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Conference Report: 6th National Biennial Conference of Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Ray Markey
University of Wollongong

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Abstract
This conference attracted 137 delegates from throughout Australia to the Wollongong Town Hall and Community Centre over the Labour Day long weekend, with the conference theme of Labour and Community. The conference, which was the first to be held outside a capital city, was hosted by the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, in which members of the University play a major role. The president of the Illawarra branch of the society, Associate Professor Ray Markey of the Department of Economics at the University of Wollongong, was the conference organiser. Other members of the organising committee from the University of Wollongong included Mr Rob Hood of the Department of Economics (secretary of the Illawarra branch of the society), Ms Frances Laneyrie (Department of Management) and Ms. Shirley Nixon a member of the university council (and the vice president of the Illawarra branch of the society). The organising committee also included a number of community representatives: Neville Arrowsmith (a former university employee), Margaret Bronneberg, Val Dolan and Bronwyn James (all graduates or current students of the University of Wollongong). Gregor Cullen (Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong) was artistic director.

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CONFERENCE REPORT

6TH NATIONAL BIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY

LABOUR & COMMUNITY

Wollongong, 2–4 October 1999

This conference attracted 137 delegates from throughout Australia to the Wollongong Town Hall and Community Centre over the Labour Day long weekend, with the conference theme of **Labour and Community**. The conference, which was the first to be held outside a capital city, was hosted by the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, in which members of the University play a major role. The president of the Illawarra branch of the society, Associate Professor Ray Markey of the Department of Economics at the University of Wollongong, was the conference organiser. Other members of the organising committee from the University of Wollongong included Mr Rob Hood of the Department of Economics (secretary of the Illawarra branch of the society), Ms Frances Laneyrie (Department of Management) and Ms. Shirley Nixon a member of the university council (and the vice president of the Illawarra branch of the society). The organising committee also included a number of community representatives: Neville Arrowsmith (a former university employee), Margaret Bronneberg, Val Dolan and Bronwyn James (all graduates or current students of the University of Wollongong). Gregor Cullen (Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong) was artistic director.

The Vice Chancellor of the University of Wollongong, Professor Gerard Sutton, generously supported the conference with a Challenge Grant enabling the employment of Ms Robyn Troughton as an administrative assistant. The Department of Economics, and the Labour and Human Resource Program of the International Business Research Institute at the University of Wollongong also provided substantial assistance. Further sponsorship was provided by the Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union, Australian Education Union, Croatian Democratic Union, Grand United Order of Oddfellows, Illawarra Arab Sports Association, Labor Council of NSW, NSW Joint Coal Board, NSW Nurses' Association, and Public Service Association of NSW.

The broad level of support indicated by this list of sponsors emphasised the community aspect of the conference. Mary Davis welcomed delegates on behalf of the indigenous community of the Illawarra. The Illawarra Arab Sports Association organised a

performance of Arabian dancing by young girls at the dinner, as part of its sponsorship. A special exhibition of Labour and Community art works was curated by the Wollongong City Gallery and opened during the conference by Gregor Cullen of the School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. The City Library displayed an exhibition of Labour Heritage collected by Illawarra Branch treasurer, Neville Arrowsmith, a number of unions provided banners for the conference, the Illawarra Folk Club organised a special show the evening before the conference to introduce delegates to the mood with *Songs of Struggle* , and Jeff Kevin and his students in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong gave a special performance for delegates of *Strike Me Lucky*, especially developed around the conference theme. The mixture of university and community input, and the site for the conference at the Wollongong Town Hall and Community Centre, confirmed the marriage of Town and Gown in this major national venture.

Professor Markey stated that the Community theme of the conference was evident in the subject matter, activities and participants of the conference in ways which represented a new departure for conferences of this kind. He said that 'we mean community in its broadest sense, to include the notions of workplace community, regional and civic community, racial and ethnic community, republicanism and a national community, and the international community of labour – from "workers of the world unite!" to "globalisation". Whilst we recognise the importance of unions and political parties as an expression of the labour movement, we also wish to broaden the focus to other community organisations such as cooperatives, friendly societies, church groups, and the business community. The conference was intended to be a festival – a historic and cultural event in its own right', claimed Professor Markey, 'and we hope that it will be part of a healing process for the divisions which occur in the labour movement and the community'.

The mix between academic and more community inspired papers, also confirmed this theme, with a total of over 50 papers (31 refereed and 22 general stream), most published beforehand in the official Conference Proceedings. Sessions included: Labour & Other Classes, The Creation of Tradition, Working Class Community, Gender & Labour, Trade Union History, The Cold War, Race & Labour, Towards a Global Labour History, Free & Unfree Immigrant Labour, The Role of Labour Historians, Labour Councils, Labour Intellectuals, The 1930s Depression, The Labour Community as an Alternative Public Sphere, Labour Disputes, Public Space/Public Sphere – the Geography of Labour Communities, and Secret Societies and the Labour Movement. The

final session of the conference on the Monday morning departed from the norm in that it finished on a particularly high note as a result of the inspiring papers organised by Bob James in a session on Secret Societies, and those by Janis Bailey and Kurt Iveson on Public Space and Protest. Bob James deserves a special commendation for his outstanding display of Masonic and secret society paraphernalia.

In addition, Ms. Jo Kowalczyk, who is majoring in Industrial Relations for her MCom at the University of Wollongong, was awarded the Perth branch Paddy Troy Memorial Essay Prize (worth $500) at the conference dinner, for her essay comparing the maritime disputes of 1998 and 1890, originally written as part of her work for ECON 953 'Political Economy of Australian Wage Determination', taught by Professor Markey. Four Certificates of Recognition from the Illawarra Branch of the society were also awarded for contributions to labour history as participant and recorder, to Irene and Neville Arrowsmith, Shirley Nixon and George Peterson.

The Federal ALP Shadow Minister for Finance, Mr Lindsay Tanner, delivered the opening keynote address on 'Learning from History: New Challenges to the Labour Movement'. Professor Markey said that the organisers were thrilled to have Mr Tanner as a keynote speaker, because 'he has played a major part in rethinking the program of the ALP for the 21st century. This is consistent with our intentions that the conference should not only celebrate the past, but also contemplate the role of Labour and the Community beyond 2000'.

The other keynote speakers were Professor Eileen Yeo from the University of Sussex, speaking on 'Labour and Community, Past and Future: Or Why Merrie (White, Male) England and Mateship Are Not Enough', and Dr Pat O'Shane, Chancellor of the University of New England and Magistrate of NSW, who spoke on 'For the People? Australian Democracy in Crisis – A Layperson's Viewpoint'.

Meeting immediately after the conference conclusion, the National Executive of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History congratulated the organisers, with a number of its members declaring the conference 'the best ever held by the Society'.

Copies of the conference *Proceedings*, including refereed and general stream papers, are available from the Department of Economics at the University of Wollongong for $20.

Ray Markey
President, Illawarra Branch, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History