
Inaugural address to Labour History Queensland Inc.

“The history of the Queensland Council of Unions”

by Grace Grace
General Secretary
Queensland Council of Unions

As General Secretary of the Queensland Council of Unions, it is with pleasure that I today address the inaugural general meeting of Labour History Queensland; a body that sets itself the important task of recording the history of labour in Queensland in ways that are useful to our future progress.

The body which I today lead is one, as most of you are aware, that has a particularly rich history.

QCU history

Established in 1885 by William Galloway, it was the first body to formally adopt a socialisation objection. It was the first peak council in Australia to link the eight hour day campaign with May Day, a practice which continues to the present.

It has provided leadership and support for some of the greatest industrial struggles in the Australian experience – the 1890 Maritime Strike; the 1912 General Strike; the SEQEB dispute; the recent dispute against Patricks.

Labour politics and the Labor Party

From its very inception it has been closely involved in labour politics and the Labor Party. Even before the first branch of the Labor Party was established in February 1891 in Fortitude Valley, the Trades & Labour Council (as it was then known), had run 'labour candidates' in two elections.

In 1885, just a month after the Brisbane TLC was formed, its first secretary, James Boyce, ran as a labour candidate in a by-election for Enoggera. Three years later, the TLC sponsored four 'labour candidates', all of who were active in one of its union affiliates.

The history of the Queensland Council of Unions has, at times, been tumultuous. It has grown through many re-births, re-organisations, and name changes.

What's in a name?

Starting as the Brisbane TLC, in 1889 it became the Australian Federation of Labour, a body that sought to cover all Australian workers, no matter where they lived or what they did.

When this body was effectively swallowed by Ted Theodore's AWU in 1914, the Brisbane Industrial Coun-

cil was established after a special union conference in August 1914. This body, however, proved too radical for many unionists, and for a number of years more moderate unions refused to be associated with it.

Eventually these divisions were resolved with the establishment of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council, which became the ACTU (Q) and, finally, the current QCU.

Throughout this process the Council gradually extended its coverage of affiliate unions from its initial base among Brisbane's male craft workers to include most of Queensland's white and blue collar workers – other than those, of course, covered by the AWU.

Taking at face value, the history of the QCU therefore appears one of grand issues, political divisions, splits and reformation.

Certainly this is one side of the story, and the one that historians have tended to write about. But behind the grand visions, which often had little meaning for ordinary unionists, there are other stories.

Personal rivalries and grudges: Galloway vs Lane

First there is a story of personal rivalries and grudges over issues that seldom appeared in public, but which underlay many of the battles over grand visions.

This can be seen in the first generation of Labour Council leaders, when Galloway – whose base was among Brisbane's more moderate craft unionists – came into conflict with a new generation of labour activists loyal to William Lane and his socialist ideas.

As Lane's supporters gained the ascendancy in labour's ranks, Galloway soon found himself on the outer. Not only was Galloway driven from his position in the TLC, in 1888 he was also expelled from the Federated Seamen's Union of Australia – a union he had founded in 1879. The official reasons for his expulsion, as recorded in the union's minutes, was that he was a 'blackleg' who had 'worked against the principles of 'trade unionism'.

To understand this titanic struggle between the giants of early trade unionism in Queensland, we need to look at both Galloway and Lane a bit more closely.

The first thing to note is that neither of them actually ever worked as workers. Galloway's first major concern in Brisbane was the operation of an oyster saloon in Edward Street, which was almost certainly a front for a sly grog shop. It was here that he came into contact with Brisbane's seamen and wharfies. Over time, Galloway's association with the liquor industry helped make him a prosperous man, as he built and became the first publican of the Breakfast Creek Hotel – a pub that still bears his initials on its façade.

All of this association with alcohol was an anathema to Lane who, as a professional writer, journalist and fanatical teetotaler, always had a somewhat romanticised and puritanical view of working class life. Throughout his career, he constantly railed against the evils of drink and how no-one who did drink should hold union office.

Certainly the deep animosity between Lane and Galloway appears to owe at least as much to alcohol as it does to politics. At a time when many moderate union leaders came from strict Methodist upbringings, Lane's appeal to the strong teetotaler element in the union movement gave him a decisive edge over Galloway.

While Galloway and Lane battled for control of the union movement, others were engaging in struggles that did not attract much attention, but in the end probably meant more for the future of the Queensland union movement.

Other important struggles - Miss Nixon

One such struggle in 1890 involved a 20 year old machinist called Miss Nixon. Unfortunately, we don't know much about Nixon's personal life, not even her first name.

What we do know is that at age 14 she began work as a female boot machinist at Hunter's Boot Factory. This was Brisbane's largest factory, and occupied most of the current King George Square site. In the factory, Nixon worked alongside up to 100 other female workers in conditions that were appalling even by nineteenth century standards.

The pay was so low that Nixon could not even afford the bus home after work, having instead to walk from the factory to her parent's abode at Milton every night.

In an era when even most male workers were not unionised, Nixon and her colleagues were long left to their own devices. Although a Women's Union was established in late 1890, even female activists such as Emma Miller appear to have shown little interest in these workers. Indeed, Miller was herself under fire during this time for operating her own clothing business without regard to proper wage rates.

Female Boot-Machinists Union formed

Despite all the obstacles before Nixon and her fellow female workers, in July 1890 they voted to establish the Female Boot-Machinists Union – a body that soon became the most successful female union in Queensland.

Over the next few years, most female workers at Hunters and the other large boot factories were organised. Employers were forced to recognise their union. Out-work was ended. Wages went up. Working conditions improved. Dignity was obtained.

Conclusion

In the end, it is the struggles of ordinary workers like Miss Nixon for dignity and a better life that have contributed most to the making of the Queensland labour movement.

They are the bedrock on which both the union movement's past, present and future was, is, and will be, built.

Hopefully, Labour History Queensland can help preserve such struggles so that they are not lost to the cause of labour.

Labour History Queensland

Labour History Queensland is a non-political association established to encourage an interest in labour history by individuals, registered unions of employees and like-minded organisations, governments at all levels and the community in general.

Membership

Members may be either registered union of employees, approved associations of retired employees or individuals interested in labour history. All applicants for membership must agree to be bound by the rules of the association for the time being in force. All applications must be nominated and seconded and approved by the Executive of the association before they become valid. Individual members who are retirees on a pension, who are unemployed or on a disability or other benefit, or who are full-time students, may become members at the concessional rate. For those seeking concessional membership, proof of concessional status must be demonstrated. Institutional members may become foundation members which entitles them to five years membership.

Further information

Bradley Bowden
Secretary
Labour History Queensland
PO Box 167, Nathan 4111
Tel: 0413 134814
b.bowden@griffith.edu.au
