
**UNITED BRIDGE AND WHARF CAR-
PENTERS' UNION.**

At a meeting of the above union held at the Trades Hall last night the secretary submitted an amended copy of the rules which he had received from the Registrar for Arbitration. The amendments were adopted, and the union is to be registered under the Arbitration Act within the next few days. A number of new members were enrolled.

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In the foyer of the NSW Trades Hall, the walls are adorned with the banners of unions from days gone by. One that catches the eyes is the United Bridge & Wharf Carpenters Union of New South Wales. This impressive and highly decorative display reminds us that the union movement that saw the foundation of the Australian Labor Party is very different from the union movement of today.

Meetings of unions were once reported in the Trades and Labour column in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

In the decades after the Labor Party went from an idea to a government, unions were formed and dissolved. Between joining the Australian Socialist League in 1891 and bringing down the Labor Government in 1916, W.M.Hughes built his power base in unions. Unions of his creation.

Unions on the waterfront disintegrated after the collapse of the 1890 strike. In 1899 Hughes re-established the Wharf Labourers' Union and became secretary on 27 December. He then organised the Trolley, Draymen and Carters' Union and became its President (while remaining Secretary of the Wharf Labourers). He trained as a barrister and simultaneously acted as that great standard – a Labor lawyer.

As the Labor Party grew, so too (mostly) did unions.

Today the Party isn't growing, nor are Unions. The title of Organiser is bestowed in both. While the title has survived over 100 years, the function has not. Unions of today are vastly different. The massive amalgamations inspired by the ACTU's *Future Strategies for the Trade Union Movement* published in 1987 have made unions sclerotic.

Unions do not attract new members, they are structured in ways that inhibit change. Lindsay Tanner's book about the Left takeover of the Victorian Branch of the Federated Clerks Union was called *The Last Battle* because the 1987 changes to unions meant it would be the last time a whole union could shift its allegiance.

Party politics has also changed since the foundation of the Labor Party. Central councils of the Free Trade and Protectionist parties were first formed to coordinate

party activities in the election of January 1887, though much of the organisation of each party dissolved after the election. The emergence of a Labor Party compelled the various anti-Labor interests to create standing party organisations to match the organisation at a branch level of the Labor Party.

The Labor Party's successes led to the amalgamation of its opponents into a single anti-socialist party that soon became the Liberal Party. After much iteration, it was remade as the Liberal Party in the 1940s. This was the era of mass movement parties, where people were motivated to engage in a cause.

Despite its own internal divisions between revolutionary socialists and Fabian reformers, between ideologues and electoralists, Labor understood that it was standing up for the workers against "the Fat Men" and for the right of workers to combine to combat the power of the "combines and trusts". Its opponents stood for one thing - opposing the socialists.

The mass movement party fell away as the 1970s arrived. Both sides of politics seemed to accept the role of the state in delivering a welfare system and in playing a central role in economic management.

Those certainties fell as the oil shock exposed the weakness in this version of centralised control. The economy needed to adjust. Labor embraced this need better than the Liberals. Where an attempt to get national control of prices and wages had failed under Whitlam, under Hawke an accord was successful that embraced restructuring with benefits to be shared.

Ironically, just as Gerard Henderson was "exposing" the Industrial Relations Club, those relationships were delivering another of the reforms - almost all instituted by Labor - that established Australia's quarter-century of prosperity.

Here began the start of "catch all parties". No longer was politics about ideas, it was about competence.

The final evolution occurred this century. Political engagement collapsed. Any vestige of a socialist cause was eliminated. Politics became an exercise in distribution between elements of a uniquely political class. We are living in the era of cartel parties.

To argue for a continued relationship between the Labor Party and trade unions today is to ignore the century of change that has befallen both institutions.

Much debate is now focussed on this subject. I have hear one party person assert that those calling for change tend to be those outside the Party who no longer need the help of a Union. That is certainly an incorrect generalisation, but it reflects the concern of those who owe their position to patronage that they cannot move against their patrons.

The same, however, was true of Eddie Obeid and his circle of patronage.

Most of this debate has been about why such a change would be good for the ALP. Trade unions also have much to gain.

The first benefit is for unions to take the debate about their existence on its merits, rather than as a reason to vote Labor. Just as Labor has acknowledged it needs to work with the representatives of capital, the conservatives must be forced to acknowledge the need to work with the representatives of labour. To do so unions

need to be seen first and foremost as representatives of workers, rather than as simply the financiers and controllers of the ALP.

Second is the ability of unions to wage campaigns outside any implication for the ALP's electoral fortunes.

Third is the ability of union executives to focus on their primary task - organising in their industries and representing their members. Officials are too busy running the party and preparing for their own parliamentary careers to look after the needs of their own failing organisations. The corruption that has been found in recent years reflects unions organised to create political patronage rather than genuinely represent workers. While many capitalist bosses support the Liberals, none dares turn their corporation from its primary purpose of serving customers and trading profitably for the sake of support of the Liberal Party.

The Labor Party and trade unions have travelled a long journey together for over a century. The world has changed. Unions need to reinvigorate themselves by cutting formal links with the ALP. The party needs to encourage this change.