

JUNE 2014 MEETING

Speaker: Barry Russell

Topic: WEA – An Association to promote the Higher Education of working men



In his talk titled "WEA Illawarra - A Historical Overview", Barry presented some very interesting background history on the establishment of WEA in Australia and Illawarra. The following is an extract from his paper.

The founder of WEA was Albert Mansbridge (1874-1952) who was the son of an English carpenter with very limited financial resources who left school at the age of 14 and took up a position as a clerical worker but he attended university extension classes at King's College London. Mansbridge would have liked to have entered the Church but was unable to achieve this goal. He in fact was a frustrated missionary who had a thirst for learning and education. While working during the day he actually taught evening classes in industrial history, economics and typing.

Although fortunate to be born during these times of opportunities for the working man (including himself), Albert saw beyond these vocational education needs and understood that the consumers of 'liberal education' must themselves take an effective part in its provision, i.e. Student Centred Learning or Participatory Learning.

In 1903 Albert and his wife Frances, 1876-1958, set up a new association, I might add with 2/6 from France's housekeeping money. The association was "An Association to promote the Higher Education of Working Men". This was named WEA in 1905 as the original name was seen as offensive to the 'Women's Cooperative Guild' and Mansbridge became WEA's full time General Secretary 1905-1915.

Its goal was to give access to education and lifelong learning for adults from all backgrounds and especially for working class adults and those who were socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged. At the Birmingham Conference where the name change occurred there were 600 delegates and 400 visitors in attendance. The three common values put forward for the WEA were: creating equality and opportunity and challenging discrimination, a belief in people, communities and their potential to change through education, placing the learner at the centre of everything we do.

In 1910 the national president of WEA (UK) was invited by the Student Christian Movement of Australia to undertake a lecture tour of Australia where he gave several public lectures on 'Education and Democracy'. By 1913 Australia had three universities in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide which all ran university extension courses. The University of Melbourne invited Albert and Frances Mansbridge to visit Australia in order to set up WEAs in each state. On this visit Albert gave over 100 speeches while Frances gave 30 talks mainly to gatherings of women at universities and Trade Halls.

In NSW the first meeting was held on 3 November at the Sydney Trades Hall building. It was attended by representatives from churches, the Co-operative Movement, Trade Unions and the University of Sydney's Extension Service. Mansbridge spoke of cultivating powers of appreciation and enjoyment, and in developing critical judgment and in training for creative leadership rather than through education with utilitarian, practical or material theory which was designed to lead to 'something useful', or vocational goals. WEA was to be non-sectarian, democratic and non-party political.

The ongoing success of WEA was mainly due to the presence of two individuals in the audience, Peter Board, the NSW Director General of Education and David Stewart, a delegate from the State Labor Council. Peter Board had in 1911 set up

Evening Continuation Schools in NSW to provide continuity of education between primary school and employment. David Stewart was a Scottish immigrant carpenter who arrived in Sydney in 1910. His brother had been a WEA supporter at Oxford Summer Schools and had suggested to Mansbridge that David would be a great supporter. Indeed he was as he became the first General Secretary of the Sydney Branch of the WEA, a position he held for 41 years, initially in an honorary capacity. On 7 November, four days after the Sydney meeting, Mansbridge addressed a meeting of citizens in Wollongong at the Wollongong School of Arts Hall. At that time Wollongong had a population of 5,000 and the whole area a population of only 25,000.

Although heavily dependent for its ideas and modeled on the UK, Australia had a more open and democratic society with a labour movement already in power in some states and challenging for power in others. WEA (NSW) was established and 28 unions supported the initial foundation. The first classes, 1914, were a joint venture between the University of Sydney and WEA. The first lecture was held in Wollongong in 1914, 100 years ago. WEA Centres were also established in Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia. The 28 organisations affiliated with the WEA in New South Wales included the Bricklayers' Union, Railways Workers' Union, Typographical Society, Working Jewellers' Union, Stonemasons' Union, Textile Workers' Union, Cigar Workers' Union and Canister Makers' Union.

1916 was an important year for WEA. There were two Australian referenda on conscription, both were defeated, but as the president of the Central Council of WEA, Meredith Atkinson, had forcefully advocated for conscription, it caused major divisions in the Association. Several Trade Unions withdrew their affiliation with the WEA and in fact the Wollongong Branch of WEA was shut down and it was not until 1919 that the mayor of Wollongong presided at a public meeting to reestablish the Branch. From this point, in Wollongong at least, the students were mainly school teachers, businessmen and their wives. In 1918 WEA was one of the leading organisations campaigning to raise the school leaving age to 15 years.

The State Central Council of the WEA was the policy making body for all NSW Branches, but after 1953 the WEA Branches in Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong were separate operating regions and it was not until 1993 that the branches were incorporated in their own right. In 1954 the Illawarra Regional Council was established replacing the Wollongong District Committee of the WEA. In the 1955 WEA Handbook the Central Council of WEA declared itself to be "Primarily concerned with studies related to social and cultural interests, concerned about the educational needs of the Labour Movement, a voluntary organization committed to democratic governance, independent of government control, primarily a missionary body."

In 1964 WEA (Wollongong) obtained its own premises in Corrimal Street, Wollongong and employed its first full time employee, Dorothy Sefton. In 1985 Wollongong University went into partnership with WEA re adult education and subsidized university staff who wished to offer courses through WEA.

Changes in adult education in 1974 changed the total picture of the adult education offerings in NSW and especially for the WEA. The Board of Adult Education (BAE) was set up

by the Labor government in NSW and funds were allocated for the provision of this sector. At this stage the main providers in NSW were WEA, YMCA, the NSW Arts Council, NSW Evening Colleges and that provided by Agricultural Extension officers. WEA at this stage was still strictly non-vocational, seeking social change in society. In the first year of the BAE, \$145,000 was allocated to WEA for the three branches, Hunter, Sydney and the Illawarra. By 1982, 9% of all enrolments in adult education in NSW were in WEA courses. In 1983 the BAE decided to allocate the WEA government grants to the three branches rather than to the WEA Central Council.

In 1984, Eric Williams was Executive Director of the Illawarra WEA as well as being the Secretary of The State Council of WEA and in 1991 Eric obtained funds from the State Branch to purchase new premises for the WEA Illawarra Regional Council (Swan Street, Wollongong).

Whereas the Sydney Branch had been keeping to the original liberal education formulae for its course offerings, from the late 1970s the Hunter and Illawarra branches had been branching out to what they saw was being sought by the marketplace. Firstly health related courses, then computer classes, cooking, business courses, jewellery making, car maintenance, languages and even courses on how to play Mah Jong and wine tasting.

Financial issues meant that the Sydney Branch of WEA followed the Illawarra and Hunter into the new income generating courses, and in 1983 relations between the University of Sydney and WEA were severed. Still, in 1988, the BAE still considered WEA as "the quality end of the spectrum of adult education." But at the same time cutting their government grant by 50%.

In 1994 WEA became one of the Illawarra's first Registered Training Organisations, RTOs, to offer accredited courses. In 1996 WEA (Illawarra) purchased a centre at Balarang public school to offer courses in the Shellharbour region. During the 1990s WEA (Illawarra) also set up a bookshop business from their Corrimal Street location supplying the local schools (Judy Duncan). In 2000 WEA (Illawarra) purchased 57-59 Auburn Street, the old Ukrainian Club, and the block two doors south was then purchased. This was officially opened in 2001. The block between the two was then eventually purchased and renovated by a government 'work for the dole' program. In the early 2000s WEA (Illawarra) introduced on-line learning and in 2004 English language courses for Adult Migrants was initiated, being used as a model for best practice for Australia.

In 2011 an independent school, ALESCO Learning Centre was established at the Auburn Street location. The school caters for high school children with barriers. In 2013 there were 47 students enrolled from year 7 to year 10, and ten of the students graduated from year 10. Year 11 was introduced in 2014. ALESCO works closely with Illawarra organisations such as Wollongong Youth Centre, Juvenile Justice, Essential Employment and Training, Headspace Wollongong (Student health and Wellbeing), Southern Youth and Family Services, local high schools where pathways back to mainstream education are encouraged.

At present WEA runs courses at its Wollongong Centre, Balarang and Thirroul. It ran courses in Bowral in 2011 and 2012 but abandoned these in 2012. In 2013 62% of students were female and 38% male.