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Obituary: Ted Roach (1909–1997)

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Abstract

Militant waterfront leader, Ted Roach, died in Sydney last week aged 88. Roach was an active participant in one of the most colourful periods of trade union history in this country. Early in his working life Roach displayed a fierce determination to defend the rights of workers in the face of employer attempts to undermine conditions. It was a characteristic that remained with him throughout his life.

—OBITUARIES—

Ted Roach (1909–1997)

Militant waterfront leader, Ted Roach, died in Sydney last week aged 88. Roach was an active participant in one of the most colourful periods of trade union history in this country. Early in his working life Roach displayed a fierce determination to defend the rights of workers in the face of employer attempts to undermine conditions. It was a characteristic that remained with him throughout his life.

Edward Charles Roach was born in Coledale in 1909 and spent his youth on the Newcastle coalfields. His early political education was imparted by his father, a left-wing miner, who was victimised during the General Strike of 1917. His father supplemented the family income with a couple of fruit carts but Ted didn't see this as his future. In 1928, on the eve of the Depression, he decided to head north in search of work. Like many prominent trade union leaders who emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, Roach honed his organisational and leadership skills amongst the unemployed as they struggled to find work and protect meagre working conditions which were under constant attack during the Depression.

The first public speech Ted Roach made was from the police station steps in Mackay at the height of the Depression. On that occasion Roach, who was involved in a work for the dole scheme, managed to persuade fellow workers to refuse to accept their daily wage of fourteen shillings which was being docked four pence relief tax. After a brief campaign involving some minor sabotage the proper rate of pay was soon restored. This incident provides a good insight into the activist who would later organise and lead the Dalfram dispute and shortly after became Assistant General Secretary of the Waterside Workers Federation, a position he held from 1942-1967.

Between 1928 and 1931, Roach travelled extensively throughout northern NSW and Queensland searching for work and playing an active role in organising the unemployed. He was often sacked for being, "a bit of a red" but he continued to "sow

the seeds of unemployed organisation". He joined the Communist Party in Mackay in 1931 and became secretary of the local branch of the Unemployed Workers' Movement.

Towards the end of 1931 Roach returned to Newcastle where he became a member of the section committee of the Communist Party, and one of three on the secretariat of the Communist Party. The responsibility designated to Roach was the building of trade union organisation in the Newcastle and coalfields area. In addition Roach became district secretary of both the UWM and the Militant Minority Movement, a communist front organisation which was designed to appeal to militant trade unionists and to spread communist ideas amongst Australian workers. Roach was able to establish MMM group of four within Lysaghts and in 1934 an historic strike was staged inside this organisation. Roach was also responsible for restoring May Day celebrations in Newcastle and held the position of secretary of the May Day Committee from 1931-1934.

In April 1934 Roach was admitted into the Newcastle branch of the WWF and in 1936, along with his brother Matt, who was also a member of the Communist Party, he transferred to the South Coast branch as it was then known. The two brothers camped in Stuart Park and presented their credentials to the secretary of the local branch. In its early years the South Coast branch of the WWF was characterised by its weakness, due mainly to the domination of the union by members of prominent waterfront families. Several members of these families formed the basis of the union's leadership, while others acted as representatives for shipping companies.

Ted Roach and other militant transferees were critical of the "bull system" and the appalling working conditions that existed at Port Kembla. Wharfies were required to supply their own working gear and tools. No overalls or gloves were supplied and throughout the 1930s the normal period of engagement for wharfies at Port Kembla was for a period of 24 hours duration, commonly referred to as "dark-uns". There was no place to have meals; no washing facilities and men were required to work in the rain with just a sack across their shoulders. The only thing the employers supplied was a candle to work by.

Immediately Ted Roach and his supporters set out to campaign on the job for an overall improvement in working conditions and an end to the inequalities that existed on the waterfront. The year 1937 developed into a year of struggle as militant wharfies led by Roach mounted campaigns to improve working conditions. As a result of his militant activities Roach was often victimised and left standing at the pick-up. It was an

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attempt to starve him out of the port.

At the branch elections held in March 1938, Ted Roach successfully contested the position of branch secretary. In the weeks prior to the elections the militants within the branch issued a programme of their policies shaped around the needs of the branch membership. The programme included the implementation of rosters for all work being done by Federation members, a roster for the casual workers, improved safety conditions, smaller lead, smaller pig iron, and smaller tubs to load it in, no working in the rain and the supply by the employer of smaller shovels.

The final years of the 1930s witnessed the emergence of the South Coast branch as the most militant and progressive branch of the WWF. Under Roach's leadership which combined forward thinking policy with strict union discipline, the branch was able to pioneer the first union controlled roster system in the Federation. This spelt the end of the "bull system" and paved the way for equality of employment. With the fear of victimisation overcome, members were able to campaign openly and vigorously for improved working conditions. Nowhere was the strength of unity in the branch more evident than in November 1938, when Port Kembla wharfies led by Roach, refused to load a ship called the "Dalfram" with a cargo of pig iron destined for Japan.

The Dalfram dispute has come to be regarded as one of the most important disputes in Australian industrial history. It occurred at the end of the Depression decade, yet it was not a dispute about wages or working conditions. It was a political strike. The Government's policy of allowing sales of pig iron to a potentially hostile nation on the eve of WWII, was given full exposure and the wharfies' stand received widespread public support. A high degree of union solidarity was established amongst trade unionists in the Illawarra and this enabled the South Coast branch to successfully resist the introduction of the Transport Workers Act which had been used to bust unions and to punish workers for over a decade. As Roach stated, "Penal legislation is only as strong as resistance to it is weak".

The participation of Attorney General Menzies in the dispute marked the first of many confrontations he was to have with the labour movement. From the "Dalfram" dispute he emerged as Pig-Iron Bob, a nickname which was to haunt him for the rest of his life.

Through his work with the South Coast branch Ted Roach became well known for his militant trade union activity. In 1942 when the WWF created a new position of Assistant General Secretary-Organiser, Roach was able to win the position, defeating

well-established identities such as A. Findlay, President of the Sydney branch, and G. Mullins, Secretary of the Sydney branch. This was only eight years after Roach had commenced work on the wharves.

One of the first tasks assigned to Roach in his new role was to extend rosters throughout the Federation, based on his experiences at Port Kembla. Roach also played a leading role in absorbing back into the Federation the breakaway Permanent and Casual Wharf Labourers Union which was established during the 1917 strike and extended to many other ports of the Federation after the disastrous 1928 dispute on the waterfront. The process was not without its bitterness but it was essential if the Federation was to become a unified fighting organisation.

Roach was again involved in a major political struggle at the end of WWII when Indonesian seamen walked off ships in Australia in support of Indonesian independence from Dutch colonial rule. The WWF announced a black ban on Dutch ships and the Federal Council of the Federation gave Roach control of the dispute which was finally resolved in December 1949 when the Dutch government granted full independence to Indonesia.

As a result of his militant trade union activity Roach spent time in prison on two occasions. In 1949 at the time of the Miner's strike, Roach was found to be in contempt of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration when he withdrew union funds to pay strike pay to three Federation branches (including Port Kembla) which had taken action in support of the miners. Roach refused to hand over the strike money. When he attempted to show cause as to why he shouldn't be sentenced he was interrupted by Justice Foster who stated, "It is the law!" Roach replied, "Yes your Honour, it is the law to starve the miner's wives and their kids." Along with Jim Healy, Roach spent six weeks in prison. In 1951, during the Basic Wage Case, Roach was again found to be in contempt. This time he spent 9 months and 18 days in isolation in Long Bay.

Throughout his life Ted Roach fought to improve the working conditions of those who laboured on the waterfront. His ability to successfully organise campaigns which were firmly based on progressive policies earned him widespread respect amongst wharfies and the wider trade union movement. He had a strong sense of social justice and a firm belief that in the course of the struggle to improve wages and conditions workers would become active in the wider issues concerning society.

When interviewed in 1980 Walter Bailey, who worked on the Port Kembla wharves from 1926-1967, had this to say about Ted Roach:

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“Ted Roach was a man of unusual quality. He was the type of individual who had a fighting spirit; somehow a flame that never died. A flame that never burnt out. His one aim was to see the waterfront a much better place to work. And he achieved just that.”

Garry Griffith
