

*Illawarra Unity - Journal of the
Illawarra Branch of the Australian
Society for the Study of Labour
History*

Volume 8, Issue 1

2008

Article 1

ILLAWARRA UNITY

Editorial 2008-9

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*Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour
History.* <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity>

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Abstract

As the financial system internationally shudders and shakes and disappears, only to reappear as something else, we are entitled to ask if this finally is the death throes of capitalism. Or is it merely the end run of what Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has called “extreme capitalism”? Rudd’s diagnosis, of course, is problematic, precisely because he fails to see the systemic fault-lines. Instead, he points to personal greed and unfettered finance as the causes, when both are merely symptoms of a more deadly neo-liberal disease. And the current Labor Government, rather than tackling this disease directly, pushes empty rhetoric while pursuing policies that enhance the problem. Thus Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard refers caustically to the previous Government letting the market rip with regard to child care but refuses to take over the private child-care industry on behalf of the community.

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The Rudd Government has kept in place the thoroughly discredited schools funding model of the Howard Government. In the quadrennial funding bill presented to the Australian Parliament at the end of 2008, private schools were guaranteed \$28 billion dollars. While ever our public schools lie neglected and abused and subject to market-driven policies, this is obscene. Meanwhile, the industrial relations legislation presented before the Parliament around the same time was much less than could have been hoped for. Some draconian anti-union policies remain, prompting a few of us to wonder why the union movement bothers to continue supporting Labor, when it is the Greens that have the more enlightened industrial relations policy. The answer, of course, is simple. The trade union movement serves, in part, as the training ground for future Labor politicians who, once in office, will turn their backs on that movement whenever possible. There are honourable exceptions to this rule but they are now mostly silenced or becalmed or neutered by the Labor machine.

This edition of *Illawarra Unity* focuses upon issues of unions and work. The theory and practice of “community unionism” is a particular concern. The fight against Work Choices involved linking the union and the community in creative ways and these links need to be strengthened. The articles on

community unionism presented in this edition of *Illawarra Unity* arose out of a workshop sponsored by, amongst others, the Illawarra Branch of the Labour History Society. It was one of two highly successful workshops the branch was involved in this year. The other one dealt with 1968 and its legacies. Some papers from the latter workshop will be published in a future issue of this journal.

The trade union movement is frequently neglected in current journalism dealing with the global financial crisis. This is to be expected, but it reveals a profound historical and political amnesia. One of the reasons for the success of the New Deal in America was the role of the union movement in supporting it. And one of the neglected factors behind the current crisis is the decline of the union movement. Far from being an index of economic strength, weak unions reflect impending economic decline. The division between the working class and the super-rich grows steadily, the number of working poor (as in America, particularly) escalates, workers' rights disappear and the ruling class begins to float above society and eventually leave it and its crumbling infrastructure behind. A revival of trade unionism and a workers' movement that connects directly to the general community is needed urgently. Hopefully, this issue of *Illawarra Unity* can help contribute to this.

Anthony Ashbolt