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Review - Of human right & human gain: peak labour organisation in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, 1869-2000

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Review - Of human right & human gain: peak labour organisation in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, 1869-2000

Abstract

Of Human Right & Human Gain traces the development from 1869 to 2000 in the Hunter Valley of the oldest continuous peak union organisation in Australia. This is a story well worth telling and decades of meticulous research by Rod Noble mean that it is told very well. Since its inception and currently, the principal role of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council (NTHC) is “to act as a collective industrial, political and community authority for its affiliated unions and the broader labour movement”. Early industrial issues of concern for the NTHC in 1885 and proximately usually involved pay and conditions, industrial legislation, union demarcation, health and safety particularly in the mining industry, shorter working hours and a rejection of dependence on organisations in metropolitan Sydney. And by the 1930s, the NTHC had established a pattern of support for equal pay for women, Aboriginal rights, public education, jobs, control of planning and development, housing, price control, public ownership, peace and disarmament.

Rod Noble, *Of Human Right & Human Gain: Peak Labour Organisation in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, 1869–2000*, Hunter Workers’ Research Co-operative, Hamilton, NSW

Reviewed by Mike Donaldson
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Of Human Right & Human Gain traces the development from 1869 to 2000 in the Hunter Valley of the oldest continuous peak union organisation in Australia. This is a story well worth telling and decades of meticulous research by Rod Noble mean that it is told very well.

Since its inception and currently, the principal role of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council (NTHC) is “to act as a collective industrial, political and community authority for its affiliated unions and the broader labour movement”. Early industrial issues of concern for the NTHC in 1885 and proximately usually involved pay and conditions, industrial legislation, union demarcation, health and safety particularly in the mining industry, shorter working hours and a rejection of dependence on organisations in metropolitan Sydney. And by the 1930s, the NTHC had established a pattern of support for equal pay for women, Aboriginal rights, public education, jobs, control of planning and development, housing, price control, public ownership, peace and disarmament.

Noble notes the decline of labour history in the academy since the mid-nineties, and suggests that it may well be written now by active participants, such as himself, saying that his “aim is to get as close as possible to the truth”. To achieve this, Noble is concerned to chart the view of the union movement ‘from the community’ and in the process he notes how during

the MUA waterfront dispute in 1998, 2,500 people rallied to the call of the NTHC and how the Anglican and Catholic bishops of Newcastle attended the picket lines and wrote critically to the Prime Minister, John Howard voicing their concerns for the parishioners in their dioceses.

Noble's analysis of the minutes of the NTHC minutes over thirty years, and not counting those items 'for information of delegates', reveals the pattern of close involvement of the NTHC with the community which supported it.

Year	Industrial Matters	Political & Community Matters
1965/66	51%	49%
1975/76	49%	51%
1985/86	45%	55%

Community organisations that sought the support of the NTHC ranged from sporting bodies such as the Greyhound Trainers and Owners Association, the Jockey Club, the Boxers and Trainers Association, the Amateur Swimming Association and the Cycling Club to more political groups like the Greek League for Democracy, the Housewives Association, the Eureka Youth League, various Parents and Citizens Associations, Pensioners Associations, various Progress Associations, and the Australian Arts Movement, as well as the Surf Lifesaving Association, the Fishing Cooperative, the Vegetable Growers Association and the Disabled Soldiers Association, among others.

This support is of course, not one way, and particularly in times of industrial dispute, local unions through their labour council have been able to rely on the support of many local small businesses. So strong is this relationship, that during the 1949 coal strike, the Labor government made it illegal for small businesses to extend credit to strikers. And as I write this, miners at Tahmoor colliery near Wollongong, locked now for a year in a bitter dispute with their employers the multinational Xstrata, report that staff of the Anglo-Swiss mining giant have threatened local business owners who are displaying anti-

Xstrata signs in their shops.

Structurally, the NTHC from the 1970s to the present, engages with the community particularly through a system of standing sub-committees, notably the Ecology Committee (established 1974), Health and Welfare Committee (1976), Workers' Cultural Action Committee (1978) and the Women's Committee (1978).

Appropriately throughout the book, the organisation which later became the Labour Council of NSW and then Unions NSW is referred to by its original title which was the Sydney Trades and Labour Council (Sydney TLC), for it is clear that from its earliest days, whatever its name, its reach was seldom more extensive than the Sydney metropolitan area. Beyond that, the Sydney TLC was used by regional labour councils on their terms, and where these were not acceded to, the relationship was difficult and prickly. For its part, the Sydney TLC, frequently quick to claim authority over regional councils, was and is seldom able to enforce it over long periods. In successfully resisting the various machinations of Labor's Sussex St machine to break the power of those it does not control, the NTHC, like the South Coast Labour Council, was supported by its direct affiliation to the ACTU and by the direct affiliation to it of unions in its region.

To this day, a tension remains within the labour movement about the relationships between 'political' and 'industrial' issues. Newcastle workers made no sharp distinction between electoral and industrial representation and miners and seafarers were elected to parliament by the organised workers of the Hunter and their supporters before the Labor Party, and even the Labor Electoral Leagues, were established. The depression of the late 1880s signalled by a cessation in public works, a collapse in the building industry and the banking system and by widespread unemployment, crystallised workers' desire to organise where they lived and worked in peak organisations responsive to their needs. It was a shame, said J. L. Fegan, one of Newcastle's first working class parliamentary representatives, President of the Eight Hour Committee and a founder of the NTHC, that workers were represented by "lawyers, capitalists and speculators rather than people of their own class".

In what was to be a defining characteristic of regional

trade unionism, for the pattern of capital investment profoundly affects local class formation, the newly formed peak trade union body joined with the Newcastle Chamber of Commerce in agitating for port facilities and a steelworks. Similarly in the 1980s in the Illawarra, the Port Kembla Harbour Task Force established by the local Waterside Workers Branch comprised representatives from four maritime unions, two local transport firms, three stevedoring companies, the Wollongong and Port Kembla Chambers of Commerce, the NSW Maritime Services Board and met under the aegis of the Wollongong City Council. It has been successful in winning for the port a facility for the export of grain, a ship-repair capacity and the establishment of a container terminal for the importation of cars.

At the regional level in the Hunter Valley, what prevented this co-operation with corporate interests and the local state becoming collusion and incorporation was the existence and influence from the earliest days of what was referred to in the media as 'the Left' and 'the Left wing movement'. As well as some trade unions, the ALP-left and the Communist Party of Australia, this also involved a workers' club, reading groups, lectures, libraries, bulletins, newspapers and popular music. As Noble convincingly demonstrates, the 'Left wing movement' was closely allied to the NTHC and each supported the other. With the support of this movement and because of its deep roots in the community, the Left-controlled NTHC was able even to withstand the powerful reaction against it in the 1950s and early 1960s from a combination of the right-wing Industrial Groups, repressive State and Federal legislation and from the prevalent Cold War anti-communist hysteria. Even though it suffered major divisions within its own ranks as a result of that backlash, it still managed to maintain its industrial work and expand and deepen its links to the community. In short, writes Noble, the effect of this close relationship was that socialist ideas were ascendant over laborist ones, the Left retained a close connection with the NTHC, and was helping to sustain its independence, viability and authority, while deepening its connection to the community.