



UNIVERSITY  
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AUSTRALIA

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

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Volume 9

Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity: The Sixties*

Article 8

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2009

## Steve Quinn: A Union Hero 1928–2009

Wayne Phillips

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### Recommended Citation

Phillips, Wayne, Steve Quinn: A Union Hero 1928–2009, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 9(1), 2009, 71-78.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol9/iss1/8>

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## Steve Quinn: A Union Hero 1928–2009

### **Abstract**

I want to welcome everybody here today to help celebrate the life and work of Steve Quinn. I want to pass on my personal thanks to Steve's wife and best mate Barbara and to his children, Jane, Tony and Fiona for letting me share time with Steve not only when he was working but also during his retirement. When Steve asked me to stand here and conduct this ceremony he gave me two clear directions: 1. Don't be late – as we know Steve was never late to any meeting or function, and 2. No tears or unhappiness.

## Steve Quinn: A Union Hero 1928–2009

Wayne Phillips

This is a slightly edited text of the funeral oration by Wayne Phillips



*Steve Quinn, Doreen Borrow and Monica Chalmers, Wollongong 2008*

I want to welcome everybody here today to help celebrate the life and work of Steve Quinn. I want to pass on my personal thanks to Steve's wife and best mate Barbara and to his children, Jane, Tony and Fiona for letting me share time with Steve not only when he was working but also during his retirement. When

Steve asked me to stand here and conduct this ceremony he gave me two clear directions:

1. Don't be late – as we know Steve was never late to any meeting or function, and
2. No tears or unhappiness.

Steve wanted everybody here to enjoy themselves, to recall good memories of him and to enjoy a drink on him later. I have had the privilege of knowing Steve for about 35 years. I first met Steve when, as an apprentice boilermaker, I decided I wanted to join the Union. I made my way into the old Trade Union Centre, walked up some stairs, and instantly heard someone talking into a telephone advising the person on the other end what he could do with his measly wage offer. On this day I also met the other AMWU organizers, Len Arber and Bob Williams. After waiting a couple of minutes I was invited in to talk to Steve. At the end of this initial meeting I knew that I would be a committed financial member of the Union for the rest of my life.

In 1979 I got to know more of the inner workings of the Union and of the type of person that Steve Quinn was. I was lucky enough to be nominated as an acting Organiser, replacing Len Arber who was on annual leave at the time. Steve became my mentor and someone who I could discuss issues with, whether it be industrial, political or family problems. I took advantage of his wisdom and advice from that day onwards. If ever I needed to talk about an issue or I was unsure how to tackle a problem I spoke to Steve. His knowledge, his politics, his activism, his love of life, his unending pursuit of rights for working class men and women, and above all this his deep passion for his immediate family is unequalled, in my opinion.

During my years with the Metal Workers I listened to many stories on the exploits of Steve. For instance the story of when he stopped a particular nasty boss in the coke ovens from charging people money to work overtime. This put Steve in the spotlight for a period of time by other management representatives in his area. Steve was watched like a hawk as management tried every excuse to get rid of him. One way Steve fixed the issue of being under constant watch was to do some

renovations to his workshop!! He organized and built a false wall into the shop. This meant that when supervisors could not see him on the job and went looking for him, Steve, Len and some other workers would be happily sitting in this false room, drinking tea, playing cards or plotting how to improve conditions for all workers.

Steve was also instrumental in resolving a big dispute many years ago for workers down at the Eden chip mill. Late one night he received a phone call from a woman advising that her husband had been on strike for three weeks and was there anything Steve could do as they were under tremendous financial pressure. The very next morning Steve had made the trip to Eden and soon achieved a settlement of the dispute that the employees were satisfied with. In fact, the victory he achieved for his members is still recognized and acknowledged to this day.

Following this Steve approached the AMWU State Secretary, Merv Malcolm, to fund a celebration of the victory. The only mistake Merv made was to not tell Steve how much he could spend. When Merv received the bill for the celebration to say he did a couple of back flips was an understatement – he went off!

However, it was recognized that in winning this dispute at the wood chip mill Steve was given an avenue to expand Union rights in other industries. Such that when he attended meetings at a small cheese factory in Bega, he was treated with great respect not only by employees, but by management as well. I still remember as Steve would receive a phone call once a year from Wendy the pay mistress to enquire what wage rates did they have to pay for the following twelve months. This went on for many years.

However, as we know, Steve's main area of responsibility was the Steel Works. He would spend countless hours planning ways to improve the wages and conditions of the members that he represented. He formed an alliance with the then FIA Branch Secretary, Nando Lelli, which try as they might, BHP management could not break or overcome. Steve and Nando went on to become great mates who shared a common goal. They were a formidable duo who never let management get away with anything that had the potential to disadvantage their

members. Later on when Warwick Tomlins the ETU organizer came on board, the combined union members at the steelworks enjoyed a leap forward in pay rates and conditions as a result of the three unions working together.

We only have to look at the decision made by AI&S in the early 80s to close the Port Kembla Steel Works, and the way in which Steve and Nando turned that decision around. Together they organized meetings, rallies, discussions with management, discussions with politicians – they put strategies into place with the full support from their members which resulted in the Government and company re-investing in the industry through the steel plan and thereby saving this community.

I will never forget the day that Steve and Nando took a couple of trains and a few people down to Canberra. This day has gone down in history as the day that Federal Parliament had uninvited guests enter the front door for a few hours.

It wasn't long after this day trip to Canberra, Steve also organized a bit of a walk from Wollongong to Sydney. During these three days walking to Sydney, whilst myself from the Metal Workers and Andy Gillespie from the FIA led a number of people on this march, Steve was the ringmaster who ensured everything fell into place, such as camp being set up, speaking engagements being kept, and fundraising along the march being sustained. By the time we got to Sydney, through the efforts of Steve and Nando, we had over 50,000 people crammed into Macquarie Street in Sydney demanding that all levels of government save our manufacturing industry and the thousands of jobs it creates.

These two events were a milestone which, I believe, helped lead to the demise of the Fraser government and to the election of the federal Labor government. It also clearly defined the power of the rank and file members and what could be achieved with the right leadership from union officials such as Steve Quinn.

I also remember a time when I happened to be an Acting Organiser at the AMWU, and Steve had just received his new car – a blue Commodore. The car was only a couple of days old when it was stolen one night. Steve rang the office the next morning to advise of the theft, and spent the day filling in forms at the police station and doing other things. When we finally got to see him

later that afternoon, the only thing he was upset about was the theft of his 16-ribbed umbrella. When I questioned his priorities he gave me a lecture on how rare 16 ribbed umbrellas whereas Commodores were just a common everyday item. When they did find Steve's car, it was the bottom of the quarry at Cleary Bros at Port Kembla. When he identified the car he again went off as the mongrels had stolen his umbrella prior to putting his car at the bottom of the cliff.

Very recently I spoke with him whilst he was suffering with this illness at home. Even though it was obvious he was in a great amount of pain, he continued to think about others. Steve had taken steps to ensure that at the end of this occasion today, refreshments would be served at Dicey Riley's pub. He said to me that after he made all the arrangements, his only concern was that some of the older people, including himself, may struggle as they walked up the hill to Dicey Riley's – and then said "What a stupid bastard I am, I won't be there." He also said that I had to make sure that people didn't get too drunk, as they would have to go to work the next morning.

Another thing he asked me to do was to look at some plans he had drawn for a portable picket tent. He had been watching the recent dispute at Pacific Brands and knew that disputes such as this would continue and probably get worse in the future. He told me that there was some steel on the top of his garage that I should use to make up the frame for this tent so that workers on a picket line would have some cover from the elements. He did all this at a time when he was in a great deal of pain, and knew that he didn't have much more time.

Everything that Steve did in his career involved Rank & File member participation. He continually said to me that a union is only as good as its members. He always said that if you don't have the members on board, no matter what you do it is doomed for failure unless you have the rank and file behind you.

Over the last 35 years I have met many people both men and women who are involved in some way in the industrial or political arena that we work in. I have met members, delegates, officials and organizers from many Unions as well as politicians from the Federal and State levels. Without offending anyone past or present I want to say that in my opinion Steve Quinn

was and is the most complete union organizer I have ever met.

As I said at the start, Steve's instructions to me were that this gathering here today should be a happy one. We should have a good time and have a beer on him. He wanted it to be like an Irish wake – I don't know what that means, but if having a beer and some nibbles at Dicey Riley's, satisfies his request, then I'm all for it. I think that what he was trying to say can be expressed by the following:

Feel no guilt in laughter, he knows how much you care  
 Feel no sorrow in a smile, that he's not here to share  
 You cannot grieve forever, he would not want you to  
 He'd hope that you can carry on,  
 The way you always do.

So talk about the good times and the ways you showed  
 you cared  
 The days you spent together, all the happiness you  
 shared  
 Let memories surround you  
 A word someone may say  
 Will suddenly recapture a time, an hour, a day

That brings him back as clearly as though he were still  
 here  
 And fills you with the feelings that he is always near  
 For if you keep these moments  
 You will never be apart  
 And Steve will live forever, locked safe within your  
 heart.

### Steve Quinn

Born in Sydney during the Depression, Steve had a difficult upbringing that naturally drew him to values of social justice, equality and fairness.

He started his career in unionism when he organised apprentices in 1949 while still an apprentice himself. He joined the Communist Party of Australia when he was 22 and became



lifelong friends with his mentor and CPA Secretary Laurie Aarons. Through his membership of the Party he honed his skills in negotiation, public speaking and strategic thinking. He understood globalism and its impact on workers from both a theoretical and practical perspective and was able to develop strategies to combat impacts.

He was union delegate in every shop he worked. He had a reputation as an excellent tradesman boilermaker and believed that you did a fair days work for a fair days pay. His integrity, honesty and commitment to principle meant that he had equal status with employers and members alike. He was a highly respected man – often called on to resolve issues regardless of where the problem lay.

He moved to the Illawarra in 1954 and quickly became involved in the politics of the area. He was immediately a union delegate, President of the Communist Party (CPA) and active in all areas of the community. He worked for 20 odd years at BHP in Port Kembla before standing for and winning election to a position as organiser with the AMWU. He held this position until his retirement in 1994.

His pleasures were simple and he claims as his greatest achievements the more individual aspects of his job – things like getting a worker their job back, compensation for an injured worker or getting a dirt money allowance paid.

At the broader level his impact was also felt. It is widely acknowledged that the work Steve and his good friend and FIA (now AWU) colleague, Nando Lelli undertook in 1982 helped save the steel industry in the Illawarra. The breaking down of the doors at old Parliament House is now a part of Trade Union and Australian history.

All who knew him would also know him to be passionate. He wanted justice, fairness and equity and fought for these values always.

All who knew him would also know his humour. He was quick to a hearty laugh, quick to see a joke and the bright side of a situation. He was very rarely without a broad smile.

Steve was a family man, enormously proud of his children and grandchildren. By his side all his adult life was Barbara, his partner and wife. They were married for 58 years and were friends always. He credited Barbara with his life following his

heart attack – he claimed her love and support was the medicine that bought him back to good health and another 25 years of energetic life.

He was a fixture at his granddaughters football games to the extent they had a minutes silence for him last weekend.

One of the last public events he attended was the inauguration of his grandson as school captain for Illawarra Sports High.

There are very few Steve would not consider a friend. He had no tolerance for dishonesty, self aggrandisement or hypocrisy – those people would certainly not be considered a friend. Anyone down on their luck, being taken advantage of or in a position of powerlessness would be a part of Steve’s gang. He wanted a better world for all and fought all his life for just that goal.