



NEWS FROM NOWHERE

Glorious Defeats

Tom Zubrycki's film *Amongst Equals* has proved a controversial production, and for all the wrong reasons. Zubrycki has every reason to be dissatisfied with the antics of the ACTU. It is not an anti-union film, although one suspects that no one at the ACTU has sufficient perspective, let alone skill, in reading film to gauge this. They have behaved abominably in this incident.

Zubrycki excels as a filmmaker in gathering and editing together first-hand testimony from participants in events. The stories told by veteran unionists about the depression or improving conditions for railway-catering workers are exemplary bits of documentary film with a positive message on trade unionism.

The weakness, and it is a serious one, is the complete lack of analysis offered in the film of the union movement's relationship to the changing political and economic environment, not just in Australia, but concerning Australia's insertion into the world economy. One does not expect a film to substitute for a thesis, but one should expect more from a film of this nature than an exercise in labour history. The discourse of labour history, with its fetish for isolated incidents,

chronicled in sequence, has blinkered the vision of this film.

Labour history can offer only a partial perspective on the present political economic conjuncture. Lacking a grasp on the politics of the present, the film flounders in trying to trace a line through the past. In this respect the film is more, not less, scholastic than it need be.

There is practically nothing in the film on the present economic crisis—the one we have been suffering for the last couple of decades. There is no analysis of the response of the trade union movement to changing conditions in this period, or even an acknowledgment of the need to change many old practices in industry and in the trade union movement. The history of trade unions is the history of the working class. The history of the working class is the history of capitalism. In failing to grasp these connections fully, Zubrycki has made a conservative film, not one which poses a radical challenge to the leadership of the trade union movement. One suspects that the ACTU's annoyance with it stems not from its biting criticisms but from its irrelevance to present issues.

Take, for example, the section on the Robe River dispute. This is presented ambiguously as a 'defeat' for the unions. But one cannot isolate the unions from the class which composes it or the economic relations which define both class and union. If Robe River was a setback for the unions, was it really a victory for capital? Did productivity rise or fall after Peko-Wallsend went in with the big stick? It fell. Robe River might have been a defeat for the unions, but the working class can still resist, silently, from within the capital relation. If anything, Robe River shows why the flexible, tactical bargaining approach to work practice reform might be preferable for the unions, workers and for some sections of capital. At other mines in the region where a review of work practices took place as a joint exercise involving the workers, the unions and management, it was possible to increase productivity, maintain union authority and reform work practices. Such an approach is vital in

many areas for the survival of workers, unions and capital alike. All three have to see their situation in international perspective now. The economic conditions which reigned historically from Federation to the Whitlam era are gone.

In the good old days, high export earnings from commodities financed our imports. Manufacturing developed behind tariff barriers as a substitute for imports. Wages were indexed through the arbitration system to a cost of living based on local consumer goods costs, regardless of world prices. When a local price rise led to a wage rise through arbitration, tariffs could be hitched also to protect the system from global price competition. This system was designed, following the depression of the last century to insulate us from global price movements. As such it worked reasonably well. It was no match for the debacle of the 20s and 30s depression which pulled the rug out from under our commodity export prices. Nor is it any help now that those prices are in long-term decline. This is the crisis which unions, workers, capital, the nation as a whole has to confront. This is the crisis on which *Amongst Equals* is curiously silent. Regardless of whether one supports the Accord, *Australia Reconstructs*, Simon Crean or none of the above, one cannot dodge these issues without running the risk of irrelevance.

Zubrycki ran that risk and made an irrelevant film. His eye is too firmly fixed on history. Not only on the history of the movement but on the place his own film might have for posterity, as a lasting document of labour history. This is why the film refuses to discuss the present crisis, and it is a pity that Zubrycki has not made a committed film in the sense of committing itself to helping people grasp the present crisis of trade unionism, which is a crisis for the working class itself as well as for capital. We need a film which deals with these issues now. Not a scholarly exercise which speaks to and for posterity. That will be cold comfort if the unions fail in the present crisis.

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