

## THE MAGNIFICENT TED ROACH

The Illawarra Branch of the Society for the Study of Labour History held a seminar at the Master Builders Club on the 25th February on the Dalfram Dispute - quite simply the most significant political demonstration to ever take place in Illawarra when in 1938 the Port Kembla wharfies, led by Roach, refused to load pig-iron for Japan because they felt it would soon return as bombs.

The seminar was probably the best historical talk by someone actually involved in the events discussed I've ever heard.

There were three speakers - Rowan Cahill, Gary Griffiths and Ted Roach himself.

Rowan Cahill, a teacher from Bowral High and co-author of the history of the Seaman's Union of Australia, got off to a slow start by speaking very generally (but pleasantly) on

Japanese espionage in Australia but then managed to annoy me no end by wholesaling the old chestnut about D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* being an accurate record of right-wing political activity in Australia in the 1920s. But, mercifully, he kept his talk to the promised 13 minutes and was fully aware that everyone was there to see and here Ted Roach.

Gary Griffiths, a teacher from Corrimal High, gave a long but superb exposition on the industrial conditions of Port Kembla wharves prior to the dispute. It was a brilliant recount of the great mixture of documentary and oral history research he prepared for an early 1980s Honours thesis in History at the University of Wollongong. Even though my own father was a wharfie and I expected I would have heard all the horror stories before, the conditions of labour detailed were absolutely horrifying.

Gary's demonstration of the incredible weakness of the wharfies as a union before Ted Roach arrived in Wollongong in 1936 was truly chilling stuff - 24 hour shifts, no meals, work in any weather combined with the humiliation of often having to bribe 'the bull' in order to get the privilege of working 24 hours in the rain with no food loading some appalling cargo..

But the highlight of the afternoon was Ted Roach. In the flesh he was an absolute sensation. 87 years old and he didn't look a day over 65 - not bad for a life-long militant who copped over two years in gaol for defending the rights of workers.

While at Port Kembla he organized the union branch so superbly that they won Australia's first union-controlled employment roster, in a move which defeated the horrendously corrupt "Bull" system which then operated on the wharves throughout the country.

As for the Dalfram Dispute itself, Roach calls it a lockout not a strike (like all good Wobblies Roach appears to believe it's best never to go on strike but to stay at work and take on the bosses on a daily basis). He's no shrinking violet when it comes to commenting on the significance of the only purely political dispute ever undertaken by an Australian trade union. In Roach's view (and I agree with him) the Dalfram Dispute was "more far-reaching than the Eureka Stockade" - which, after all, was little more than a squabble over money.

But Roach and the Port Kembla wharfies in the Dalfram Dispute were truly engaged in a David and Goliath Battle. They took on and beat the Australian Government and its Attorney-General, Robert Menzies. Roach arranged a public burning of the single "Dog-Collar" License (licenses with which Menzies threatened the entire waterfront) and still held firm when BHP retrenched 3500 Port Kembla workers in order to put pressure on the wharfies to cave-in.

When Menzies sent Undersecretary Lawson to Wollongong, unannounced, to demand a meeting with the wharfies, Roach abused him for his discourtesy and told him he'd have to wait until the next day for a meeting to be arranged. Unbeknown to Lawson, Roach brought a member of the press to the meeting so that, in the interests of democracy, he could listen to what was being said. Menzies was furious when the headline appeared the next day declaring "Lawson Woos W.W.F". Poor Lawson lost his job for that faux-pas.

When Menzies himself was forced to come to Wollongong to negotiate a huge crowd mobbed him at the Wollongong Hotel. The police had to ask Roach and other wharfies to help them protect the Attorney General. Roach quipped that it was "ironic that Australia's biggest red-baiter had to be protected by Communists when he came to Wollongong."

When asked from the floor of the seminar what role the Communist Party played in the Dalfram Dispute, Roach again displayed not only his wit but his grasp of dialectics by replying: "I was the leading figure in the dispute and I was a member of the Communist Party and therefore the Communist Party played a leading role!"

Roach struck me as one of the most impressive men of his generation I've ever encountered. Claiming he had little formal education and that he had only attended "The University of Adversity", he nevertheless impressed the audience as what can only be described, using the words (or at least my translation of them) of Antonio Gramsci, as an "organic intellectual of the working class." The South Coast has been fortunate to have attracted working class internationalists of the calibre of Ted Roach and Fred Lowden.

I doubt that we will ever see their like again.

Joseph Davis