

CONFERENCE REPORT

Labour History and its People: the 12th Biennial National Labour History Conference, Australian National University, 15-17 September 2011

Julie Kimber and John Shields*

Canberra in spring can be beautiful – as it was during the three days in September when we were greeted with warmth as we gathered for the 12th National Labour History Conference. Hosted by the Canberra branch of the Australia Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH), in association with the National Centre of Biography, and held at the Manning Clark Centre at the Australian National University (ANU), it was a fitting homecoming for the Society on its 50th anniversary. A tour of Canberra led by Sigrid McCausland, Rosemary Webb, Peter Ellett and Bill Thompson headed a full and enjoyable conference – a highlight of which was the celebration and awarding of a certificate of appreciation to John Merritt, a veteran founder of ASSLH.

Senator John Faulkner began the formal conference proceedings with his ANU Archives lecture, 'Proud Past, Bright Future'. It provided a grounded perspective of the past and future of labour history. Faulkner's lecture was followed by Kim Sattler's discussion of the new 'National Museum of Labour'. Located in Canberra, it promises to be a significant cementing of working lives in the imaginings of Australians in the twenty-first century.

In deference to the 50-year celebrations of ASSLH, the second day of the conference was devoted to a single session with papers dealing with these bigger issues and the role of labour history in contemporary life. Stuart Macintyre's keynote address on 'Fifty Years Hard Labour: A Retrospect' was a recollection of the struggles of the Society to remake working-class history, and relocate it from a marginal to a central preoccupation of Australian historians. And befitting a Society in its 50th year, a session was held, to challenge and to charge, on 'The Theory Thing'. John Shields, Verity Burgmann and Geoffrey Robinson each discussed the role and value of theory in history. It was a passionate call for innovation in our theoretical understanding of working-class studies, and a reinvigoration of what we do. The following session, by Don MacRaild and Neville Kirk, signaled what would be one of the signature themes of this conference: the rising tide of interest in transnational labour. In an engaging discussion the two drew on Irish diasporas and British influences to undercut any habitual notions of a remote and unique Australia and, in the process, highlighted the kindred connections across the seas. Later, Peter Love (Melbourne), Bobbie Oliver (Perth), Gary Lockwood (Adelaide) and Francis Bedford (Adelaide) discussed labour history and labour and social movement activism from the perspective of ASSLH branch organisations. In each presentation, it was apparent that the success of branch life, and of the Society in general, rested on its activist foundations. Each talk provided a salutary reminder that labour history breathes, in and out of academe.

Gary Lockwood and Frances Bedford's presentation on the life and times of South Australian and UK feminist-activist Muriel Matters, was especially memorable for its passion and polish.

The central theme of the conference – labour history and its people – was examined in the two major biographical projects being undertaken in this country. First, Melanie Nolan discussed the Australian Dictionary of Biography's new initiative, 'Obituaries Australia' and its potential for the inclusion of working people into the Australian narrative. Second, the 'Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement' – a labour of love by Andrew Moore and John Shields, joined recently by Yasmin Rittau – was launched, in mock-homage to Captain De Groot, at this most appropriate of moments.



Andrew Moore cutting the ribbon at the launch of the Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement

Photographer: Christine Fernon, used with permission

Fittingly, the afternoon of this busy full day was rounded out by a discussion by Sigrid McCausland and Maggie Shapley of the immense value of our archival sources. The day provided a solid undercarriage, both comforting and confronting, of what it is we do, should do, and could do, to enlarge our understanding of labour, and its people.

Friday evening brought a change of tempo, with some 60 attendees participating in the conference dinner at The Gods, ANU. During the evening the ASSLH President, Nikki Balnave, announced the journal's 2011 prize-winning authors: Sue Taffe, Brad Bowden and Verity Archer (see the separate report in this issue).



John Merritt and Frank Bongiorno at the Labour History Conference

Photo courtesy Peter Love

The third and final day offered a daunting array of choice, including 40 papers distributed across six parallel sessions, resulting in some deft footwork by comrades intent on hearing the papers of their choice. Again, the biographical theme was very much in evidence, as was that of transnational labour/labour mobility. Fran Laneyrie's presentation on women in the Illawarra labour movement offered fresh insights on the private side of activism, and the gendered nature of activist identity and leadership. David Palmer gave a rousing presentation on the life and agency of United States shipyard organiser, John W. Brown; Peter Clayworth offered a new interpretation of Australasian labour activist, Pat Hickey; and Desley Deacon drew on biographical case studies to examine the actress as worker. Jack Munday spoke alongside Verity and Meredith Burgmann in a session celebrating the 40th anniversary of the first Green Ban. Sue Taffe and Heather Goodall sparked lively discussion with their papers on Shirley Andrews and Kevin Cook. There were also some outstanding presentations on the themes of labour and war, activism and the Cold War, labour women's leadership, religion and radicalism, the value of image and film as sources on labour history, and labour and music, with the Canberra Union Voices Choir providing the perfect ambience for the latter.



Senator John Faulkner, Maggie Shapley (ANU Archives), and Melanie Nolan (Conference Convenor) at the Labour History Conference

Photo courtesy Peter Love

The conference wrapped up with a plenary session on Labor politics – past and present. Chris Wallace spoke on Julia Gillard’s journey from working-class Barry to the Canberra political cauldron, while Ray Markey highlighted the parallels between the Federal Australian elections of 1929 and 2007 – a topic that may well warrant a sequel at the Society’s next biennial conference, in 2013.

Organising a conference of this scale is no mean achievement and stalwarts of the Canberra branch deserve all praise for putting it together and making it run so smoothly. Particular thanks go to Peter Ellett and Melanie Nolan. Of disagreement and debate there was certainly plenty – and the robust nature of these exchanges bodes well for the future of the Society, its branches, and the journal.

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