
This collection of essays on various aspects of the trade unions is most timely, given that many in the radical and industrial movement are embarking on the further development of a forward-looking strategy. It presents to the reader discussion on a wide range of subjects including the relationship of the trade unions to the ALP, a number of views and descriptions of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, the media's manipulation of the trade union image — and other aspects such as the ACTU, trade union democracy, shop-floor activity, the union activity of women and so on.

The writers are many and varied and range from Sir Richard Kirby, with his scarcely-concealed dislike for the Fraser government's attempts to coerce the court, to a fine socio-political treatment of the law and industrial conflict by Breen Creighton of Melbourne University. They manage to cover a wide range of trade union territory.

Looking at the book in more detail, Edward Davis argues in the chapter "Trade Unions and the Media" that for a great variety of reasons, not just sheer monopolistic ownership and class bias, the press has been able to present a very bad public image of the industrial movement in general.

Kathryn Cole, in "Unions and the Labor Party" does a good job in tracing the relationship between the unions and the ALP and discusses the dichotomy between the political and industrial wings. She also looks at the Whitlam era and includes a very good treatment of the developing white collar and services sections. She views them as having limited connections with the Labor Party or politics. Her account of the lack of trade union ideology inside the ALP is interesting and she concludes that the unions at federal level don't really achieve full advantage from their actual input into the party.

Don Rawson's treatment of the ACTU's history and future prospects is also useful. Among many aspects, he points out that the apparent ALP support for the ACTU, in terms of those who belong to Labor Party affiliated unions, has decreased from the peak of 1969. This decrease in support, he believes, leaves many question marks for the future. Rawson also asks if the activities of the ACTU have outgrown its actual strength, but goes on to trace the significance of its recent growth. Rawson believes that the ACTU has a more important role to play relative to non-Labor governments and this raises some interesting questions.

Perhaps one of his most interesting observations is the growth of militancy in various non-manual sections of the workforce, together with a breakdown in traditional voting patterns. This has led to a very different ball-game than that recognised or understood by old-style Labor supporters of the 1940s, '50s and the '60s.

By researching varying membership sizes, leadership methods and political influences, Edward Davis, in "Trade Union Democracy", has a look at union structures. He generally concludes that there isn't a correlation, necessarily, between the size of a union and its internal democracy, one way or another. He suggests that considerable care and thought is required in viewing the relation between internal union organisation and the way the rank and file can influence decision-making. His research gives a limited insight into this area; readers will have to add their own views and experiences to his conclusions.

Industrial legislation

Of a number of treatments of the question of industrial laws and their enforcement on the trade unions, I was impressed, as mentioned earlier, with the chapter by Breen Creighton on "Law and the Control of Industrial Conflict". This chapter gives a good class-related analysis of the framing of industrial legislation and goes on to uncover how unworkable the law can be if the union or unions and their members decide that they will deliberately flout the law, or operate in such a way as to render it inoperative. He also looks at many of the penal provisions of the Arbitration Acts and sets them out so the reader can learn, in some detail, their actual meaning and application.

Richard Mitchell and Stuart Rosewarne set out to expose the basic contradictions that lie at the bottom of the Liberal-National Country Parties denials of class antagonism in their union policies,
and their constant statements that usually place all blame for disputes on trade union action. This is well discussed in the context of the moves by the Fraser government to ostensibly protect the “rights of the individual” (in terms of union members) over and above the rights of the group. The authors agree that there are problems but, basically, they see these moves are being made to hamper the democratic activities of the rank and file and associate the union movement with an aura of autocracy and bullying.

The chapter on “Shop Stewards, a Western Australian Study” is particularly interesting because a number of contradictions in the nature of the steward’s role are uncovered. To me it reveals how stewards view themselves principally as leaders and how little trade union organisation has come to grips with further democratising rank-and-file struggle. In other words, energy is channelled (and restricted) into the “big man theory”, ie Bob Hawke, the union hot-shot. Little attention is given to the rank and file who are not trusted to develop their shop-floor organisation. The article demonstrates that workers are protected by the structure from making mistakes, and all their tactics are basically decided centrally. Consequently, they miss out on political lessons which are useful only for individuals such as the embryonic union official in the shape of a shop steward. This is one conclusion I draw from this study; perhaps other readers will get a totally different impression?

Edna Ryan and Helen Prendergast generally paint a not-too-optimistic picture in “Unions are for Women Too” although, at some levels, others could say that Ryan and Prendergast have placed too much emphasis on “window dressing” exercises by unions. There remains a tremendously long hard road to hoe for women to gain their rightful place in the unions.


The first edition of this book was published in 1976. It was, and has remained, the most comprehensive, accurate, balanced and clearly written introduction in English to the physical background to the consideration of energy problems.

It deals with energy flows in the biosphere and in human society, the principles of thermodynamics and energy resources. It gives brief accounts of all the many important energy extraction and conversion processes.

This new edition retains all that, with some appropriate updating and the excision of a few short sections which have been overtaken by events. It also eliminates the special emphasis which was previously given to the British situation. (Even in the first edition this emphasis was by no means excessive compared with the average American book purporting to give a world perspective.)

In its concluding chapters, the book concentrates on the need to plan for a transition to relatively scarce, relatively costly energy sources. It emphasises the (not original) point that until recently the historical trend of the energy industry has been from costly and complex energy sources to cheap and simple ones. All future trends must be in the opposite direction.

On the whole it is rather gloomy about the future, expressing particular concern about the prospects for the ordinary people in underdeveloped countries. Nor are the authors very hopeful about the potential of solar and other renewable energy sources over the next twenty or so years (though they are more optimistic about energy conservation). They are sharply critical of both the optimistic vision of Lovins and the mindless growth-for-ever perspective of his opponents.

What this book does not do is deal with any of the important economic issues relating to energy, with the exception of the relationship between energy and GNP, which is well dealt with. Nor does it explicitly address political issues, though the authors’ general sympathies can be read clearly enough between the lines (they are for the poor and weak and against the rich and powerful). This is not meant as criticism; the authors set out to deal with a particular set of topics and do so very well at convenient length.

This does not mean that people whose prime interest is the politics of energy should not bother with this book. On the contrary, if you do not already have it, go out and buy it, because it is the best compendium of the background factual information needed to make a sensible contribution to the energy policy debate. However, if you already have a first edition, I doubt if the improvements in this new edition, welcome as they are, make it worth buying to replace your old copy.