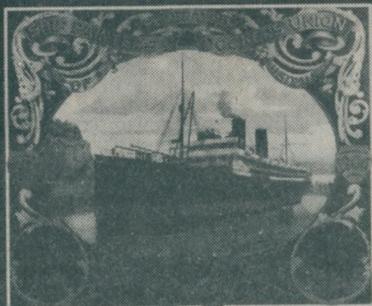


WITH BANNER UNFURLED

WITH BANNER UNFURLED by Issy Wyner. Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1983. \$11.96 (paperback).

With Banner Unfurled

The early years of the Ship Painters and Dockers Union



Issy Wyner

Issy Wyner has done a good service to the labor movement with the publication of *With Banner Unfurled* because he has tackled a little known area of history. The publication is also timely given the recent press notoriety levelled at the focus of the book, the Ship Painters and Dockers Union (SPD).

The basis of the book is broadly in two stages — the early history centred on the Balmain Labourers Union and then its evolution, with some fits and starts, into the SPD.

The author does a creditable job of research and manages to encompass a number of other issues that revolved around the suburb of Balmain at the time. Historically, this comprises a look at the Morts Dock Company, the development of Cockatoo Island, the beginnings of the Labor Electoral League and issues concerning the Labor Council.

Wyner postulates on some of the activities of one William Hart and seems to think that this individual played a significant role inside the SPD and in labor affairs in general. He manages to dwell a short time on William Lane's 'New Australia' utopian exercise and weaves this expedition into the lives and work of Balmain and the dockworkers.

Much of what the author has to say remains principally unstated; he relies heavily on very large appendices to allow readers to peruse original documents and form their own opinions. Some may think this is not in the character of a definitive historical exercise but I think Wyner has made full use of the known facts and, unashamedly, makes calculated guesses based on a stated class line and a knowledge of general working class activities. He states his own views clearly and yet allows readers the room

to move and, if they so desire, to initiate their own investigations.

With Banner Unfurled is a very readable book which may become a good starting point for other labor histories of the dock industry.

A number of small criticisms could be levelled. Realising that the work is sub-titled "The early years" I still expected that a small potted history or chapter on the SPD in other Australian states would have been in order. Secondly, I think the social conditions of the labourers could have been added to, and the good socio-political point of the 'craft' unions vis-a-vis labour unions somewhat extended.

These remain both minor and subjective suggestions and, all in all, the book is a refreshing example of a good narrative written by an extremely active member of the Australian labour movement. There are too few accounts written by activists who have a sense both of the need for continual struggle to maintain working conditions, and to develop political organisation. And while a lot of unanswered questions remain about the early Australian labour movement, this book is a good example of how to answer some of them.

Reviewed by

Barrie Blears

Barrie Blears is a member of the ALR editorial collective.