

## The Age of Union Halls

Two Australian trade union halls were recently nominated for UNESCO World Heritage recognition. The Broken Hill Trades Hall and the Victorian Trades Hall, in Naarm (Melbourne), have been nominated as part of a transnational submission that includes the Workers' Assembly Hall in Copenhagen, Denmark, the Feestlokaal Vooruit (Vooruit Festival Hall), in Ghent, Belgium, and the Edificio de la Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labour Building), in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The five buildings have been entered on [UNESCO's Tentative List](#) pending a final determination.

UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – is a UN agency dedicated to “strengthening international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture, and information.” Under the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972, the agency’s mission includes supporting countries “in protecting and safeguarding cultural and natural heritage.” The main way it does this is by maintaining a [World Heritage List](#) of natural or cultural sites of “outstanding universal value”. These sites are regarded as belonging to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located. Nations are expected to safeguard listed places under their sovereign control.

Currently there are 1273 locations on the List, of which 21 are in Australia. The Australian entries include places recognised for a mixture of cultural and natural significance: Kakadu National Park, the Willandra Lakes Region, the Tasmanian Wilderness, and the Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park. Several other sites are listed on cultural grounds alone: the Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens in Naarm, the Sydney Opera House, Australian Convict Sites, the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape and the Murujuga Cultural Landscape.

The nomination of the five union halls breaks new ground in drawing attention to the role of workers' movements. No other entry on either the World Heritage List or the Tentative List specifically references organised labour as a social force with significance to humanity. Yet, as the halls' nomination document points out, these movements “profoundly shaped

our modern world.” By grouping the Australian halls with like buildings in Denmark, Belgium and Argentina, the nomination makes the point that unionism’s emergence was both global in scope and internationalist in outlook. As the submission declares, the halls bear eloquent testimony “to the development of the international democratic labour movement and its impact on societies on a universal scale.”

Although architecturally diverse, the five buildings have certain attributes in common. They are all prominent in their landscapes and boast monumental features, creating a visual impact intended to project at a symbolic level the rising power of the working class in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism. They were also designed to be busy places, their declamatory grandeur matched by an emphasis on functionality. These were, and are, buildings that serve, as the nomination explains:

The multifunctional workers’ assembly hall was part of the daily lives of the working class in Europe, Australia, the Americas and with examples in Africa and Asia, and lay at the centre of their collective political, social, educational, and cultural activity. Core values of equality and democracy, community and solidarity, welfare, identity, and belonging empowered workers to unite and improve all aspects of life.

In Australia, the union hall was once almost as ubiquitous as the town hall. As the UNESCO submission puts it, “they were physically, and symbolically, fundamental to the mass organisation of workers.” Every major centre in Australia boasted one, offering a place for organising, political debate, campaign coordination and working class culture and education. Typically, they accommodated the local peak union body as well as the offices of individual union branches. Most boasted an auditorium to host large meetings or social functions. Libraries were a common and popular feature.

Sadly, the Naarm and Broken Hill buildings are among only a handful of Australian workers’ halls to survive. Sydney Trades Hall still stands proud. Newcastle still has its, as does Fremantle, although neither of these places function anymore as a base for unionism. In Queensland, we have Toowoomba Trades Hall, built in 1934 and listed on the [Queensland Heritage Register](#) as a place demonstrating the development of unionism, a

movement that, as the entry states, “has made an influential contribution to the development of Queensland.” The Ipswich Trades Hall is a more recent addition, a rebuild after a fire devastated much of the Ipswich CBD in 1985.

Meanjin (Brisbane), meanwhile, has the TLC Building in Peel Street, South Brisbane. Also a product of the 1980s, this five-storey bunker accommodates the Queensland Council of Unions and the State branch of the ALP. While Naarm’s grand edifice has been in continuous service since its first section was completed in 1874, and the Broken Hill hall has operated since 1899, the labour movement in Meanjin has never managed to keep a hall for more than 70 years. The Peel Street version is number four, if we count the Maritime Hall in Eagle Street, where new unionism, the colony’s first Trades and Labor Council and the Australian Labour Federation took shape in the 1880s. The third hall, in Turbot Street, facing down Edward Street, was the grandest and most resilient, serving as the centre of Queensland unionism from 1923 to 1985.

Australian trade unionists can be proud of the UNESCO nomination of the Naarm and Broken Hill buildings. Yet as we celebrate this international recognition, and reflect on the broader history of trades halls in Australia, the question invariably arises: is the era of workers’ halls over? Although the nomination claims that, internationally, new halls are “still being built today”, in Australia this is not the case. The current financial constraints of a union movement with historically low membership levels is obviously a factor. However, the disappearance of trades halls cannot be explained solely by a lack of means. Bricks and mortar unionism has not disappeared. Most unions have real property and many are able to acquire or build more when needed. What has changed are the industrial, political and social conditions that gave rise to *centralised* union buildings – assembly halls for the workers, as the UNESCO submission describes them.

In the golden age of union hall building, from 1850 to 1950, two tendencies came to dominate the workers’ movement: a propensity for mass activity and a drive towards closer unity; in other words, a commitment by waged workers to mobilising as a class, both industrially and politically. Responding to the rise of mass production, capital monopolisation, market integration and state intervention, workers organised unions on an industry-wide basis, formed peak union bodies such as trades and labour councils, and even took up the radical call for One Big Union, a demand that in

Australia eventually found a bureaucratic expression in the formation of the ACTU. These centralised union organisations offered coordinating capacity that enabled workers to wage struggles across occupational, industry and state boundaries. Effective international solidarity was made possible, the £30,000 donated by Australian trade unions to the striking London dockers in 1889 being one of the most remarkable examples. The big fights at home usually involved the creation of a strike or disputes committee, bringing together representatives from multiple unions. Wage campaigns, too, were often a centralised affair, led by trades and labour councils. Unions also regularly united to prosecute political causes, such as the anti-conscription struggles of 1916 and 1917. Paralleling this, socialists who were allied to the working class took seriously the slogan ‘Workers of the World Unite’, and set about unifying their own forces internationally. For workers and socialists, unified mass mobilisation – active class solidarity – was seen as the key to success. The trades hall was a tangible expression of these developments, a bricks and mortar response to the needs of a unitary, massified and active working class.

Since the 1970s, however, the economic and political conditions have been altered, and the world of labour collectivism has been undermined. Unions have failed to respond adequately, and in fact have often been complicit in the very changes that have weakened their power. Structural restraints, such as the ALP-imposed insularity of enterprise bargaining and the implementation of extensive legal prohibitions on ‘secondary’ industrial action, have led to fragmentation.

The new world of labour that has emerged in this environment looks far less than before to workers’ collective power. At the federal level in Australia, the improvements to working life in recent years have included the right to disconnect, the ‘same job same pay’ provisions for contract labour, protections for gig economy workers, and improvements around gender pay and leave equity. These are all important gains but all were legislated after lobbying from the ACTU, with minimal or no mobilisation by workers. In this process, a spacious facility for rank-and-file assemblies is far less important than a close relationship with the relevant Labor minister. Lobbyist unionism and narrow enterprise bargaining now fills the void left by the retreat of mass working class activity coordinated from union centres. Consequently, the workers’ assembly hall has lost its central place in community life. The age of the trades hall is over, at least for now, not

because there is no longer a need for them, but because that need is subordinated to the strategies of sectional bargaining and parliamentary intercession. On balance, the working class is, literally and metaphorically, the poorer for it.

The aspirational grandeur of the union halls in Naarm and Broken Hill remind us that the workers' movement was once not so narrow. A material manifestation of, as the UNESCO nomination puts it, "a universal longing for emancipation, belonging, and dignity of workers through mass organisation," these buildings invite us to see unionism as it once was, and to consider what a new age of union halls might look like.

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