepted; shorter contributions are encouraged. First person accounts of labour history are particularly welcome. Reports on exhibitions, seminars and research projects are sought, as are book reviews and photo essays. Obtain a copy of the Editorial Guidelines before submission.

Contributions should be made in hard copy to the Society's post office box and (if possible) digital format via email, to the Secretary's email address (see inside front cover). Hard copies should be typed, double-spaced, on single-sided A4 bond paper, with a margin of at least 3 cm. Please number the pages. Two (2) copies of each manuscript are required. Please ensure all contact details are given, including phone numbers and an email address.

Please advise if you have ideas for graphics (photographs, maps, drawings, cartoons, etc) that might accompany your article if accepted for publication.

**The Queensland Journal
Of Labour History
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