

Conclusion

Rockhampton Unions and 'the Grand Cause'

When secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation E.B. Purnell led his members behind their new banner in the 1907 parade, the marching unionists could scarcely have anticipated the spectacular growth of trade unionism which would follow their demonstration of worker solidarity and purpose over the ensuing decades. From the nadir of workplace organisation in the late 1890s, the embers of unionism's original fervour of the 1880s were stirred into renewed life in the first years of the twentieth century. Facilitated by the return to good seasons and prosperous regional trade after several years of severe drought and economic depression; inspired by the words and deeds of visiting organisers from kindred southern unions; motivated by legislative and political measures, first from a hostile conservative government and then a reforming Labor government in 1915; and championed by a sympathetic labour press, trade unionism in Rockhampton—as elsewhere throughout the state and nation—experienced a dramatic growth in both the number of unions and the number of individual workers joining the ranks of the organised. Those early years certainly did constitute a renaissance of unionism.

Over the ensuing decades of this century, trade unions—whether industrial, sectional or traditional craft bodies—sought to counteract the overwhelming power of employers in determining the terms and conditions of manual workers in the labour market. Through unity and strength of numbers they strove to redress the exploitation forced upon workers through long hours, low pay and poor conditions for the sake of economic profit. As this history has illustrated, it was the perceived social injustice of

this situation which inspired the efforts of the founding fathers of Rockhampton unionism to organise their fellow workers into industrial bodies with the primary goal of securing a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. A resolute belief in the fundamental principle of unionism, aptly captured in the motto of the WWF's 'An injury to one is the concern of all', gave them the courage to withstand the test of victimisation and persecution which their actions initially invoked in many employers. The spirit of unionism also gave them the strength to maintain their crusade in the face of worker apathy and reluctance to join the cause.

The 'concern of all' encompassed not merely members of each union. Even though in a competitive labour market the interests of members took precedence over those of other unions, the broader industrial interests of workers extended beyond the confines of each individual union as early leaders recognised their common predicament at the hands of employers. Encouraged by the example and guided by the practical assistance of early local activists like 'Pa' Purnell and others, new unions sprang up to reap the anticipated rewards of organisation which those bodies already established were gaining. They realised that if strength and hope for workers lay in unity within individual callings, then even greater strength lay in sharing the broader working-class struggle with others, both in kindred unions elsewhere and in fraternal unions in Rockhampton.

To achieve this common end of improving the employment conditions of manual workers, local unions developed effective instruments which empowered and facilitated their efforts. First, through experimentation, refinement and adaptation they devised highly effective internal organisational systems and strategies to promote their interests and to maintain authority over their membership. Second, unions established extensive support networks through federation with their colleagues throughout the state and nation; they also attempted—with varying success—to emulate this closer unity by setting up local peak union organisations to handle domestic industrial issues and to

establish and manage a Trades Hall as the focal point of unionism in Rockhampton. Third, unions utilised their connections with the Australian Labor Party to implement legislative changes to benefit workers.

In its quest to right the perceived injustices of the workplace, its shared sense of purpose in that regard and the creation of effective instruments to achieve beneficial changes in workers' lives, unionism in Rockhampton was indeed a social movement rather than simply a collection of unions each pursuing its own ends. Moreover, the early leaders of the union movement, particularly those of major unions like the WWF, AMIEU and FCDIU for example, saw unionism as a vehicle by which, in conjunction with political reform, they could improve workers' quality of life as well as their economic standard of living. In the name of this broader cause of unionism, they attempted individually and in concert to undertake local economic, social and cultural activities.

Notwithstanding the optimistic vision of these founding fathers, not all their efforts nor those of their successors proved successful; neither did their achievements always prove long-lived. Without doubt, unions succeeded eminently in improving and protecting the employment conditions of their members in the workplace. The dramatic reduction in working hours for, say, lorry drivers from the 56-hour minimum week of the 1912 wages board determination to the 40-hour week secured by workers by the close of this history and the corresponding increase in their rate of pay, improved leave and other conditions stand as clear evidence of the efficacy of unionism. For local unions, the foremost avenue for achieving industrial demands and for redressing grievances was the institutionalised process of arbitration.

An arbitration mechanism existed in the federal sphere from 1904 but it was the advent of the state system under Queensland's newly elected government in 1915 which proved most advantageous for unions. With the major exceptions of the WWF between

1920 and 1928 and the AMIEU retail section after 1932, most Queensland unionists worked under the terms of awards handed down by the state's Industrial Court or its equivalent. The arbitration system further empowered unions through its protection and, in the main, its sympathetic treatment of unions' claims. Although included in state-wide approaches to the court negotiated by senior union officials in Brisbane, local unions diligently monitored the court's provisions in Rockhampton by rigorously checking time and wage books and overseeing the adequacy of physical working conditions. In these pursuits, the Industrial Inspector proved an able and close ally whose services union secretaries adeptly exploited. And on the occasions when this was unsuccessful, unions invariably approached the Industrial Magistrate to rule on contentious workplace issues.

As a part of their dominant labourist view of union support for its political wing in return for favourable reform and consideration by the Labor government, Rockhampton unions also groomed well their relationships with elected representatives and lobbied these politicians frequently and productively. As prominent guests at Eight Hour Day and later Labour Day processions and union social functions, politicians were in little doubt that their unionist supporters expected them to defend the cause of workers and unions before the interests of other constituents. Most expedient was the close association with Jimmy Larcombe who, during his record parliamentary service of almost 40 years, held numerous ministerial portfolios and who never forsook his humble part-time office in Trades Hall for grander surroundings.

Admittedly, not all union leaders subscribed to these methods of achieving justice for their members. Even in Rockhampton which displayed a marked preference for institutional avenues of conflict resolution, the few activists of a more militant persuasion who led the ARU and ASCJ during the 1920s and early 1930 and a small minority of unionists who sympathised with communist ideology from the 1940s opposed the alignment of unions with the ALP and its reform policies. Yet these

elements failed to have any great lasting effect on the preferred industrial strategies of Rockhampton unions.

As well as achieving improvements for their members through institutional and political means, the particular nature of local leadership contributed markedly to success of union endeavours. Indeed, the political and industrial outlook of these men underlay the extensive utilisation of those mechanisms in preference to disruptive strike action. Secretaries such as Purnell, Len Haigh, Frank Conlon, George Kemp and many other union officials were 'good Labor men', devoted to both the industrial and political cause of labour and active in ALP affairs. As the 1956 editorial tribute to these men accurately observed, they staunchly believed that the best hope for improvements in workers' lives lay in Labor's arbitration system and in the industrial and social legislation the ALP introduced on their behalf.¹ And for Len Haigh in particular, negotiations with the meatworks' management often achieved the desired results even before employing the formal arbitral mechanisms.

A great deal of the success of Rockhampton unions lay in the longevity of union leadership and in the relationship they developed with employers over these years. Their association both inside the workplace where they grew to understand and predict each other's approaches and in outside life where union and business leaders served on public authorities and often belonged to the same sporting clubs, masonic lodges, friendly societies and church congregations, did much to facilitate comparatively harmonious industrial relations. Union leaders and businessmen alike found a common goal in promoting regional and local progress which benefited both labour and capital and whose attainment industrial disruption hindered. Indeed, as this history has illustrated, most of the strife and all the major strikes into which local unions were drawn through their federated structure originated outside Rockhampton.

1. *MB*, 5 Dec. 1956, p. 4.

A second aspect of the long office of union leaders was the firm authority and discipline exerted over the rank and file for most of the half century of this study. Union secretaries patrolled the city constantly on the lookout for award offenders; they rigorously checked wage and time books for irregularities on the part of members; and swiftly punished offenders for any award or social misdemeanours. Most importantly, they quickly isolated any militant unionists who stirred up industrial trouble and endeavoured to stamp out their influence; only in the AMIEU did this element begin to gain some influence from the 1940s. Clearly, the bulk of unionists found satisfaction with the achievements of their leaders and the benefits they delivered. They would not, had they been dissatisfied, have repeatedly re-elected these men to office.

While these achievements fulfilled the vision of the early union leaders that through organisation workers could and would obtain justice in the workplace through better terms and conditions of employment, the loftier aspirations of the early union movement to create a better existence for workers in the wider world through combined local action did not bear similar fruits of success. Plans such as a theatre specifically for workers, for a workers' cooperative store and for a labour paper could not be realised in a small city like Rockhampton, where the motivation to establish such ventures was based more on the desire to emulate Brisbane than on local need. Nor could these schemes succeed with the limited financial resources available in Rockhampton especially (as in the case of the theatre) during the Depression years.

Lack of inter-union cooperation stemming from workplace competition; from longstanding ideological differences in the case of the ARU and self-imposed isolation on the part of the AWU; and from the introverted focus of the plethora of small sectional unions reduced the broad union support necessary for many ventures to succeed. Apathy on the part of many ordinary unionists also meant that leaders lacked the rank-and-file support they needed to allow their plans for union ventures to come to fruition. In the opinion of many workers, the concern of the union should be with

workplace issues and not the broader problems of working-class life. Those were for Labor-in-office to address through reforms.

In close-knit unions like the WWF, AMIEU and some of the railway unions where membership coincided with workplace, mateship and often family connections, union solidarity contributed to the success of many social activities and celebrations. On the other hand, in unions with more dispersed membership—the bulk of the more than 40 unions in Rockhampton—many members cared about neither those social activities organised by their union nor those arranged by inter-union bodies.

This failure to identify with the needs and interests of other manual workers and to give, as a result, wholehearted support to union ventures reflected the absence of a broad working-class consciousness in Rockhampton, even though there clearly existed a 'trade union consciousness'² wherein workers recognised the need for effective collective organisation against employers and willingly supported union activities to that end. Rather than seeing their interests as being the same as those of other manual workers outside the work gates as well as within; instead of accepting that the class predicament underlay all aspects of public and private life; and displacing the belief that class-based organisation and ventures were the best means of redress, many workers found other communities of interest with which to identify. Employers encouraged loyalty in their employees and fostered a sense of common purpose based on the firm through works' picnics and socials. Other cross-class affiliations developed in churches, schools, sporting teams and lodges, while some people who were working class by their manual occupation considered they had more in common with the 'respectable' middle class than with other workers whose particular occupations and lifestyles were deemed inferior to their own. But the central aspect of identity in Rockhampton was the town itself. Workers and middle class alike saw themselves as Rockhamptonites first and foremost and efforts by labour leaders to promote a separate

2. Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour*, London, 1983, p. 59.

and distinct working-class identity could not supplant this stronger identification with the town. In the particular social and cultural context of Rockhampton, therefore, a definitive working-class consciousness was transected and muted by other aspects of public and private life. Only when it came to politics did most people vote along class lines. For workers, that was invariably to vote Labor in the expectation that, through its legislative reforms, the state would improve the quality of life for workers just as it had, over the years since 1915, helped unions redress the injustices of the workplace with beneficial industrial legislation.

The tragedy was that other competing visions—of emancipating workers through revolution and of subverting labour politics to religious ideals—and the consequent fracturing of that working-class political unity brought the downfall of Labor in Queensland and for the next three decades unions faced a renewed onslaught from hostile governments which favoured the interests of private enterprise and bosses. The 'Grand Cause' once again needed men of vision to lead a renewed struggle for justice as it had drawn the dedicated leaders in the early decades of the twentieth century—men who were prepared to devote long hours and sacrifice much to defend the conditions of their members and whose wives and families, it must be said, stood behind them in the shadows.

Ultimately, 1957 was a grievous year for the union movement apart from the loss of a sympathetic government. It also lost many of its staunchest advocates and willing workers through both old age and death. Of the deaths of leading union figures and former luminaries of the Rockhampton union movement that year, the most profoundly symbolic was the loss of tinsmith John Denis Ryan of the ARU. As his funeral notices attest, Jack Ryan was Central District secretary of his union, an activist on the new Trades and Labour Council and, even though his union as a whole had only overcome its antipathy towards the ALP to re-affiliate with the party the preceding year, Ryan had long been an ardent Labor man. He was president of Fitzroy Executive of the

ALP and stalwart member of its Balmoral Branch. Jack Ryan was one of the most prominent and able members of the new generation of unionists who, like their forebears fifty years earlier, saw the 'Grand Cause' as much more than just workplace organisation. For men like Ryan, the union movement was an integral part of the wider labour movement whose battle for workers' justice was facilitated by the industrial and social reforms of Labor-in-office. His joint union and political activism truly exemplified the principles of labourism. A Catholic and staunch anti-communist himself, Ryan had nevertheless placed his loyalty to the union and the ALP above all else—especially above the dictates of his bishop and clergy in the face of what must have been enormous spiritual pressure and persecution to subvert the cause of unionism and Labor to the socio-religious goals of Santamaria and the Movement.



Fig. 89: John Denis Ryan

Just as Labor's defeat deprived the local union movement of its ally-in-office, Ryan's untimely death at the early age of 50 robbed the union movement of one of its most able men in its hour of need. The workers of Rockhampton paid due tribute to his life's dedication to unionism and Labor in a funeral service at St Peter's Church on 9 October 1957. Hundreds of workmates from the railway, leaders and rank and file of other railway unions and from the many outside unions, ALP officials and members together with relatives and friends filled the church to give thanks for his life and

devotion to the 'Grand Cause' and to farewell a brother-in-arms. Following the service, the congregation followed the casket to the nearby cemetery and formed a guard of honour at the gate.³ It was more than appropriate that for such a loyal unionist, the Lawson tale⁴ rang true: the union did indeed bury its dead but not, as in that case, an unknown member. The funeral of Jack Ryan honoured a leader lost at labour's hour of need and, with the sorrowful gathering of unionists and Labor figures, symbolised the passing of half a century of workers' power and influence in shaping the quality of their own lives. It was an industrial and political era forever gone.

3. *MB*, 9 Oct. 1957, pp. 1 and 29; *ibid.*, 10 Oct. 1957, p. 6.

4. Henry Lawson, 'The Union Buries Its Dead' (1893), in Leonard Cronin (ed.) *A Camp-Fire Yarn: Henry Lawson Complete Works, 1885-1900*, Sydney, 1984.