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Benefit Societies and Freemasons in Labour History

Abstract
Hello – I want to argue today that much of what you have been taught, and much of what you have read under the heading of Labour History is either wrong, or at the very least is very misleading, and that the decline of the organised labour movement is largely because that movement is not in touch with the actual, the complete history, of ordinary working people. Please note that I am not saying that what you have personally experienced is wrong.

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BENEFIT SOCIETIES AND FREEMASONS IN LABOUR HISTORY

[Text of an address to the Illawarra Branch in August, 1997]

Bob James

(Hunter Labour History Society)

Hello – I want to argue today that much of what you have been taught, and much of what you have read under the heading of Labour History is either wrong, or at the very least is very misleading, and that the decline of the organised labour movement is largely because that movement is not in touch with the actual, the complete history, of ordinary working people. Please note that I am not saying that what you have personally experienced is wrong.

I make these claims, not from some Anarchist bias, though Ray has introduced me as 'an old anarchist'. I'm regarded as a heretic among those who call themselves 'anarchist' and for exactly the same reason that I'm regarded as heretic in the circles of people who write and teach Labour History – because I make the claim that people who call themselves 'Anarchist' know enough, and get very defensive when questioned about basic terms; especially those who regard themselves as the custodians of the flame – anarchist or Labour History.

Please note, however, that I am not regarded as a heretic by those people who have lived or are living labour history.

In effect, because of political imperatives, Labour History has been controlled by people in whose interest it was to jump to certain conclusions after perusing only some evidence. In practice, Labour Historians have always been selective about what is included in the record, and what is regarded as valid evidence, because they have decided beforehand what the conclusions must be. Labour History, the record, has value as politics, but must be dismissed as poor history, if it is history at all.

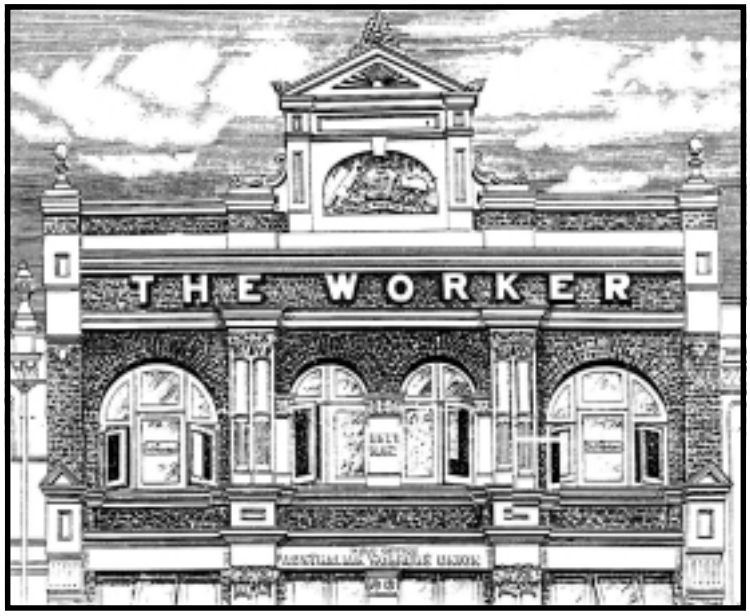
I make these claims on the basis of 25 years of research, of ten years or so as Secretary of the Hunter Labour History Society, of participation on the Australian Executive of ASSLH and as organiser of a National Labour History Conference. I also make them on the basis of a great deal of sympathy with the ideas and content of Labour History.

I notice in his latest book, *Suspect History*, about Manning Clark and the future of Australian history, Humphrey McQueen spells out the 'deepening gap' between his notion of historical explanation, 'which emphasises material forces and social classes' and 'Clark's focus on ideas and personalities' (p. 145-6). He writes: 'I have no more interest in writing Clark's kind of history than he had in mine' (p. 146).

Working people and/or the world of working life hardly ever got into Manning Clark's stories, but for Labour Historians such as McQueen working people have been stereotypes, personifications of certain ideas – heroic militants, romanticised dwellers in 'close-knit communities' or they have been brutalised victims. And while there has been a lot of talk recently about the need for a more culturally sensitive approach, it is my belief that the stereotypes remain in place and that the reality remains largely unexamined, firstly because, the custodians of Labour History remain politicians first and historians second, and because the full range of humanity which is working people does not fit the stereotypes and generalisations required by a politics of work.

The stereotypes remain even when the comparatively simple tale of the miners' picket line at Hunter Valley No. 1 is being told. The strengths which we hope to see – courage, solidarity, reasonableness, and so on – easily and too readily become the only things we see, or they are assumed to be there right from the beginning and without qualifications. The second tragedy is then that because we are flying on assumption, we don't plan beforehand the necessary education and training to make them happen.

For a long time women were excluded from Labour History, even though everyone knows and it was known last century that no labour movement was possible without women. Even today, a partial exclusion remains in place and there are many labour people who would like to return to the situation of total exclusion. Why? Because in all of our heads the nature of heroes and the nature of work is more easily male than female. There is in this, of course, a romantic view of 'labour' as being about industry, dirt and smoke, lift that bale and pull that barge-stuff, all



Compare the decorative elements on the top of the building illustrated above, built in Sydney for The Worker newspaper in 1907, with those on the canopy over the Grand Master's chair in the United Grand Lodge of NSW (left).
The triangular form, the rising sun and the three 'flames' illustrate their common ancestry and their continuing adherence to the principles embodied in the tradition.

essentially male, just as the drink after knock-off with your mates, to 'clear the dust', is essentially male.

This kind of blood, sweat and tears is OK because it lends itself to the heroic image. Women's blood, sweat and tears do not. The problem here is not solved just by including women in the Labour History record, for excluding women has meant that Labour History has not even had an adequate view of men.

Because the historical record, Labour History, has been keen to portray working people as victimised losers, romanticised stalwarts of mutual aid or as heroic militants, it has treated such people as a generalised mass, not as distinguishable individuals. (Even those selected individuals, like Ben Chifley, who have been followed by Labour Historians, have not been treated as real flesh and blood human beings but with reverence. And when something like Bob Hawke's womanising is written about, the result is not regarded as 'Labour History' but as something else. Biographies of 'Labour' persons are the exception, in any case.)

If 'working people' were to be treated as distinguishable individuals, then individual motivations, perceptions and responses would come into view. And some of these individual perceptions would not be to the liking of the custodians of the record. But if the point was pressed, the hidden assumptions might be forced to the surface and actually talked about seriously.

For the labour record to be history it needs to include all the doings, including all the weaknesses, of working people, all the warts and the less than heroic bits – for example, the wife-bashing, the alcoholic abuse, the lying and deceit, the claim-jumping and branch-stacking, the thuggery, blackmail and the murders, carried out by people working for the labour cause, or people associated with the cause.

I'm not talking about 'muck-raking' for the sake of it. I'm talking about a diversity of strategies adopted by working people for survival, including getting out of 'the working class', by whatever means at hand and as quickly as possible. To be blunt here in order to be brief, getting out of the working class is just as much part of the working class record as any other strategy of survival, and must be treated with as much historical respect as any other element.

Of course, working people have had terrible things done to them, and, of course, working people were, when drunk, say, reacting to brutal working conditions or to poverty and sickness, and, of course, working people are engaged in an heroic struggle for a better life, and, of course, History involves interpretations

Ben Tillett, British 'trade unionist' and the AMA executive in their regalia at the laying of the Foundation Stone, Broken Hill's Trades Hall, in 1898.

drawn from the evidence, but all the evidence must be on the table first, before we can draw major conclusions.

The basic ideas on which Labour History were originally built die and perhaps Labour History is impossible without them. My suggestion is that we have to get the question right before we can get the answer right. And getting the question right, involves admitting mistakes and listening to critics.

My jumping off spot for a lot of this, was certainly my attraction to Anarchism and my wondering why there were no anarchists mentioned in standard Labour Histories, say in the 1970s, when anarchists themselves claimed to be working on behalf of the poor and the dispossessed, which is what Labour History claimed to be about. My own researches turned up lots of Australians prepared to call themselves 'Anarchist', especially in the 1890s. I discovered a trail of significance from the 1886 Haymarket explosion through the maritime and shearers strikes in Australia, into May Day celebrations, all of which only intrigued me further. Here was a fascinating and important story, which was being excluded from the record of Labour History. Why?

The easy answer was that Labour History, like all claimed histories, has been written by the victors and 'anarchists' were certainly among the losers in the political struggles of wisdom or the relevance of people calling themselves 'anarchists', I say only that they existed, and, just as in the case of women, that that is sufficient support for their being part of the historical labour record.

I've touched upon some of the less than glamorous aspects of all people's lives and experiences, and, of course, domestic violence, or opportunism, etc., are not confined to working people – I don't believe that we have been well served by any of our historians. Conservative historians, feminist historians, family historians, all select what they believe puts their argument in its best light. And they don't tell you about the negative stuff. But this is the strategy of a politician or a lawyer, not an historian.

But I'm actually not here to talk about the less than wonderful aspects of people's lives. There are other gaps in the Labour History record which involve very satisfying and pleasant-to-read aspects. Furthermore, I believe these to be so significant that their inclusion will fundamentally alter what you now understand as Labour History even if you don't accept any of what I've argued so far. I'm refering now to questions of working people's organisations, why they organised and how.

I want to move into this stage of my presentation by making some constructive suggestions.

I think we need to know more and to think more about our British heritage. We assume too easily that immigrants to this country freed themselves almost overnight from their home-town habits and attitudes, and that labour phenomena in this country can be dealt with in isolation as though totally unique.

Next, I believe we need to use the material already at hand much better. As one simple example, we don't make any effort to compare the Wollongong experience with the Lithgow experience, with the Newcastle-Hunter experience, with the Broken Hill experience.

Thirdly, we are hardly radical at all in the way we examine issues. Too easily, we go for the easy answer and allow our literature and plays, stories, etc. to get away with unexamined assumptions and conclusions. The heroic and romanticised stereotypes keep getting reinforced, whatever we say about them being outdated or politically incorrect.

The organisations that I want to talk about now are at the heart of all of these questions and, if taken seriously, provide a new interpretation of Labour History, an understanding of which shows us a way forward, even a way for the official labour movement to arrest its decline in numbers and influence. My interpretation turns on a question often overlooked – how was it that that massive change occurred in Australian white society, from a situation of apparent self-help and mutual aid to one of State-centred welfare and centralised bureaucracies, with all that that meant for loss of local control and independence?

The second question that will then appear is – how do we untangle the massive confusion with which we are confronted, the confusion wrought by Labour Historians who have overwhelmed the history of working people with the history of an ideology.

It may sound that this will be just an argument for a need to redress the balance within labour organisations and return to more localised control. I'm not saying that at all. And neither is it an 'anti-class analysis' argument. I'm saying that in constructing Labour History and in allowing that creation to determine how the labour movement saw itself, we have lost touch with the very process of construction. We have forgotten how we got to where we are, and are unable to reproduce the process now when we need to.

The Notion of 'Trade Union'

I notice that, in recent times, feminist historians have claimed credit for women as the creators of the welfare state in Australia. We previously had the claim by Eva Cox that if a rebuilding of social capital, by which she meant localised and community self-help, was going to happen in Australia, then women would be doing it because men were constitutionally incapable of mutuality. These two feminist claims are just as factually wrong as certain similar claims made on behalf of 'trade unions'. For example: the Preface to the 1887 Rules of the Amalgamated Shearers Union of Australasia began:

> Experience has proved that *all* the privileges the working classes now enjoy have been gained through and by their Trades Unions... (Those) who are not members of some society whose duty it is to look after its members' welfare, must of necessity suffer injustice and wrong...[1] (my emphasis).

Next, I quote Martin Ferguson from an Introduction he wrote for a book published in 1992:

> Australian working men and women have a century-old history of collective action to change their workplaces... This collective action... was done through the formation of Australian unions...[2]

Thirdly, Bob Carr wrote in 1991:

> (The 100 years 1890-1990) was a century during which the Labor Party was the vehicle for raising living standards

> and alleviating misery and poverty; 100 years in which Labor governments created a fairer society out of the frontier capitalism of the 1890s; 100 years in which Labor governments gave Australia its shape as a modern nation... It is the Australian Labor Party that in large measure created modern Australia.[3]

The two later claims depend on the first being successful. And it clearly is not. Around 1900 when Friendly Societies were serving well over 30 per cent of the population, fewer than 1 worker in 10 or 2.5 per cent of the total population were trade union members.

I remind you that Friendly Societies were those welfare organisations, like Oddfellows, Foresters, Druids and Rechabites, that by the 1860s were 'a major presence in every Australian town'. Their members were predominantly working people who banded together to provide, through their own exertions and from meagre resources, medical services including doctors, ambulances and hospitals, as well as payments to cover sicknesses, funerals and childbirths.[4]

The 1887 claim on behalf of 'trade unions' then is very, very

The 1913 FEDFA Executive, Broken Hill, in their regalia of office.

wrong, if by it is meant that 'trade unions' were at that time the only societies concerned with the welfare of working people. But what if the label 'trade union' could be applied to all the societies that were concerned with working people's welfare? This is what happens when the Tolpuddle Martyrs, for example, are said to have been transported for administering a 'trade union' oath. They were actually members of the 'Agricultural Labourers' Friendly Society'. Using the label 'trade union' to cover 'friendly society' in this way is an example of what I call the inclusive/ exclusive contradiction in play.

Labour people seem to be able to accept simultaneously that representative organisations of labour have been exclusive, that is, that members were generally male, blue-collar and focussed on the industrial workplace, while at the same time argue that these same representative organisations were inclusive, that is, have encompassed all the concerns of all working people. Especially in coal-mining areas like Wollongong and the Hunter, it has been argued that the 'trade union' has stood for the whole community and made virtually all the cultural, educational, health and environmental gains that have been made in those communities.

So, on the one hand, when it seems useful to do so, the labour movement has argued for exclusivity and for discipline within the self-chosen group, while on the other and also when it suited, the argument has been that no-one nor any point of view has been excluded. This flexibility suggests to me that the basic terms involved here no longer have any sensible meaning, if only because they are so rubbery that they have become generally useless, especially in situations requiring constructive decision-making and leadership.

So, if I asked you, today, to produce a group definition of 'trade union' I would not expect success. The reason would be the difficulties that I've mentioned already – in particular, that agreement about what to include within the idea of 'trade union' and what to exclude changes with circumstances. Look at this definition:

> A trade union ... is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.

Happy with that one?

It comes from Beatrice and Sydney Webb's influential book on the history of British trade unionism. Despite their providing an apparently neat and tidy definition, a close study of their

Cessnock Miners Lodge No. 1 in 1936 May Day march at Cessnock, with banner showing the deep allegiance to the temple symbolism. Photo courtesy of Wilf McLung.

material shows that in this book they keep changing the criteria used to decide what is and what is not a 'trade union'. It seems to be that they keep changing the criteria in order to arrive at a *political* conclusion that they had in mind before they started.

In summary: they first argue that to be a 'trade union' an organisation must be 'continuous'. They quickly substitute a need for the organisation to be 'durable', and then replace that with

'permanent' as the necessary criteria; they then claim that such an organisation *must* be seeking to improve conditions of work via a contract of service *voluntarily* entered into; then they insist it *must* be independent; and that its members *must* oppose the relevant employers; and; that any prospect of the members becoming employers rules out the organisation; then that such an organisation *must* consist of members following only one trade; then that such an organisation must not be cut off from 'the mass of manual workers' but must be part of 'a movement'; then that it have concerns for the whole labouring population, not just for the specific trade of specific members.

All of this is at best a circular argument, the criteria for inclusion being manipuated so that certain conclusions can be arrived at, but the whole argument put by the Webbs is also terribly ambiguous, confused and illogical.

A second definition:

> A Trade Union ... is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives.

This also comes from the Webbs, and also from their book *The History of Trade Unionism*. The first was in the 1890 edition, the second 30 years later in 1920 in its second edition. The difference between these two ('of their employment' to 'of their working lives') is profound and still not understood.

The Webbs said that their intention with the alteration was to accommodate their more 'revolutionary' acquaintances who wished the definition to encompass an altered work-relationship. The objection was that the words 'of their employment' implied 'eternal wage slavery'.

I say that the inclusive/exclusive contradiction embraced by these definitions has been the foundation for most if not all of the problems with the 'trade union' literature written since. It is on the back of the contradiction that the claims (above) have been made and it is in the context of this confused, illogical and ambiguous context that labour history has been created.

Benefit Societies

My attempt to contrast these two definitions, and suggest that the first is about defining an in-group to guard against outside influences, and the second opens the group up for analysis in the light of outside influences, rests on those last words – 'of their employment' vs 'of their working lives'. For 'working lives' are much more clearly individual things, felt, experienced

personally and individually. Working lives necessarily involve families, children, sickness, death and out-of-work activities, in a way that 'employment' does not.

How did that oft-rehearsed 'close-knit community' or those 'sturdy pioneers' in Britain and in New South Wales first manifest self-help and mutual aid? – why? – because the rigours of life and actual circumstances made it necessary. These societies were not in response to ideology or to growing class consciousness, or because of repressive working conditions, but because they were necessary for survival.

But if the inclusive nature of the label 'trade union' was applied comprehensively, as in the Tolpuddle example, then Freemasons and friendly societies would have to be included in labour history because that is what Freemasons and friendly societies are – sick and accident provident societies, what I lump together as 'mutual benefit societies'. Why can't they be so included in all their variety? Because the edifice of Labour History has been built on the specific exclusion of these notional types of organisation. The Tolpuddle transportees could only be included if the name of their organisation was fudged. The Webbs got quite hysterical at the thought of Freemasons and Oddfellows, etc. being included, even though their own evidence points to the necessity of such an inclusion.

It is my firm belief that is in that specific exclusion, of Freemasons and Oddfellows, that Labour History lost touch with its fundamental being, ordinary working people, and lost touch with the process whereby working people built the movement which made Labour History possible. Working people began to organise because they had to – there was no other way of surviving. The idea of a movement came after the event, not before.

I return to the Webbs because it is there that the argument which produces the exclusion is spelt out clearly for definition which suits them politically, as I've said. And I've listed the many shifts they use to get to what they want. But there are yet more criteria being used, which are not spelt out.

The core of the 'trade union' ideas that they are attempting to set up is that it be 'modern'. This carries with it an hostility towards anything which offends what they like to think of as their forward-looking and progressive outlook. Anything involving individual motivation or perception, anything which smacks of ritualism or symbolism is not to be included. Virtually any form of organisation prior to the second half of the 19th century must be labelled as pre-modern, or primitive, and any means, however illogical, must be found to rule them out of serious consideration.

When they cannot avoid referring to the fact that 'trade unions' showed the same ritual, regalia or organisation that Freemasons and friendly societies had, they insist that these were mere strategic 'borrowings' rather than parts of a shared, living culture.

The rites and regalia are further demonised as 'sensational', 'fantastic ... ceremonies' an image akin to primitive, pagan rites. They then proceed to use that fantastic image to dismiss what are after all competitors and to sooth the fears of the authorities:

Although in the majority of cases the ritual was no doubt as harmless as that of the Freemasons or the Oddfellows, yet the excitement and sensation of the proceedings may have predisposed light-headed fanatical members, in times of industrial conflict, to violent acts in the interests of the Association. At all events, the references to its mock terrors in the capitalist press seem to have effectually scared the governing classes.[5]

They argue that the use of these 'ceremonies' by 'trade unions' is only pretend, entirely for short-term impact, an artifice of stage-management to impress unsophisticated newcomers. Simply left unexplored is the possibility that they were part of a living culture reflective of the needs, anxieties, expectations or desires of the people using them. The 'ceremonies' must have no history of any significance and must be only a temporary aberration, (basically around the time of Robert Owen's Grand Consolidated Trade Union in the 1830s) in the evolution of 'the trade union movement'.

In Australia

If this argument were sound there would be no problem with the history of 'trade unions' in Australia. There would simply be no evidence linking them to Freemasons and friendly societies.

What we think of as 'trade unions' are associated by Labour History with the ideas of being modern, being secular, being efficient and being democratic. These qualities are explicitly or implicitly contrasted with:

- being primitive, proto- or pre- (the really important thing) as in pre-historic, in the sense of not yet formed, not yet real, 'trade unions';
- being religious, and therefore superstitious, sectarian, unable to combine for a common good, and beholden to un-Australian agendas;
- being disorganised, locally autonomous, and again unable

to perceive the need for a common good, decided by those in Head Office; and

- being beholden to self-interested cliques rather than the disinterested representatives of the whole people.

Once an apparently clean, modern thrusting and progressive image has been established, it has been possible for the heroic/romantic symbols, like white knights on horseback, the bicepped proletarian with huge hammer, and the dancing lads and lasses in flower-strewn halls of the New Jerusalem to be used again and again without it being possible to question them.

As you might now understand, I am asserting that the notion of 'trade union' must lose its special status, that Labour History must adopt the label 'benefit society' as its general, overarching label for working people's organisations, and see that term made up of a range of related and overlapping forms of association, including Freemasons, friendly societies and co-operatives. My particular concern is with the first two of these and their relationship with what have been called 'trade unions' and it is around these relations that the burden of my argument resides.

I conclude that it makes much more historical sense to see the core of Labour History as a range of benefit societies, and to see what are called 'trade unions' as just one culturally determined response within a group and along a time-line. What we now call 'trade unions' were and are benefit societies, just like Grand United Oddfellow and Freemason lodges. They had their own ritual and regalia whether or not they were based around a certain work-place or occupation. Concern about working conditions and the strategy of withdrawing labour, 'going on strike', developed naturally out of the lodge habit of insuring against all sorts of other future dangers. Strike pay was just another benefit covered by contributions and the union 'stump', or membership dues, was just another levy put on lodge members.

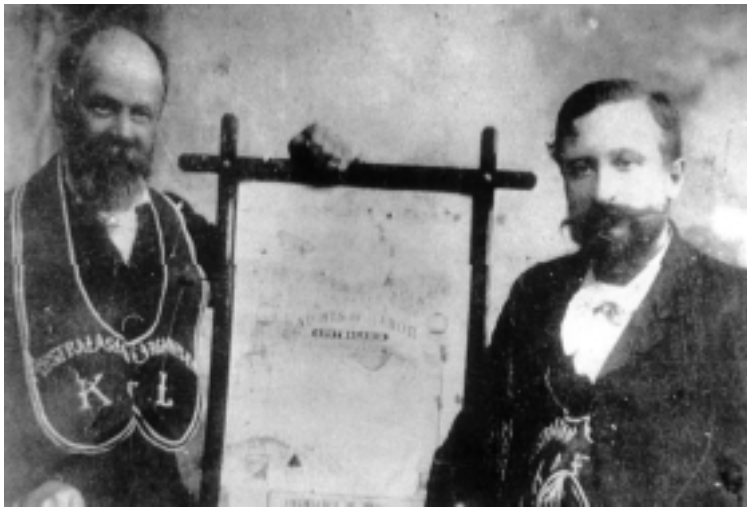
While most trade societies eventually dispensed with collars and aprons and concentrated more and more on political and economic campaigns, they never lost their 'benefit society' look, including their concern for solidarity and mutual aid. If we take out the Shearers' Strikes and the Maritime Strike from our understanding of the 1890s we would see that that decade marks no milestone in working people's organisation. What we would see is a drift away from one form of symbolic behaviour (regalia and ritual) to another form (meeting procedures and business agendas).

Before and after the 1890s, working members of trade and

other benefit societies were still called on to walk behind the coffin of a 'brother' and to be conscious of *the need for* solidarity and 'a fair go'. Eight hour and May Day banners carried the same symbols as the lodge regalia [note the temple form] and when those trade lodges joined together for greater strength, they formed, not an 'Order', but a Federated Association. Some Australian lodges, for example, of Boilermakers, used Rules couched in the language of the 18th century, up until the 1960s. I have photos of regalia being worn, in procession and in meetings, by Bakers, Engine-drivers and miners up until the First World War.

Whether it was as members of Grand United Oddfellows or the Operative Brickmakers Society that workers went on strike or were locked out, the effect on a benefit society's funds was the same. There was more money going out than coming in and the society was going to be in trouble the longer the situation went on. Strikes and periods of unemployment or events which interrupt the regular payments into the lodge, like wars, are devastating to all benefit societies whether they wear regalia and have secret handshakes or not.

What we now call Freemasons and friendly societies have been excluded from the labour record for two major reasons:



J.R. Davies and Dr W. Maloney in the regalia of the Australasian Knights of Labor (Melb) 1895 (approx.). Photo from NSW State Library.

they were reminders of a past which most people wanted to feel they were escaping. While lodges continued to use regalia, especially, they were vulnerable to charges of attempting to maintain the 'old world' which was being caricatured as irrational, superstitious, silly, inefficient and undemocratic.

I have already suggested that one aspect of the tragedy that is labour history is losing touch with the process whereby the labour movement was created. I also believe that in losing touch we have made it almost impossible to understand why the labour movement failed to increase in militancy, but has become increasingly compliant. I believe that it is those organisations which have been excluded which contain the key to this question.

To understand this, you have to appreciate that the ritual and the regalia are not accidental or strategic or fantastic pieces of fancy dress. They are essential elements, along with lodge structure, of one idea, the 19th century notion of democracy, which insists that any person can rise from the lowest level to the highest. The ritual represented the tests, and the regalia marked the successful passing of those tests from one level to the next.

At higher levels of the hierarchy a brother assumed greater responsibility for the welfare of the structure, especially of its probity, reasonableness and stability. The greater the success of the society, the greater the funds in need of safeguarding, the more rarefied the status of those in authority and the greater the distance from the lowest to the highest. This process was intensified as the local organisations federated to become part of more centralised state or national societies. Such a process necessarily separated the ordinary brothers and sisters from their representatives, the office-holders. It was democratic but it cemented the hierarchical idea, which includes the notion of everyone knowing their place.

Because the whole structure and its reason for being depended on the funds being safe and accounted for, their flow into the centre had to be made certain. The risks involved with small contributions being made every week or fortnight were too great. They were replaced with single annual payments from a society or a branch as a whole. This broke the essential connection and rendered the ritual and the regalia untenable.

The office-holders always held a status akin to 'God' despite human weaknesses we all know about, because they were at or near the pinnacle of the hierarchy we had been conditioned since birth, over many generations, to accept as the location of the important decision-making power, and as the custodians of our

destiny. As the lodge/branch structure declined in significance and centralised state and national apparatus became more important, these representatives, though fewer in number, were strengthened in their power, and their potency more clearly channelled upwards to the centre, not downwards to revitalise the lodge/branches.

We no longer even debate the virtues of centralised organisation. And since we have denied even the existence of the markers of where the ladder of achievement used to be, we have lost the ability to sensibly debate how and where we failed to do what we set out to do.

Notes

1 General Rules of the Amalgamated Shearers of Australasia, 1887, copy at E154/1, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU.

2 'Introduction' to G.Smith, *Emblems of Unity: Badges of Australian Trade Uions*, Little Hills Press, 1992, np.

3 B. Carr, 'Introduction', *Bede Nairn and Labor History*, Pluto Press, 1991, p. 1.

4 Statistics and quotes from D. Green and L. Cromwell, *Mutual Aid*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, 'Introduction'.

5 S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade* Unionism, London, 1920 edn, p. 128.