

# Conference Report: Work - Organisation - Struggle

Christine de Matos

*Seventh National Labour History Conference, Australian National University, April 19-21, 2001 organised by the Canberra Region Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. [Conference Proceedings edited by Phil Griffiths and Rosemary Webb are available from the Canberra Region Branch at LPO Box A43, ANU, Canberra ACT 2601]*

The Seventh National Labour History Conference began with both the weather and the participants in high spirits. As this was my first experience with a labour history conference, I was pleasantly surprised at the level of comfort and camaraderie one experienced on arrival, and indeed throughout the conference. Among the various welcomes was the opening address by Sharan Burrows. It was delivered in the context of the history of struggle, and reminded us that the issues that have been fought for by the Australian labour movement, from its earliest days and which have become regarded as Australian institutions, are the same ones that are under attack today – issues such as arbitration and the eight-hour day. It was a very purposeful introduction to the feast of papers to follow over the next three days.

Filled with delicious morning tea and armed with my conference program, there remained one major task to be undertaken: to decide which panel of papers to attend! With an average of six concurrent sessions to select from, the great diversity of papers offered only served to make this decision more arduous! The natural consequence of this was that more papers were missed than seen, and therefore this report will be biased towards the actual choices made. I attended panels on arbitration, the Cold War, the Parliamentary Labor Party (the previous two being key streams during the conference) and racism and class. They were interesting, some provocative, and all indicated the vibrancy that still exists in labour history circles. However, given the title of the conference was ‘work organisation struggle’, there appeared to be a decided lack of these topics exhibited in an otherwise fascinating range of papers. This diversion from the key themes was also apparent in the keynote addresses (aside from the opening and closing talks).

Many of the ideas and issues discussed in the keynote addresses, and many of the other discussion panels, appeared to centre on the ‘crisis’ labour history intellectuals find themselves in due to the challenges of postmodernism and its appendage, cultural studies. In a Saturday afternoon panel entitled ‘Where is labour history going?’, Greg Patmore articulated the essence of that which brings all sections of the labour movement together for such gatherings as this conference – whether intellectuals or activists – and that is, the acknowledgment of the existence of social injustices. At various times during the conference, it was pointed out that while labour history has been able to meet the challenges presented by other movements – such as those based on the women’s movement, indigenous history, ethnic histories and social history – it appeared to be moving slowly or ‘patchily’ in relation to the postmodernist challenge. The debate at this session, and throughout the conference, provoked the following personal thoughts.

The questions raised about labour historiography by the women's movement *et al* in the 1970s and 1980s (of course their influence continues) were still based on the very premise of the labour movement: the existence of social inequities. Hence, it was almost natural for labour history to take these new perspectives and arguments on board. On the other hand, while postmodernism has been useful in highlighting issues such as the relative nature of meaning, the existence of multiple historical voices and experiences, literary constructs, and the role of subjectivity in historical analysis – its 'denial' of the existence of any concept of 'truth' or 'meaning' renders it politically inactive and politically benign as a paradigm. By giving equal weight to all thoughts and understandings, postmodernism is unable to take a stand and, whether intentionally or not, actually serves to *justify* the existence of social inequity. In this way, much of postmodernist thought becomes the very antithesis of labour history, and perhaps this is why postmodernist theory has had greater difficulty in finding a comfortable place in labour history. Yet the diversity and vitality exhibited by the participants confirms labour history is alive and well, and working more than sufficiently within its current paradigms. Papers ranged from 'new age' socialism to reassessing the foundations of White Australia, to defining the impact of compulsory arbitration. There is plenty to keep labour historians busy, especially in this time of corporate globalisation.

Another theme emerging in discussions during the course of the conference was the lack of dialogue between the intellectual and activist components of the labour movement. The conference itself, of course, brought all these interested parties together. If, however, labour historians are tempted to infuse their research with a greater proportion of postmodernist ideas, which would in turn require the adoption of its obfuscated language, it would only serve to decrease rather than increase the possibilities for such dialogue. This adds to the arguments against a greater infusion of postmodernist theory in labour history – because the ability of all sections of the labour movement to converse and learn from each other is a source of pride. One personal concern, though, was the obvious under-representation of younger students and researchers at the conference. One can only wonder if it is indeed due to the temptation of pursuing of 'trendier' subjects, such as cultural studies. This may demonstrate a need for labour historians to find ways of attracting more students to postgraduate research in labour history to ensure strength for the discipline in the future.

I enjoyed my moments at work on the *Labour History* desk at the conference. It was an opportunity to talk to conference participants I may not have otherwise met, and allowed me the luxury to feel I was contributing directly to the conference itself in some small way.

As well as intellectual stimulation, there was social stimulation. Old acquaintances were renewed and new contacts made, and like-minded researchers found much on which to converse over coffee and cakes. Thursday evening saw the screening of 'Visions and Voices', a collection of audio and visual material spanning the twentieth century from the Screensound Archives, presented by Marilyn Dooley and David Headon. We had everything from early anthropological footage of Torres Strait Islanders, to confronting 1920s ideas on White Australia, to opportunities to sing along to 'It's Time!'. And, of course, all who were present at the screening now understand the *real* reason the pro-conscription vote failed in the First World War

referendum: the 'No' campaign obviously picked up the protest vote from those who were simply BORED by Billy Hughes' very, very, long, tedious and relentless 'Yes' campaign films! To finish that first evening, we brought out our tissues to shed a tear over 14 minutes of J.B. Chifley. The reception on Friday evening at the Noel Butlin Archives was another social highlight. It was a great opportunity for those who had not visited the archives previously to take a look around (including those incredible storage stacks), and the refreshments and food provided delicious *hors d'oeuvre* (for those going to the Conference dinner) or a meal (for those who were not!) and added to the positive atmosphere. Performance poet, Geoff Goodfellow, entertained the participants both at the reception and Saturday lunch in the Crisp tea room.

After three days of exhaustive intellectual and social inspiration, a weary but tenacious group of conference attendants descended upon the Copland Theatre for the final address by Jim Macken. They were not disappointed. Suddenly they were brought back to earth and reminded why we were all there. Social inequalities still existed, and thus still needed to be written about, dissected, fought against and rectified. There is still so much to work, organise and struggle for. After a spirited rendition of 'Solidarity Forever', led by some members of the Canberra Trade Union choir, the conference officially ended. While Canberra's weather had chilled and dampened, the participants left with the same enthusiasm they showed on arrival, though tempered with an elated sense of tiredness.

The foundation of a successful conference lies in its organisation, so extensive thanks are due to the conveners, the Canberra Region Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, and to the various sponsoring organisations. The indefatigable Phil Griffiths is especially deserving of gratitude; he always seemed to be in the right place at the right time to offer help and advice, and to oversee the smooth running of proceedings. It also must be said that the Seventh Labour History Conference provided the BEST coffee and cakes ever seen at any conference anywhere! Many thanks to the organisers and to the staff from Calypso Coffee Lounge, who worked relentlessly and enthusiastically in the Crisp tea room to satiate the caffeine addictions of the conference participants!