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Review: Uncharted Waters - Social Responsibility in the Australian Trade Unions

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Review: Uncharted Waters - Social Responsibility in the Australian Trade Unions

Abstract

The 'uncharted waters' in the title of Greg Mallory's book refers to the idea of trade unions adopting the broad, long-term function of social responsibility, as well as being concerned with the short-term issues of wages and conditions. The argument is that trade unions should join with people and forces in the wider community, adopt principled moral positions and tackle social, economic, and political problems as a matter of course. The metaphorical waters are uncharted in the sense few trade unions internationally, or within Australia, have adopted this wider function as central to their agendas.

Reviews

Greg Mallory, *Uncharted Waters: Social Responsibility in Australian Trade Unions*, Greg Mallory, Brisbane, 2005. 244 pages.*

Review: by Rowan Cahill

The ‘uncharted waters’ in the title of Greg Mallory’s book refers to the idea of trade unions adopting the broad, long-term function of social responsibility, as well as being concerned with the short-term issues of wages and conditions. The argument is that trade unions should join with people and forces in the wider community, adopt principled moral positions and tackle social, economic, and political problems as a matter of course. The metaphorical waters are uncharted in the sense few trade unions internationally, or within Australia, have adopted this wider function as central to their agendas.

Mallory mounts a powerful argument for the adoption of social responsibility as a trade union role by examining two Australian examples of the idea at work, selecting for analysis and discussion the Port Kembla Pig-iron Dispute (1938), and the Green Bans campaign of the NSW Builders’ Labourers Federation (1970–1974). The historical and political grounds have been worked before by numerous historians, while the idea of trade union social responsibility has been powerfully articulated previously, notably and variously by sisters Meredith and Verity Burgmann. Mallory’s achievement is to bring the two struggles together, arguing both are examples of social responsibility in action, drawing out common threads and lessons that can be applied to the present and the future, while demonstrating social responsibility is the way forward for trade unions.

For the uninitiated, in 1938 Port Kembla (NSW) waterside workers refused to load tin-clippings and pig-iron destined for Japan and its undeclared war in China. The ban flew in the face of the appeasement/pro-Japan policies of the conservative Commonwealth Government, and especially Attorney-General Robert Menzies; a bitter conflict ensued. Eventually the Port Kembla workers were forced to load the cargo, but their action exported militancy to other Australian ports, seeded the future with the idea that trade unions could take political action, and

ensured that Japan's war in China and Australia's links with the Japanese militarist juggernaut came under intense public scrutiny and debate.

During the early to mid-1970s, the NSW Builders' Labourers Federation controversially engaged in actions not solely concerned with wages and conditions, becoming involved in the anti-Vietnam War campaign, struggles against racism and for Aboriginal rights, and through its invention of Green Bans, campaigned on environmental issues. The latter campaigns, literally and bitterly fought on the streets of Sydney, helped change environmentalism globally. Mallory places his examples of social responsibility within, and outside, the history and traditions of Australian trade unionism, while teasing out the influences impacting upon the union leaders identified with the two examples, wharfie Ted Roach in 1938, and builders' labourer Jack Munday during the 1970s. Both leaders were "rebels within the rebellion", as Ted Roach put it not long before his death in 1997. In his treatment of Roach, Mallory gives long overdue recognition to an extraordinary person, a courageous and legendary militant whose name still invokes respect and admiration amongst pockets of old-timers and maritime ancients around the Australian coast.

A key point made by Mallory is that both the unionised workforces he examines were characterized by high levels of membership unity and participation, and leaderships that led from the front lines. Widespread also was the belief or understanding that history and social change can be, or should be, made from below instead of from the top-down.

A final note. Confident about his *Uncharted Waters* manuscript, based on his 1999 PhD thesis, Mallory self-published rather than hawking the book to mainstream publishers, facing probable rejection, or the probability of having to tone down the ideological and political thrust of the text. He went out on a limb, raised the necessary capital, and invested in professional editing, design and marketing expertise. The result has been publicity, reviews and sales that would please any publisher's bottom line for this sort of book. Arguably Mallory has shown the way forward for other progressive writers in an era when publishing outfits are either closing down, or closing their doors to this sort of committed writing.

* This review was published originally in the e-journal *workSite*, produced by the Department of Work and Organisational Studies, University of Sydney, March 2006.