



Workers' Liberty

Reason in revolt

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Bob Carnegie: four decades in the workers' movement

Bob Carnegie, currently secretary of the Queensland branch of the Maritime Union of Australia (which organises dockworkers and seafarers), has been active in the labour movement and the left, mostly in Brisbane, Australia, for nearly four decades. This issue of Workers' Liberty pulls together interviews done with Bob during a speaking tour he did in England in May 2015, and at various times in Brisbane, with other material, to tell the story of the big workers' struggles Bob has been involved in or led, and his political odyssey.

Three big disputes

Interview with Bob Carnegie, 2015

The most important industrial disputes that I've been involved in were the 1985 SEQEB (South East Queensland Electricity Board) dispute; the maritime dispute of 1998; and the 63-day Queensland Children's Hospital construction workers' dispute of 2012, after which I had a long battle against both criminal charges and litigation for civil damages.

A more important strike that I had a little bit to do with was the British miners' strike of 1984-1985. The Seamen's Union of Australia in those days put on a complete ban on any coal to go to Britain during the strike. Not one ounce of Australian coal was utilised to break the miners' strike during the 1984-85 dispute. As a young rank-and-filer, I was exceptionally proud of that.

The SEQEB dispute lasted from early February 1985 until probably September of that year.

Australia had had 62% unionisation in the mid-1950s, and the rate was even higher in Queensland. By the mid-1980s, unionisation had dropped to about 50%, mainly because of a shift in employment from highly-unionised blue-collar to less-unionised white-collar jobs, but unions were still very strong in basic industries. (The unionisation rate is now only 17%).

Queensland had a long history of Labor governments. In 1957 the trade unions expelled Labor premier Vince Gair from the Labor Party in 1957 because of his refusal to follow a party mandate. That was a signal of the unions' confidence and strength, but Gair led a split which was sizeable for a while. The right-wing National Party ran the state from 1957 to 1989, and the ultra-conservative Joh Bjelke Petersen from 1968 to 1987.

PETERSEN

Bjelke Petersen was not confident to take on a major union until conditions changed – under a federal Labor government.

Bob Hawke's government, from 1983, pushed through much of the adaptation to world-market capitalist competition which Thatcherism imposed in Britain, but under cover of an "Accord" with the union leaders.

Of the three disputes I've mentioned, two of them were under Labor governments, only one was under a Conservative government in Australia. The economic argument is there whether a Labor or a Tory government is in power. Class struggle doesn't stop because the Labor Party forms the government. Often it intensifies.

In 1985, Bjelke Petersen's state government felt confident enough to de-unionise part of a major unionised industry. In February it sacked over 1,000 workers who maintained the transmission lines and who had been involved in a long-running dispute about wages and conditions.

The dispute escalated immediately and had a major impact.

For 15 days, in the middle of a very hot summer, there was one hour of power and one hour of outage.

The power operators were heavily involved in supporting the SEQEB people. A lot of pressure was brought to bear by sectors of the conservative labour movement, as well as by employers and the state government, upon those power operators.

A deal was struck that saw the power go back on. Once power supplies were restored, we had to fight a guerrilla war, against the forces of the state. From then on it was always going to be difficult to win that dispute.

Many workers were arrested. Active in the dispute as a seafarer supporting the SEQEB workers, I was the first to be arrested. As the dispute went on, I was arrested another eight times, and jailed for 22 days in a maximum security prison.

As revolutionary socialists, we learn lessons from disputes, we take those lessons forward. Even if we're knocked down, we get up again, dust ourselves off, and go to rebuild our industry even under great difficulties.

It is to the historic credit of the Electrical Trade Union that though the scab-herding in 1985 was very successful, in the end the union has been able to fully unionise that industry again. The government wanted to contract out all the work on the transmission lines, but the union now has everyone under union contracts where they earn wages and conditions like any other permanent worker.

That took many years. People thought that the ETU would never achieve re-unionisation of that industry after the defeat of 1985. But they did.

I was involved in the waterfront dispute of 1998 as an elected organiser for the Maritime Union of Australia, which had been formed by the merger in 1993 of the Seamen's Union of Australia and the Waterside Workers Federation.

There had been a couple of years of build-up. Then on 7 April 1998, the Patricks Corporation, then one of two major operators in Australian ports, locked out 2,000 members of the Maritime Union in the ports and tried to replace them with scab labour which they had trained up in secret overseas. Patricks had strong support from John Howard's conservative federal government.

Huge picket lines, or "community assemblies", were quickly set up at the ports. In Brisbane, on 21 April, we had a mass arrest of 186 workers, some blocking the road outside Fisherman Island, some supporting workers chained across railway tracks. But the pickets remained strong.

That same day the Federal Court made an order reinstating the unionised Patricks workforce, but Patricks immediately appealed. On 4 May the reinstatement order was finally upheld by the High Court, and Patricks was forced to dismiss the scab labour.

I have often described that dispute of 1998 as a matter of the leaders of the Maritime Union and the Australian Council of Trade Unions snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. What we won on the picket line was lost on the negotiating table.



A trade unionist is arrested in the watershed 1985 SEQEB dispute

The workforce was reinstated, but with numerous sackings and victimisations, and eroded conditions.

The great tragedy isn't so much erosion of wages and conditions as the systematic destruction of the culture of dockworkers in Australia. Sometimes, from an employer's viewpoint, that is the most important thing that they can achieve. Once a strong culture of solidarity is broken, you get atomisation, people think only about themselves, and the employers can gain control.

There was once a strong culture of solidarity on the docks in Britain, and that was largely broken by Thatcher in the 1980s. The culture of solidarity has not been entirely broken in Australia, but it has been fractured.

CASUALISATION

Casualisation came in in a huge way after 1998. For decades before 1998, almost everyone who worked on the Australian waterfront had a permanent job.

A few casuals had become a part of the culture from 1992, but it took off after 1998.

We have regained some ground in some places since then. We now have an agreement at the Patricks container terminal in Brisbane where all the workers are permanent again. But in most areas in the ports there are many different grades of workers now, from permanent full-time through semi-casual to casual.

Over the decades, I have become much more cynical about the trade union leadership. I used to be very wide-eyed about it all. But through quite bitter personal and organisational conflicts that I've encountered in dealing with trade unions and trade union leaders, I have gained a much more realistic view.

In some respects the trade union movement has lost its way. The trade union movement, as well as being the focal point for workers when they have problems, as an organisation to defend and improve workers' conditions and wages, should also improve and heighten the culture of working-class people.

The unions have abandoned that. Certainly in Australia they have, and in Britain there doesn't seem to be a huge amount of work done on cultural matters by trade unions. The neoliberal attack over the last 30 years has created a very defensive-minded trade union bureaucracy.

You get what I call bricks-and-mortar officials, whose stand is that they will do anything to defend the bricks and mortar of the organisation and its bank accounts. We all understand that unions need money and offices to operate, but it matters what they do with those assets. By making excuses about why unions can't do anything, instead of going out and defending the rights of working people, trade union leaders have sold the pass.

I don't buy the story that it's just a neoliberal attack from the right that has seen union membership collapse. This conservative outlook that has developed in the trade union movement has also contributed to the massive decline in union density.

With the rise of a very aggressive state, and emboldened employers, in the early 1980s, the union leaders' response was mainly to go and hide their heads in the sand. Not all of them: to their eternal credit the National Union of Mineworkers in Britain took on a struggle to save their industry. But how many other unions went into battle to save their industry and to make sure that there would be decent full-time work for other generations of Australian workers, of British workers, German workers, French workers and whatever?

The union leaders have been asleep at the wheel. It is definitively a political question.

When I talk about cultural matters in trade union organi-



In the Patricks dispute of 1998, one of Australia's then two major port operators sacked its whole workforce overnight and replaced them by scabs. Big "community assemblies" besieged the ports. In the end Patricks reinstated most of the workers, after a court ruling; but the union agreed to heavy redundancies and much-increased management control.



The protest line at the 2015 Hutchison dispute, where dock workers fought to save their jobs from summary sackings

sation, it is a political element, but also an element of working “family life” and how workers relate to each other as people. Patricks before 1998 was the closest-knit group of workers that I had ever encountered. They had created a type of working where the boss made sure that there was money put in the bank each week, but had nothing to do with the job: the workers could run the job themselves, and well.

After the dispute, the level of management on the docks grew quickly. Staggeringly so. You found new layers of management where there weren't before. You found workers in some cases being timed going to the toilet, or being told how many toilet breaks and having to swipe in and out for them.

It turned the job from one where workers would break their neck to get to work so they could do a bit of work and see their mates, into a job that was just a job.

OUT OF HAND

In 1998 the Maritime Union of Australia leadership and the ACTU wanted the dispute stopped because it was starting to get out of hand.

The West Coast longshoremen were doing amazing work in California, which was one of the finest acts of trade union internationalism I have ever encountered. Wharfies in Los Angeles refused to unload a scab-loaded ship, the *Columbus Canada*, and eventually it had to sail back to Australia, still loaded. The pickets were still growing towards the end of the dispute. So it wasn't like the dispute had run its course.

But the leadership of the Maritime Union were bewildered by such an aggressive campaign from the government in support of an employer. If you didn't know that the Patricks boss, Chris Corrigan, was going to attack the union and be heavily supported by the government, you must have been living on another planet. But the leaders were unprepared.

I had been the branch president of the Queensland Branch of the Seamen's Union from 1988 to 1993, and I also worked as acting assistant secretary in the port of Brisbane, unpaid. In 1993 I was elected assistant secretary, and the post became Branch Organiser of the newly merged Maritime Union. So, five years as a full-time official, and then I had a disagreement and I resigned in 1998.

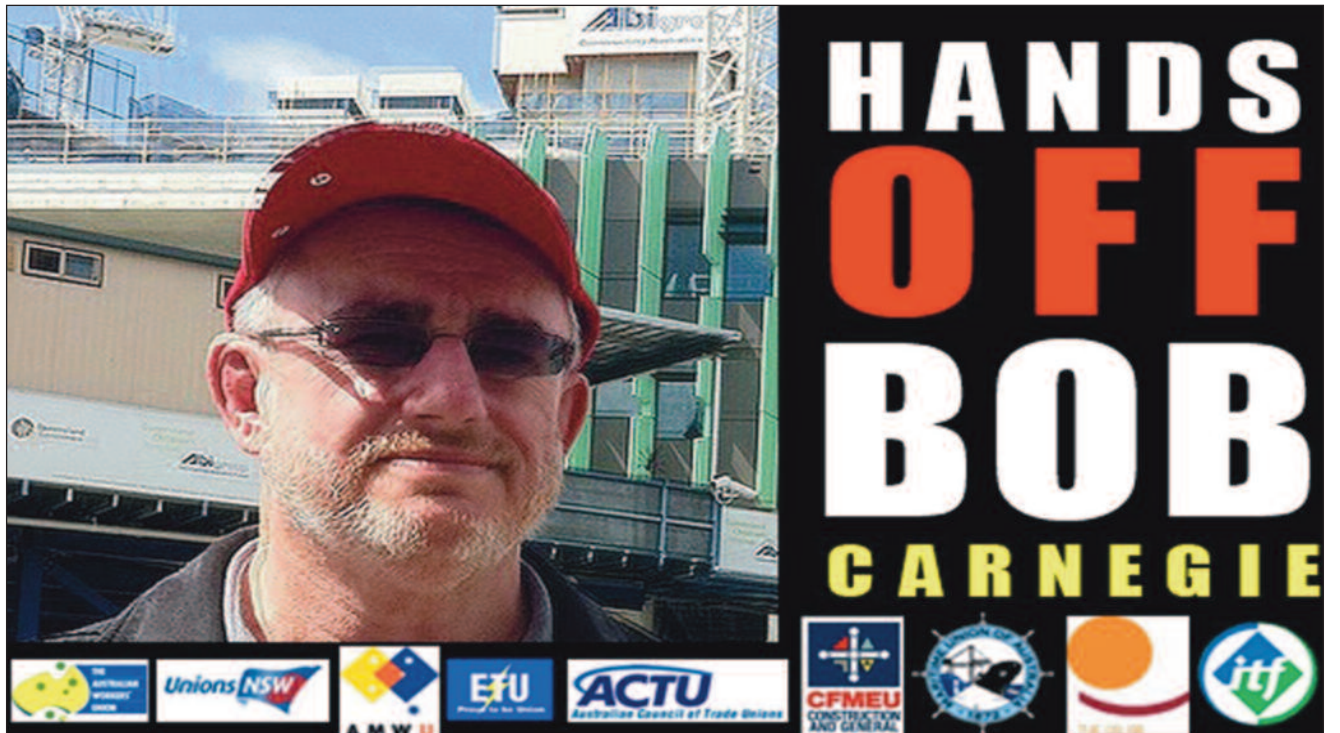
I was having continuing problems in debates with, mainly, the Stalinist section of the Maritime Union of Australia, which was mainly organised around the seafaring part of the industry. I was thinking more and more about revolutionary socialist politics — people such as Orwell and Serge, and eventually Trotsky. And that was like putting a red rag in front of a bull.

I didn't handle things well. I had known the leading union people from when I was a young man, and I felt that really I couldn't go against them. Instead of going to the membership with the problems I was having, I internalised them, and thought that the noble thing to do would be to resign.

That was the single most stupid decision I have made in my life. It cost me dearly. It cost me five years of my working life. It also shows the importance of being a member of a socialist organisation so that you can talk to your comrades about problems. I found it virtually impossible to talk to anyone in the union about the problems, as they would run straight to the leadership and tell them that I was against them. I just thought they were completely on the wrong track — but I left instead of taking them on in a political struggle.

In the three big disputes I've mentioned, I was a worker or union official in the industry only in one, the Patricks 1998 dispute.

I had worked briefly on the Queensland Children's Hospital site before the 2012 dispute, but I was out of work at the time of the dispute. I got involved out of principle and because I was asked to get involved.



The labour movement mobilised to defend Bob when he faced both civil and criminal charges after the 2012 Queensland Children's Hospital dispute.

There was a story spun that I was just “a community activist” to try to deflect the injunctions which banned union organisers from the vicinity of the construction site. But I was doing what the workers wanted. In the end I did not precisely coincide with what the union hierarchy wanted, though they had wanted me to get involved when their own organisers were hit by the injunctions.

In the end we had a significant victory, but with some heavy casualties. I don't cry over spilt milk, but it's a worry that I might not ever find regular paid employment again in Australia. I had a few jobs on construction sites after the dispute, but when the employers sacked me, as they did, the union officials looked the other way.

The only way I can see myself getting a job is if a union picks me up — and I am regarded as an uncontrollable left-wing radical. Charles Manson would be better received. It's a concern. My next job will be my 77th in my working life. Everywhere I go I get moved. Even if I don't open my mouth, I'm moved.

CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

I didn't throw myself into that QCH dispute thinking that everything was rosy within the construction union, the CFMEU.

I was a former official in the Builders Labourers Federation [which has merged into the CFMEU], and I knew what things are like in construction trade unions.

But when I was asked to go and help with the dispute, there were agreements made about helping me find work — not work in the union, just simple work in the industry. I had disagreements with some of the leadership, and that disagreement means that that offer has dried up.

That's that, and they know full well that I'm not the sort of person that's going to make a big case out of it, so I have to try to find work, and that worries me.

I'll go right back to give you an example of the problems I've had with Stalinism since I was a young man. I knew something was wrong, but I refused to admit it at the time, because I wanted to be a union official and I knew that you had to play a certain game.

When I was jailed after a very violent arrest in the SEQEB dispute in 1985, I spent 22 days in maximum security prison. I was trying to set up a house with a woman. I'd not worked for several months because I wanted to be around to support the electrical workers.

I had the mistaken belief that my union, which had collected well over \$120,000 for various things, might help. But I soon found out that I had overstepped the mark in the union.

When I got out of jail, there were lots of people saying “oh great Bobby, you're free”. I spoke to a union official. I hoped that maybe, as I hadn't worked for so long, they might have a few dollars. Not full-time pay for the time I was in prison, but a bit of something. But there was nothing.

So I had to get a bus from the Magistrates' Court to go back to the prison, to get a letter from the prison, to go to the dole office so that I got a dole cheque. And that was more or less my old union saying, you might have principles, young fella:

but you'll have our principles, you will not step outside. That was a lesson I learned.

In that dispute I was always looked upon as a bit unsteady. I ended up becoming a maritime union official because they knew that if it went to an election I'd have won it. I stood in an election from eight people for four delegate places to go to a conference in Sydney, and I got 348 out of 352 votes. I had a bit of standing with the rank and file.

Of course, swimming against the stream for a long time, is tiring. It is exhausting. I battle depression. I lost five years of my life to it. It was because I didn't handle a character assassination campaign by a group of Stalinists, and I let that take over my entire life. That was a tough time. I attempted suicide — I shouldn't be here, it was a miracle I lived.

The episode was used in a 2010 election campaign in the Maritime Union. They said I was nuts. The fact that I had suffered severe depression was used savagely.

ACTIVE

What's kept me active is that I believe in workers. I believe not in workers as an abstract idea, but I believe that we have to live in a society that's based on human need and not human greed. I believe it has to be based on what the old guys used to talk about, a co-operative commonwealth.

We need a society that is based on a fair distribution of the world's wealth, it has to be humanist in its nature. I hope that I'll be able to say, at the end of my life, that I did a little bit towards building something better than what we have now.

If we don't start changing what we have now, from an ecological viewpoint we're not going to be here. If China and India reach the same mode of living as Britain and Australia, we'll need another earth, because that's the amount of consumables that'll be needed. If we're going to have a sustainable world, it needs to be socialist. The competitive nature of capitalism, the dog-eat-dog society, is not compatible with sustainability.

My message to young people who want to fight for a better society is: find a group of good people who you feel meet the interests of what you're thinking about politically. Try to integrate that work, the politics, with the fact that everyone should be in a union.

It's not enough just to be in a union to change society. So it's important that young people today in particular realise the very real political need to change society. People of my vintage, and ones who are older, are probably seeing the best of what capitalism can give. Now we're in an age of neoliberal austerity which, unless we can combine our forces, is going to extract further and further concessions from the body and the blood of the working class.

That'll include students. They will finish university owing so much money that they may as well have never done a university degree, because they'll have such a huge debt over their heads.

If I could at will rouse the left and the union movement to do one thing, I would have the most massive campaign against outsourcing and agency work. I see that as the front line of the neoliberal agenda.

The political journey to Trotskyism

Bob Carnegie described his political itinerary, from young cadre of the Stalinist movement through Maritime Union official to anti-Stalinist revolutionary, in an interview with Workers' Liberty in October 1999.

I always had a strong underlying humanist bias. I tended not to view things not just from an ideological viewpoint, as was the rule in the SPA [Socialist Party of Australia, a "hardline" pro-USSR split-off from the Communist Party of Australia].

My moral break from authoritarian state-capitalism, or Stalinism, which still infects the Australian left and the Australian trade union movement to a much larger degree than people realise, took a long time. I would say it took from 1979, when I joined the SPA, to the final break in about 1994. The last five years has been my great political growing-up.

I joined the SPA when I was 19. At the time, fundamentally I viewed things from an anarcho-syndicalist viewpoint. I was a keen student even then of the US labour movement, and the nobility and courage of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) impressed me a great deal.

The SPA influence came from the seamen's journals. My father was a member of the seamen's union for 35 years, a middle-of-the-road Labor Party person in politics but a very strong industrial delegate. I've only really understood a lot of his political ideas in the last five years.

When I joined the SPA, I expected to find a dynamic organisation. What I saw was a group of mainly older people, very dedicated, with the party having a certain degree of influence in a number of union leaderships. I respected the older people. My major contribution to party work was selling the party paper. But I couldn't feel that it was a revolutionary organisation.

MOSCOW

Then I was sent to Moscow for political training in 1980. It was a great opportunity, to spend six months studying Marxism-Leninism. I met some wonderful people, including a woman I later married.

On Afghanistan, I followed the party line. The Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan to defend the rights of the people of Afghanistan. How stupid that sounds now is beyond a reasonable person's comprehension, but within the closed circles of the SPA it made sense.

What did I think of Moscow when I arrived there? What would a boy from Brisbane think? I thought I had come to a place where the workers had finally gained control. We were kept within a closed university structure, and because of the language difficulties we had difficulties knowing what life was really like for Russian workers.

You could see that things weren't quite as the party hierarchy said they were. I remember one lecture which said there was no such thing as dissidence in the Soviet Union, and even then I found that hard to swallow. Some comrades from Northern Europe who were there at the time wanted half the course based around Stalin's time. They got one four-hour lecture, and that was it.

Then I lived in Denmark for a while, and was fortunate to ship out on the Australian coast in 1981. I got back into the swing of the SPA. By then there was a split in the SPA between the industrial side of it and the bureaucracy side of it. I sided with the industrial wing.

I started reading much more broadly. I started reading Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and looking at things more from a

cultural-historical side. What also changed my ideas is that I did a job on a fellow during the 1987 union elections — a prominent rank-and-filer called Harry Leonard, who was in the CPA [Communist Party of Australia, then more democratic-minded than the SPA which, confusingly has now taken the CPA name dropped by the old CPA in 1991]. I betrayed a friendship with an old-time seafarer there. I believed then (or fooled myself into believing) that what comrade Leonard was writing, about furthering democracy in the old Seamen's Union, was tantamount to destroying the union. All he and a few other CPA members in the union wanted was a more open union.

Being a good attack dog for the hierarchy of the union, I got stuck into him, using all the vitriolic polemics of a committed Stalinist. Even twelve years later I feel I can't wash the shit off me. Almost instantly I wanted to square up with Harry, but he died before I could. I realised that there are certain human values which you can't walk across. If you're going to be a revolutionary, you have to treat people decently.

In 1989 I went to North Korea as the leader of a youth delegation. It was a horror story — state capitalism gone insane. I contracted some type of gastro-enteritis that miraculously cleared up when we touched down in the far less intrusive police state of Singapore.

But then I guess I threw myself into the union. I'd been one of the trade-union coordinators of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and done a heap of work on that. I became a full-time union official in 1994, but I spent a lot of time relieving in the union office before that, from 1988 onwards.

By that time I'd developed a lot of ideas. I'd read *Darkness At Noon*, by Arthur Koestler, and I'd started becoming a fan of George Orwell's. But, while it has turned out that a lot of the old Communists were just social-democrats looking for an excuse to become open social-democrats, I still believe very deeply that we will never have any peace from war or peace from want unless we have a society where working people are in control and own the means of production. I don't believe you will find that by being a social-democrat.

Over the last three years before the Maritime Union dispute of 1998, I was putting in at least 100 hours a week. I was working full-time as a union official plus part-time as an International Transport Workers' Federation inspector. On top of that I was the chairperson of the Queensland Workers' Rights Coalition, which fought three major campaigns to enable workers in this state to have access to common law if they are injured at work.

More and more I was seeing things within my union similar to those described by Orwell and Koestler and even Trotsky: I started reading a little bit of Trotsky, which was probably the worst possible thing I could have done as far as the leadership of the MUA were concerned. It was becoming obvious that to some of the leadership of the union that I was not in agreement with them on some key issues. I was becoming in their eyes and I quote "a loose cannon, a Trotskyite, or a maverick". To a man like myself I found this type of character assassination not only untrue but also extremely hurtful.

After the 1998 Maritime Union dispute, I ended up getting very sick partly because of the huge contradictions I faced: whether to stay as a well-paid union official, and a fairly effective one at that, but betray fundamental working-class ideals. Before my resignation from my union position I was constantly telling workers that left was right, right was wrong, night was day. It was Stalinism.

I faced a huge contradiction between loyalty to the union leadership and loyalty to the rank and file. I'd known the leadership of the union, particularly on the seafaring side, virtually all my adult life, but I knew they were going down a completely wrong path. Some of them convinced themselves this



A Communist Party of Australia meeting in 1965. The CPA had briefly held a majority in the Australian Council of Trade Unions in the 1940s, and was still a strong force. Notice the Australian flag decorating the rostrum. The speaker, Bernie Taft, went with the "Eurocommunists" when the CPA split in 1971 and those who had opposed the CPA's criticism of the USSR invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 formed the Socialist Party of Australia. The SPA lost much of its initially impressive trade-union base in 1983, when its main trade-union leaders split to defy the SPA's objections to the "Accord" signed between the trade unions and the Labor Party leadership round Bob Hawke who would take office in 1983. The CPA dissolved in 1991, and in 1996 the rump SPA took up the discarded name CPA.

was the only plan on offer; some of them, I think, had convinced themselves that they were brilliant Marxists, with the most brilliant plan to save the union.

The leadership's answer was for the workers in the industry to forgo stabilisation and to have it replaced by casualisation. In the stevedoring area, casualisation is now an integral part of the industry. To the leadership's credit a rank and file delegates' conference was held, and these measures were passed. However, several points have been disregarded which were critical to the package in areas such as training and single-point-of-engagement for seafarers, and of course government assistance to the industry, all of which has not occurred.

USSR

What do I now think about the Soviet Union? It had very little to do with socialism. It was state capitalism. It was the greatest armed encampment created in human history.

The last chance that I think the Soviet Union had of resurrecting itself was in the late 1920s, just before Trotsky was expelled and then Bukharin was destroyed by Stalin. When I think over the little problems I've had in my life, the times when your point of view won't even be listened to within a Stalinist union structure, I understand what people like Trotsky went through on a much grander scale in the USSR in the 1920s.

Stalinism has compromised the language of socialism. It has become culturally stupid to speak about socialism. I think Lenin still has a great deal to offer, though I wouldn't regard the Leninist political party model as one that we would adopt these days. For us to be a small conspiratorial party of a new type will not attract people. We have to learn from people like Lenin and Trotsky, but also learn from the great Marxist libertarians like Erich Fromm and anarchists like Bookchin and Chomsky. There's a whole range of ideas on the left — take people like Gabriel Kolko, for example. His exposure of the complicity of the Stalinist CPs of Europe after the war with US and Soviet imperialism in ensuring that the left would be defeated is tremendous.

But the Leninist party? There's a problem with any exclusive group which claims that it is the only force in society which can deliver freedom for the workers. Undemocratic practices are bad in a trade union.

But in a political party which ends up having control of the coercive means of the state you're dealing with a much higher level of disaster. Though maybe you're right that this is the Stalinist political model, rather than the norm of Lenin's party, before Lenin's death.

• After further discussions, eventually Bob joined Workers' Liberty.



The XXXX brewery in Brisbane city centre, where Bob had his first unionised job

Early years in the movement

Looking back, the watershed moment of the modern Australian labour movement was really 1975. The Governor-General sacked the reforming Labor government and put in the conservatives under Malcolm Fraser to govern instead. Workers organised a huge surge of strikes and demonstrations in response; but the union leaders limited and deflected the movement. After that, the left-wing ferment of Australia's early 1970s subsided quite fast, though the trade union movement remained strong. You would have been in your early teens then. Do you remember what you made of it?

I remember my father being horrified by it and being on strike — he was a Labor Party man, politically — and I remember the protests on TV. But the protests were in the city centres. There were no protests on the streets in the suburbs. Nothing happened on the streets in the suburbs. We were living in Virginia then, about 10km north of Brisbane city centre.

You wanted to stay on at school — Hendra State High School — after 15, but your parents said no. Why was that? How did you feel about it?

I felt gutted, as if I'd been told I was insignificant. Dad was away at sea at the time, and Mum said I had to get a job and support the household. I think it was so that she would have a bit of money to spend on top of the household basics.

When Dad came back from sea, he was not impressed with the decision. Then I worked for a year and saved money so that I could go back to school. Mum was ok with it then, but this time Dad said no: he said I'd made my decision, and I had to stick with it.

You started out working in a bank, though you soon moved on. When did you first get into trade union activity? And then you joined the Socialist Party of Australia: how did you get into that?

I worked for the Commonwealth Bank of Australia for the first year. Working for a bank then was like working for the public service: your job was secure and you could expect a good pension. I think I chose the bank because my dad was always a bit in awe of people who worked in offices.

I didn't like the bank. Then I worked as a clerk for a wine and spirits merchant, and went through a few other jobs. In early 1979 I got a job in the big brewery in Milton, in the Brisbane city centre. That was a good job, and well-organised in the Liquor and Allied Trades Union (which later merged into the LHMU, then into United Voice).

Even before that, though, I was interested in the Industrial Workers of the World. I used to buy their paper from a book-



Some of the books which shaped Bob's politics

store in the city centre, though the IWW had no group in Brisbane, or anywhere in Australia as far as I know.

I joined the Socialist Party of Australia [SPA, a "hardline" pro-USSR split from the Communist Party of Australia] in a period when I was out of work. I knew they had influence in some unions, and I read their paper.

You knew about the SPA from the union journals which your dad had, since he was a strong member of the Seamen's Union of Australia. But your dad also warned you against the SPA. And the SPA at the end of the 1970s was an ageing organisation, not very active, and not very attractive to young people. It wouldn't have been too hard to find out about other left-wing organisations. Why the SPA? What were you reading at the time?

Although I played football and all that, I was a young man who always wanted to listen to older people and learn about their struggles.

I was reading a lot about the US labour movement. I got books from the State Library. I particularly remember *The Bending Cross*, Ray Ginger's biography of Eugene Debs, and the books of Philip S Foner. I didn't come across any books by Trotsky or Lenin — or Stalin.

In the SPA, I'd sell the paper near the War Memorial as people came out of the Central rail station, and I went to branch meetings. The SPA would have had 30 or 40 people in Brisbane, though often the membership would be divided into a number of small branches in order to increase Brisbane representation at the SPA conference. I thought the meetings were dull. Most of the members were older people who did their trade-union activity and little else.

The SPA, on the whole, didn't give me new stuff to read, though I did read the Communist Manifesto. The main idea in the SPA was slavish devotion to all things "Soviet". The big debate in the SPA at the time was about the street demonstrations [in defiance of a ban on all such demonstrations imposed by the right-wing Bjelke-Petersen state government] — should the SPA support them or condemn them as student extremism? I thought that was stupid: of course you should support the demonstrations.

But I didn't come across other groups on the left much then, or until I came back to Australia after going to Moscow and to Denmark.

Jim Henderson, the SPA state secretary, took a liking to me, and so about six months into my SPA membership I was asked if I wanted to go and study at the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow. Of course I did. I went from downtown Brisbane where it was 32°C, and two days later I was on the tarmac in Moscow Airport where it was -35°C. So, a pretty big difference for a young larrikin from Australia!

We got to read some basic works of Marx and Lenin in Moscow, with pretty heavy pressure about how to interpret them. The tutors were hyped up on "the leading role of the party" to the exclusion of everything else. They were carried away on a particular interpretation of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*

This was at the time of Eurocommunism [a trend, particularly in some European CPs, to be more critical of Moscow: most of the Eurocommunists eventually became ordinary social-democrats or liberals, but at the time there were also leftish currents in Eurocommunism]. By this time the French and Italian CPs had stopped their members going to the Institute. The main CPs represented were hard-line Stalinist parties — the West Germans, the Scandinavians, South Americans. No British. I don't remember any Greeks. The line from the CPSU was that the Italian CP had played a good role in developing a mass organisation, but we should be critical of its appeasement of capital.

The Danish students asked for a lecture on Trotsky, and were severely reprimanded for the request. Trotsky had been completely eradicated as a figure in history.

I found the Russians were very interested in "social origins". Every form asked about your social origins. I think that was about their distrust of intellectuals: they didn't like questions.

The most powerful moments for me were going on manoeuvres with the Red Army. I had huge respect for the sacrifices of the Soviet peoples in World War Two. Only later did I find out how many tens of millions had died unnecessarily because of Stalin's policies.

In the Soviet Union the economy was incredibly distorted. There was no obvious poverty, and it wasn't like what I can imagine it would have been in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s under Stalin, it was more relaxed. But to some extent you knew your movements were watched.

In hindsight, the society was not sustainable. Certain things struck me as being very odd, like how a second-hand car was three times more expensive than a new car, because the supply and demand problem was completely out of kilter; the distribution of food was completely disorganised. This was 62 years after the Russian Revolution. In some respects they just didn't get it as far as logistics went.

For all that, it took me by surprise that I was there in 1980, and eleven years later there was no Soviet Union. It was stunning, politically. A shock to the system.

From Moscow, you did not come back directly to Australia, but went to live for a while in Denmark with your friend Anna. What did you do politically and job-wise

How a union turned around politics



In 2015 the Electrical Trades Union made a dramatic intervention in the Queensland state election campaign. Queensland had the world's first-ever Labour government, in 1899, was Labor for most of the 20th century, and was in office from 1989 to 2012 with only a short break. After Anna Bligh's Labor administration pushed through unpopular privatisations, Labor crashed in 2012 to just seven seats in the state Parliament. The ETU swung Labor to an anti-privatisation platform, and mobilised activists on the streets to win the 2015 election. Above: Bob with two ETU organisers. ("LNP" is the conservative party in Queensland).

Continued over page

while you were in Denmark?

I was stymied by the language barrier. I worked in a textile factory and in a factory rustproofing cars, all minimum-wage jobs, and I had an extended time out of work. Then I told my friend Anna that I had to go back to Australia because I couldn't live on a woman's wages: that's how sexist I was.

I was politically active in support of the IRA hunger-strikers in Northern Ireland, and I attended some meeting with the Danish Communist Party and sold its daily paper. The Danish CP then had 15,000 members in a population of only five million. You could not have imagined then that it would all be over in less than a decade. [The residual Communist Party of Denmark, which operates as a part of the "Red Green Alliance", has maybe a few hundred members].

Scandinavian social democracy has some pluses that we don't have in Australia. And you could speak your mind freely in Denmark, while in the USSR you had to be careful. But, I thought, at least in the Soviet Union everyone had a job.

So you came back to Australia and started working as a seafarer. You were still a member of the SPA. In 1982-3 the SPA split. The SPA opposed the Accord [a deal between the unions and the Labor Party, mainly crafted by Communist Party of Australia people in the unions], but its main trade-union figures supported the Accord and split away to form the Association for Communist Unity and the Maritime Unions Socialist Activities Association. You went with the ACU and MUSAA...

I thought the Accord was shit, but I also saw it as an issue of loyalty to my union. I was expelled from the SPA around 1983 because I was, according to the SPA leaders, not a revolutionary but a pure trade unionist. The SPA leaders were having a purge of trade unionists at the time who wouldn't kow-tow to what the party hierarchy wanted.

In hindsight, the SPA leaders were right on the issue in dispute — they wanted to oppose the "Accord" between the unions and the Labor government, and the leading SPA trade unionists wanted to go along with the majority of the unions — but I experienced it as an issue of loyalty to my trade-union comrades.

The split produced a new organisation, called the Association for Communist Unity, and in the maritime area, MUSAA, the Maritime Union Socialist Activities Association. They were both fundamentally Stalinist organisations. There was also BUSAA, the Building Union Socialist Activities Association, which was supposed to keep their so-called Marxist ideas alive within the building industry. But over time those organisations faded away.

I got more and more involved in the seafarers' union [which

merged in 1993 with the Waterside Workers Federation to form the MUA]. I'd be away at sea half the year or more, sometimes for brief stints of six weeks or so, sometimes for three months at a time.

I was still reading a lot: Upton Sinclair, anything I could get my hands on about the US labour movement. I was interested in the Middle East, the civil war in Lebanon, the Druze. I wrote away to Progress Publishers, found books in second-hand stores, borrowed books from the State Library.

Then in 1985 I was active in supporting the SEQEB dispute. The end of it all came with the deregistration of the Builders Labourers Federation [federally, in 1986]. We just stood by and let it happen: worse, Tom McDonald and Pat Clancy [ACU leaders in the Building Workers Industrial Union] planned it. I remember McDonald saying: "Gallagher [Norm Gallagher, federal secretary of the BLF, a Maoist] will be fixed this time".

In 1988, *Children of the Arbat*, a semi-autobiographical novel about the mid-1930s USSR, was published for the first time in English. Anna, my Danish friend, sent it to me: she was splitting from Stalinism. I started realising that I had very serious deficiencies on the question of democracy, and I set out to change that.

I had become a stooge for the Stalinist union officials. I had to become what I was going to be true to, not necessarily what would have advanced my career in the union. I read other books critical of Stalinism, like Victor Serge's *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* and George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*.

As you became more critical of the SPA and post-SPA tradition, you were in contact with groups like the Democratic Socialist Party, which also offered criticisms [the DSP was a Castroite group with a Trotskyist back-story, which until about a decade ago was the biggest far-left group in Australia]. What did you make of them?

The first thing that put me off the DSP was when I was in prison for my activities in the SEQEB dispute in 1985. There was a split in the Nuclear Disarmament Party [a party which flourished briefly in the mid-80s], and it seemed to have been inspired by Jim Percy [then leader of the DSP]. I thought: if this is Trotskyist politics, it is not for me. Then I saw the DSP move Sue Bolton out of the bus workers' union in Brisbane, where she was building a real base, and down south to work in their office. I thought it showed they didn't understand how to deal with workers.

I came across Ian Rintoul and the ISO [then the Australian satellite of the SWP], too. But I didn't go to any of their meetings. I saw them mainly as university people, with no roots in the working-class movement.

What did you make of the collapse of the Stalinist order in

Eastern Europe and in the USA in 1989-91, at the time it happened?

Because the left is so fragmented in Australia, there was no real analysis of what was happening. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 was shocking, but there had been a big lead-up to it. I don't remember any big discussions. But at that time I was away at sea a lot.

You're critical of the way that some of the Trotskyist groups train and form their activists to operate in the working-class movement. What lessons would you draw for how Trotskyist groups must train our young activists, who almost always start off with no trade-union background, and sometimes with a social background in the middle class or in the markedly better-off sections of the working class, in how to operate in workplaces, in union organisations, and in struggles and campaigns?

I would train them to become excellent industrial delegates [shop stewards] first and then, through winning workers' confidence by showing that they are fearless industrially, inject the politics. I've seen some brave young Trotskyists go into jobs and run a very strong political line straight off which isolates them. It's important that people in the workplace feel that you're part of them, not separate from them.

The Stalinists say you have to be the best worker in the workplace, but that's wrong. Just be a good worker and do your job. It almost never happens that the workers who complain most are the most militant, so don't get dragged into that. The main thing is: be yourself.

At the same time, we need to train and educate our young activists not just to be effective in day-to-day battles and to win the respect of their workmates, but also to contribute intellectually to building a revolutionary organisation sharp, clear, and theoretically-grounded enough to make a positive contribution towards rebuilding the political, social, and moral culture of the labour movement. What ideas would you propose, from your experience, on how best to do that?

There is a huge danger of being consumed by trade unionism. You have to stay rooted in your beliefs and your political organisation, attend your political meetings, and understand that the theoretical basis is fundamental. The world is full of trade-union deadbeats, and we don't need any more of those. Being just another union delegate or another union official will give you no capacity to change the basis of society to one based on human need, not greed.

It is the job of the organisation to avoid a divide between the trade-union activists on one side, and the writers, speakers, etc. on the other.

Hutchison: fighting for jobs, 2015

Within days of Bob taking office as MUA Queensland secretary, the union faced a major dispute. On 6 August 2015, Hutchison, the world's biggest container operator, summarily sacked half their workforce in their Brisbane and Sydney terminals, 97 workers out of 194.

The sacked workers ran a 24/7 protest line at the Brisbane and Sydney terminals, with the support of the workers not sacked, who were called in for minimal working hours but handled very little traffic.

After 102 days of bitter struggle, the workers did not win a complete victory, but pushed Hutchison back considerably.

They won reinstatement for almost all the workers; sizeable severance pay for those who chose to quit; and strong fences around the use of casuals and how they must be sourced.

Two of the union delegates at the terminal talked about the dispute.

Damien McGarry: I came from a wharf in Sydney where, while we were strong unionists, there was an us-and-them attitude. The older men had been on the waterfront thirty years, and we were only a year or two in. They did not let us have the same rights as then when we came in the gates. We were the casuals.

I was one of the first ones to come up here to Brisbane, and I decided that I would never let it get like that again. I wanted everyone who came into this place to be on an equal level. Yes, I had twenty years experience, but with the new kids coming in, we did not go down the path of "I'm the crane driver, I'm the team leader, I'm better than you".

A lot of the new workers were non-union. I said to them: you've heard a lot about unions, but it's what we do in here that will define us as a union. The type of people we are, we will look after each other. We've got to work the joint, and we

will work all as one. So we've got a good close working relationship with everyone. We worked to keep this place going because we saw it as our future.

That rug has been pulled out from under us now due to gross mismanagement. It all started six months ago when they brought new managers in. Now we know what their plan is: it is to get rid of all of us.

I think this is a Free Trade Agreement blue now. I think Hutchison are heading down the path of "when we invest in your country, we expect the same results as back home." Do they get their own way back in China? My word, they do.

Workers' Liberty: *Not entirely. The Hong Kong port workers had a big strike in 2013 and won some things, and although proper unions are illegal, there are probably more strikes in mainland China than in the rest of the world put together.**

DM: Ok. But it worries me. There's so much Chinese investment in Australia now. If they get away with this here, then they're going to do the same thing in the mines and all the other places where they invest. While it's our blue, it's also a blue for everyone in Australia.

What now? We've made a decision to abide by the court orders. My view, on the ground, is that we keep those containers in there. If there comes a time when we don't have many containers in there and we're at risk of losing our bargaining power, I'd put a stop to it. We will see whether they're working in good faith if they start running boxes in. If they just run out, and they don't bring any exports in, the game has changed.

Hannah Matthewson: There are a lot of strong individuals in the workforce, and not just people who have been in the industry a long time. We've always seen the first 18 who started, the Phase 2 boys, as seniors, but they don't look down

on us. We're all multi-skilled, and everyone was being trained at the same time. No-one is better than another person here. We're really lucky with that.

I've talked with other women on the waterfront, and here is completely different. There are two girls, me and Crystal, and we don't get picked on or anything like that. We're treated the same because we work the same.

Before, I was a vet nurse for seven years, and this is so much better. I loved vet nursing, but here you have the camaraderie, you feel you are part of a collective, whereas before I was a nurse at the university and it was very divided. Here, we're all one, and the managers are... up there. Here, the work is hard, but you're working with your mates every single day. And the money is so much better.

What next? I reckon we just have to show a presence, make sure the company knows we're still here and we're not going anywhere. I don't think the company understands how strong people are here.

Workers' Liberty: *We're socialists, so the big picture, as we see it, is that all this stuff should be owned by the community, democratically controlled by the community, and the workers should decide how things are done in the workplace. Does that make sense to you?**

HM: A hundred per cent. At first, when we said we were going to go on picket, I thought it would be twenty of us, sitting out in front. Never in my wildest dreams did I think all these people would turn up. Before we started, I didn't understand how close-knit unions are. I've never been in anything like this before. I've only been on the waterfront two years, and I wasn't in a union when I was a vet nurse.

Fighting for workers' rights

Below is an article from Workers' Liberty Australia, jointly written by Bob and Martin Thomas, setting out ideas at the beginning of the battle against WorkChoices, in 2005. In 2005, John Howard set out plans to bring in anti-union legislation more drastic than former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ever attempted in one instalment, and arguably more drastic than the sum total of the whole long series of laws introduced by Thatcher's government through the 1980s.

The legislation — "WorkChoices" — was pushed through. A large union campaign against it limited its use and got it repealed by the Labor government elected in 2007.

Then the unions dropped all the major demands for restored workers' rights which they had worked out in the campaign against "WorkChoices" and quietly accepted replacement legislation from Labor which did abandon the drive to get most workers on individual contracts, but also made industrial action unlawful unless the union can win an official decision to have the action "protected" because it is about the terms of a new enterprise agreement, and comes after all attempts to negotiate have been exhausted.

Bob organised the Workers' and Community Rights Campaign in Brisbane to push for workers' rights.

This is an attempt to change the balance of class forces radically and suddenly — to set in train a process which will transfer most workers to individual non-union contracts (Australian Workplace Agreements, AWAs) in place of union-negotiated, publicly-registered "awards". If successful, it will yank the Australian working class out of conditions still in the same league as the working classes of continental northern Europe, and hurl them towards conditions more like those of workers in the USA.

Howard is putting through special legislation for the building industry which is to be retrospective — to take effect from 9 March 2005, long before being passed by Parliament. This legislation bans "pattern bargaining", requires a 21 day "cooling-off period" after two weeks' legal strike action, imposes heavy fines for both union officials and individual workers for unlawful strike action, and creates a special body to "police" the industry, the ACCB, before which building workers will have no right to remain silent when questioned.

Federal Labor leader Kim Beazley has refused to commit the next federal Labor government to reversing the legislation. He has even dissociated from official Labor policy to scrap AWAs, claiming instead, and implausibly, that he will legislate sufficient protections for workers to make them irrelevant. But ACTU secretary Greg Combet has declared himself content with Labor's general stance. The unions should insist that Labor commits itself to full repeal.

LABOR

Former New South Wales attorney-general Jeff Shaw is planning a court challenge to the constitutionality of Howard's general legislation with the backing of the state governments, which are all Labor.

One Labor city council, Newcastle, decided on 23 August 2005 to ban contractors who use AWAs.

At the same time the federal government is also making it a condition of funding to the states for schools that the schools buy flagpoles, fly the Australian flag, and grade students' reports "competitively" (top of the class, bottom of the class, etc., rather than in terms of achievement).

Union activists should seize on the legal and political contradictions, and act to make Labor fight! Despite the Australian Labor Party's huge turn to the right over the last twenty years and more, Labor is still structurally dependent on the unions, and can still be pushed along by union pressure — if the unions choose to exert it.

If the government cuts funding to the states in retaliation, they should respond by stopping the payment of PAYE contributions from state employees to the federal treasury. They should take the same stand as Newcastle City Council about refusing to deal with contractors who use AWAs.

Well-organised groups of workers in large companies should demand their employers refuse to use AWAs, and refuse to deal with contractors which use AWAs or which do not allow union organisers free access to their sites.

Industry minister Ian Macfarlane said on 22 August: "We've got to make sure industrial relations reform continues so that we have the labour prices of New Zealand". In New Zealand, unions' powers were crushed by legislation in 1991 and — even after the repeal of that legislation by a Labour government in 1999 — wages there are, on average, 32% lower than Australia's.

For over a hundred years, worker-boss negotiations in Australia have been much more publicly-regulated than in most other countries. Industrial deals have been "awards", publicly-registered legal agreements negotiated by unions with employers and covering whole industries or sectors. The federal and state Industrial Relations Commissions have large powers to arbitrate. Despite all its problems, this system creates large possibilities for better-organised workers to push forward advances in wages and conditions which flow on to worse-organised or more weakly-placed workers.

Howard plans to shift the axis of the whole system towards individual agreements between individual workers and employers — so-called Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) — and thus drastically reduce the ability of workers' collective trade-union action to determine wages and conditions.

In sum: 1. Individual contracts which scrap most "award" conditions will be legal. The only legal limitation on them will be that they pay at least the minimum wage and include eight days' sick leave per year, four weeks' annual leave, unpaid parental leave, and "award" working hours. Employers will be entitled, and encouraged, to "buy out" all other conditions individual-by-individual.

2. Strikes will be illegal without the workers first being balloted by the Electoral Commission.

3. The right of union organisers to enter workplaces — one of the most important legal strong points that Australian unions still have — will be drastically curtailed.

4. "Pattern bargaining" — in which a union wins the effect of an industry or sector-wide agreement without the formality by winning deals with all the employers based on a common "pattern" — will be illegal.

5. Employees of the states will be pushed towards AWAs by the federal government making the transfer of tax revenue to the states conditional on that push.

6. The powers of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission will be drastically cut. Its power to determine the minimum wage will be transferred to a new commission more controlled by the government. The federal government cannot directly abolish or disempower the state Industrial Relations Commissions, but is explicit that longer-term it wishes to see them fade away.

7. All unfair dismissal protection will be removed for work-

ers employed in companies with less than 100 employees. (That is, the majority; and it will not be too hard for bigger companies, if they wish it, to divide up their operations so that all their workers appear to be in a unit of less than 100 employees). Workers can still take court action against "unlawful" dismissal, for example being sacked on racial grounds, if they can afford to hire a lawyer for it and wait maybe 12 to 18 months for the case to come to court. But most workers unfairly dismissed — and, certainly, those sacked for striking — will have no legal recourse.

Even this legislation will not be able to shift the Australian working class in one blow to a system where each worker hopes for no more than the best deal he or she can haggle for in the market as an individual facing the collective power of a corporate employer. Even the Howard government expects no more than 10% of workers to be on AWAs by the end of 2007.

And Howard could not even get to first base if it were not for a whole series of previous measures. The 1983-96 Labor government instituted Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) as an "add-on" to awards, legislating so that EBAs have become the main way for organised workers to get pay rises, and awards are mostly only back-up. Thus it will not be too hard in many sectors for bosses to offer AWAs at slightly more than the award wage-rate, but drastically worse conditions, and pressurise or intimidate sufficient workers into accepting the AWAs.

AWAs themselves were introduced by the Howard government in 1996, but so far have been limited by a requirement that they offer "no disadvantage" compared with award conditions, and have not been taken up widely.

FIBRE

The fibre of the union movement has been cumulatively weakened over the years. In 1956, 85% of Queensland's workforce was unionised.

In 1976, 56% of workers all across Australia were in unions. In 1986, unions still organised 46% of Australia's workforce. The 1983-96 Labor government's policies of privatisation and marketisation pushed union density down to 31% in 1996. It fell to 23% at its lowest, before recovering slightly in the last couple of years to 25% [and then falling again, to 17% in 2015].

Strike rates for 2001-2003 were 90% down on the average for 1973-83.

But the last big labour dispute — the attempt by port employers to lock out the wharfies in 1998, and replace them by non-union workers — generated large-scale solidarity action on a level not seen in Europe recently except in the French strikes of 1995 and 2003. In the end the unionised labour force got its jobs back, but on worse conditions and with large job cuts. Our assessment that this was a defeat for the workers (though a much smaller defeat than would have been without the solidarity action) was a minority view on the Australian left at the time. The idea that "the MUA scored a major victory" was majority opinion on the left, and is still argued today.

The Australian labour movement has not suffered a crushing nationwide defeat of the type that the British unions suffered with the 1984-5 miners' strike, or the US labour movement with the 1981 air traffic controllers' dispute. The building industry has a level of worker assertiveness and combativity unknown in Europe.

Groups like the Business Council of Australia have long urged drastic legal measures to shift the class balance of forces. And on 1 July 2005 they got their chance. For the first time since John Howard became prime minister in 1996, he gained control of the Senate, the upper house of the federal Parliament.

With unemployment currently low and wages rising at a fair rate, Howard must think that — despite Macfarlane's unfortunately candid outburst — he can get through the anti-union laws while assuring a lot of workers that they will only bring more "flexibility" and "competitiveness", not more exploitation.

The Australian ACTU has issued well-written publicity against the new laws. But its leaders don't believe it is worth trying to stop the laws.

As early as March 2005, "ACTU secretary Greg Combet... signalled he want[ed] to negotiate with the Howard government over industrial relations reform and want[ed] state Labor governments and unions to avoid focusing on the issue of states' rights". On 22 August Combet called for legislation to



The Civil Liberties march from the University of Queensland to the city centre, 1967. 4,000 marched to defy a state government ban on protests. They sat down in Roma St when confronted by cops, and over 100 were arrested. Battles for the right to protest continued through the 1970s and into the 1980s.



As well as street protests being banned, the old regime in Queensland also banned women from pubs. In a successful act of defiance in 1965, Merle Thornton and Rosalie Bogner chained themselves to the bar at the Regatta Hotel in Toowong.

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Fighting for workers' rights

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include (as a way of limiting the damage) a compulsion on employers to negotiate with a union if a majority of their employees vote for that.

Combet is reckoned to be the leader of the Left in the Australian labour movement. It was left to a mainstay of the Right, New South Wales Labor Council leader John Robertson, to retort that Combet's proposal would leave Australian workers in the same position as workers in the USA, where a similar legal duty to negotiate already exists and does not stop de-unionisation and "give-back" contracts!

In short, the ACTU is already thinking (weak) damage-limitation even before Howard has published his legislation in full. As another way of signalling that stance, the ACTU's campaign puts huge emphasis on Howard's proposed changes to unfair-dismissal law and the downgrading of the "independent umpire", the Industrial Relations Commission, but hardly any on the restrictions on strike action.

LEFT

The radical left has called for industrial action to defeat the legislation — rightly, but in terms too abstract to have any grip.

Neither the level of confidence of the rank of the file, nor the strength of the radical left in the unions, is sufficient for the radical left to make any definite calls for definite action by definite unions — beyond urging maximum support for the ACTU's days of action.

Some left activists say that we cannot stop Howard legislating, but the "real" struggle will come later. "Howard might have the numbers in the new Senate to ram through this big-business wish list, but that's far from the end of the story... It is one thing to pass a law, it another thing to implement it. A determined campaign of industrial action... can have them running for cover" (*Socialist Alternative*, August 2005).

There is a half-truth here, but a dangerous half-truth — a sort of "mañana Marxism". It will be a "determined campaign" on what demands, exactly? After the law is passed? Why only then? If the campaign can be done at will, then why not do it now?

The union movement can fight these laws effectively only if it holds to the first principle of trade-unionism: solidarity. That means the stronger groups of workers mobilising to help the weaker sections.

It means those stronger sections thinking strategically, seeing themselves as having a long-term responsibility to the whole working class, rather than thinking only (and sometimes over-confidently) about how they can hold their own corner even if the rest of the working class goes down.

The importance of democracy

Bob wrote about the dispute at the Queensland Children's Hospital construction site in 2012. The hospital is now named the Lady Cilento Hospital.

Construction workers recently won an eight-week strike at the Queensland Children's Hospital in Brisbane.

There's a greater spirit of militancy in the industry now than for some years. The current Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) campaign has been met with strong employer resistance [EBAs are the main form of collective agreement in Australian industry].

The renewal of some of the four-year agreements have been met with a much stronger resistance from employers than there ever has been in the history of the EBA system.

[At QCH, workers struck for a site agreement after some workers lost their jobs and their entitlements by a sub-contractor folding]. After the union officials had been enjoined and prevented from accessing the site, I got involved in the dispute. [Bob had previously worked in the site, but was out of work at the time of the dispute]. We had to go through the process of trying to develop organisation that hadn't existed previously.

The more we increased the democracy of the organisation, the more determined the workers became. It was an interesting study in the importance of democracy in a dispute.

We had full site meetings at least once a week in the Serbian Hall in South Brisbane. We ran those meetings as democratically as possible and made sure everyone was given a say. It created the feeling that people were actually part of something, instead of being hectored, which is what can happen at certain union meetings.

One of the weaker points was around keeping other workers and the wider labour movement informed. The work that Workers' Liberty did in raising awareness of the dispute, and producing leaflets to inform people about what going on, was very important.

No leaflets were coming out of the dispute until Workers' Liberty produced some, so that was hugely important.

We made sure the dispute didn't become static by keeping everyone informed about what was going on. We'd have at least one meeting every day on the protest line at Graham Street where we'd give a run-down of what was going on, and we'd have guest speakers in, like Brian Boyd from the Trades and Labour Council in Victoria. We had guys in from the Transport Workers Union and the Maritime Union, and other working-class organisations. It helped the guys feel like they weren't completely alone.

We also found the international messages very helpful. A lot of the men and women were gobsmacked and really impressed that workers in Turkey, Iran, and elsewhere had heard about and were supporting their struggle.

We worked to make links with workers on other construction sites. We protested against attacks on Grocon workers, and marched to the big Grocon site at Elizabeth Street in Brisbane, and helped organise a community protest there which shut down the site twice. There was also action by CFMEU members on Boulderstone sites.

Like Abigroup, Boulderstone is owned by Lend Lease, and the workers' action got the attention of Lend Lease management. We had delegates from other sites and other workplaces coming to us and offering their solidarity.

We found it more difficult to get delegations from our site out to other workplaces. That was another weakness, partly due to obstructions, and partly because around week seven of the dispute, poverty had become a real issue and people were finding it difficult to keep petrol in cars.

Since the return to work, the workers are feeling strong and they're determined that things will work better than they did before.

There are some divisions, for example, between workers who stuck out the dispute 100% and some who went and found work elsewhere, but all in all things are going OK there.

There is an ongoing political campaign we have to organise. I'm facing a major contempt of court charge because I was enjoined during the dispute but continued to visit the site anyway. I defied that injunction quite deliberately; bad laws have to be disobeyed.

We have to build a political campaign around the court case, because it represents a big corporation attacking an individual in order to deter other people from helping workers to organise and fight back. The court case is a threat to all socialists and union activists.

There's been a definite politicisation of many workers in this dispute. Before, they certainly knew which side the bosses were on and which side the workers were on, but now there's a bigger political understanding.

The word "socialism" was raised by myself and other comrades on numerous occasions, and it was never howled down, and often applauded.

Construction workers can be pretty tough, cynical people, but once they saw the work that people from the socialist movement were doing they became more open to the idea that society should be organised in a different way.

Comrade Hand Grenade

The Builders Labourer, the journal of the Builders Labourers Federation of Queensland, carried this tribute by Bill Hunt to Bob Carnegie in 2008 when Bob decided to step down as a full-time organiser with the BLF to return to work on the sites.

By now many if not most of our members will be aware that Bob Carnegie is no longer an organiser with the BLF. Bob has a job with Grocon as a peggy [site cleaner] and is looking forward to reacquainting himself with the rank and file.

Bob Carnegie was born to unionism. His father was a seaman who brooked no bullshit from anyone and was affectionately known by one and all as "Fuck-'em," as this was his response to any demand or requirement that he thought was unfair or unreasonable.

With that sort of heritage Bobby was always going to go somewhere, but he had the intelligence, the nous and the drive to go much further.

He threw his heart and soul into the support and defence of the working class. He was a firebrand within the Seaman's Union and in society generally.

Bob was an inspiration throughout many disputes and social upheavals. He was the first person jailed during the infamous SEQEB dispute when Joh Bjelke Petersen declared war on workers and was instrumental and inspirational in many other disputes.

Bob played a major role in the MUA dispute when the

fledgling Howard government unleashed the dogs of war against workers under the Bastard Peter Reith.

He gained a lot of notoriety in normal society and a lot of support for the dispute when he chained himself to the rail tracks and then had the chains welded to the rails.

Bob has been a rallying point around which supporters gather, in most of the pivotal fights for justice and freedom in Queensland in the past 30 years.

I was a painter and docker when I first came into contact with Bob but I only really got to know him when we were locked up together at some time, I think it was during the Right to March dispute.

Many years of friendship and many shared watch house cells were to follow. The Painters and Dockers were decimated by Australian ships being docked overseas and I returned to the building and construction industry as a member of the BLF in the late seventies.

Bob suffered a long and debilitating time with depression after the MUA dispute but in 2003 he returned to the workforce as a construction worker and proud member of the BLF. BLFQ Secretary Greg Simcoe offered him a job as an organiser and Bob grabbed it with both hands. He has acquitted himself well in the role and left a legacy especially for the new young organisers coming through. Bob has always supported the advancement of youth and the renewal of the union through new blood.

He asked me particularly to remind each and every member to support their delegates, but most importantly to en-

courage and aid the new organisers.

There are thousands of working class men who looked up to him as an organiser and will support his decision to go back to his roots among the rank and file.

It would be easy to over simplify Bob. You know what they say: "Look up unionist in the dictionary and there's a picture of him"

But Bob is a bit like those Russian dolls. You think you know him but there is more inside.

Everyone knows Bob supports the working class and their struggle but Bob is much deeper than that. Take off one layer of the unionist and you will find a humanist who works for the homeless for no kudos or reward.

Take off another and you find a person whose commitment is much greater than just to the working class. Bob has a deep and abiding belief in the Brotherhood of Man.

Look even deeper and you find a lover of philosophy who actually has a Camus quote tattooed on his forearm. At another level is the perennial student. Bob is studying for a law degree and the Grocon job is near the campus.

And even deeper is the Bob who earned the nickname Comrade Hand Grenade. A bloke that still dares to dream of a "Glorious Socialist Future" where one May Day the parade in Brisbane will be led by a Soviet tank being driven by Leon Trotsky.

One of my favourite quotes of all time comes from Elie Wiesel, an American writer born in Romania in 1928, winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1986:

"I swore never to be silent whenever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. we must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented"

Many of us have read this quote. Some of us even believe it. Bob Carnegie lives it.