Fifty years of the ACTU

By some standards the Australian trade union movement has been an outstanding success. Although it has sometimes been sharply divided ideologically, it has achieved a wide coverage of the workforce and an almost complete structural unity. In the last decade major new affiliations of white-collar and government employees have highlighted this growing organisational strength. In the same period financing has dramatically improved, and professionalism and sophistication have grown. The ACTU now is not so disadvantaged in the fairly unequal battle with government and employers as it once was. And partly as a cause, partly as a consequence, many of the ACTU's affiliates have grown stronger and more effective.

Bald figures underline this story of recent rapid development and greater cohesion. From 1972 to 1975 the proportion of trade unionists in the employed workforce rose from 53 percent to a relatively high 58 percent — a faster rate of growth than during World War II. Between 1971 and 1979 (before the CAGEO affiliation) the membership of ACTU-affiliated unions grew by over half a million, and in 1979 (perhaps the most significant figure) over 72 percent of all trade unionists were in ACTU-affiliated unions (62 percent in 1971).

Quantitatively and organisationally, this is a success story. However, as Jim Hagan notices, apart from the printing and metal industry's struggle with the relatively low status of its members in the community, the ACTU continues to be disadvantaged in the battle with government and employers. A path is blazed for the future, but no problem is completely solved.
workers' amalgamations in the 1960s and 1970s (not really industrial unionism anyway and to which the ACTU contributed little) the ACTU has fallen far short of the grand objectives of its founders: the socialisation of industry and the transformation of the trade union movement from craft to industrial unionism.

The lack of a solid history of the Australian labor movement constitutes a great gap in the intellectual wherewithal of the political left in Australia. (There are a number of excellent partial studies.) And until somebody comes up with something more comprehensive and complete, Hagan's *The History of the ACTU* may, by default, serve the purpose. Not that Hagan has set his sights low. His book is an ambitious undertaking and in many respects a major achievement, even if it doesn't always live up to its basic conception and good beginning.

Hagan tries to ensure that the reader sees the ACTU in the round. Although, as he readily acknowledges in his preface, the book fails to deal adequately with the "other" history, the one from below in the factories, mines, offices, banks and schools, with the actual class struggle and the "ebb and flow" of working-class consciousness, it is nevertheless not a narrow institutional history. In fact, it is almost five distinct books (which may be a source of weakness with some unwarranted repetition and a little loss of direction): the ACTU and the unions; the ACTU and the government; the ACTU and the employers; the ACTU and the economy; and the ACTU and the arbitration system. And running through it, trying to bind it all together, not always with uniform success, is a major theme: the ACTU as an historic compromise between labourism and revolutionary industrialism.

The revolutionary syndicalism of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), the One Big Unionism of the revolutionary industrialists and the revolutionary unionism of the communists, all had a measure of common ground which can perhaps best be referred to as revolutionary industrialism—a feeling (as much as a doctrine) that social revolution depends almost solely on industrial working class organisation and power.

**Australian labourism**

In Hagan's definition of *Australian* labourism there are five features: a strong trade union movement; a parliamentary Labor Party based on the trade unions; a protective tariff policy to develop Australian industry and provide jobs at *fair* wages; a White Australia policy based on ideas of ethnic superiority and "purity"; and a system of compulsory industrial arbitration to determine fair wages and working conditions.

Hagan stays with this definition of labourism throughout, without real acknowledgment of other important points and the significance of the particular mix that applies at any specific moment. This rigidity leads to over-simplification of the dichotomy between labourists and revolutionaries and reduces the explanation to too black-and-white a picture.

Hagan manages, quite contrary to the facts, to leave out of his definition a socialist strand whereas socialism has always been an element of labourism—albeit of fluctuating and uncertain proportions. And, of course, in 1921, six years before the formation of the ACTU, at the behest of the All-Australian Trade Union Congress of that year, this strand became quite explicit.

Social catholicism and Irish ethnicity is another, almost as important, omitted strand. Thus, B.A. Santamaria's notorious "Movement" appears in Hagan, almost *deus ex machina* whereas it sprang from a conservative attempt to co-opt this particular strand for rightwing purposes. Some might argue that male sexism is an equally important omission.

Moreover, Hagan doesn't allow for the significant weakening of white Australian chauvinism over the last fifteen years. Nor does he give sufficient weight to the vigorous attack on maleism in approximately the same period although he doesn't ignore completely the ACTU's development of a women's
policy. There is perhaps an even more serious failure: an almost complete neglect of the effects of non-English speaking migration, especially since World War II, the consequent segmentation of the workforce, different traditions towards work and workers' organisations and the relative lack of concern about ethnicity in the trade unions and the ACTU.

The origins of the ACTU

Hagan's detailed and coherent account of the immediate circumstances leading to the formation of the ACTU shows quite clearly that, as with so much else subsequently, the initiative lay with the revolutionaries. Briefly, there were three main impulses at work leading to the establishment of a national trade union centre: first, the steady growth of a national consciousness and the need for stronger organisation across state borders; secondly, a deep concern about the problem of unco-ordinated direct action and the possible threat that it constituted to the viability of trade union organisation; and, thirdly, the anti-labourist, anti-political belief of a growing number of class-conscious workers that only a strong, independent industrial organisation could bring about a successful revolution.

Hagan shows that the agreement to form the ACTU was a principled compromise between revolutionary industrialism and labourism. It was, in effect, an aspect of what had become known as the workers' united front. The ACTU was to be the organised trade union embodiment of the united front of different sections of the working class. The principal architects of the strategy and therefore founders of the ACTU were E.J. Holloway, the secretary of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council, C. Crofts, secretary of the Federated Gas Employees' Union, and a key figure in the Commonwealth Council of Federal Unions (CCFU), and J.S. (Jock) Garden, secretary of the NSW Labor Council. But it should be said, and Hagan's account brings this out clearly, that the ultimate organiser, strategist and key-note speaker at the founding congress was that man-for-all-seasons, Jock Garden.

This is not the place to try to come to grips with the complexities, motivations and paradoxes of Garden's politics and character. His enemies and detractors from both right and left have so muddied the waters that there is no easy way to establish the essential truth about him. But his common image as a demagogue or mere opportunist and crook will not stand up to careful research and analysis. He was as capable of serious error as the next person, and he certainly wasn't an encyclopaedic marxist. Yet he grasped and at times brilliantly applied to Australian conditions some of the major ideas and main theoretical discoveries of international communism. Perhaps the greatest paradox about him was that in the middle of him moving to organise the ACTU he was expelled from the Communist Party for failing to publicly acknowledge his membership of an organisation (the CPA) of which he had been one of the principal and most public founders.

J.S. Garden's role

Garden realised that after the failure of the One Big Union (OBU), of which of course he had been one of the key figures too, the only practical approach to launching a continuing national trade union organisation was to base it on the central trade union councils which had a long history of increasing stability, strength and acceptance. After the effective end, in 1923, of attempts to launch the OBU and the formation of the largely Victorian-based Commonwealth Council of Federal Unions, Garden worked remarkably skilfully to head off the CCFU influence and bring about an historic compromise – an Australian trade union council.

Garden had the general backing of the CPA's mass influence and policy initiatives through the NSW Labor Council's various Trades Groups, but it seems likely that to some extent friction developed between Garden and the party leadership over the ACTU. In any case the detailed strategy and organisational arrangements could have only
been carried through by somebody of Garden’s political perspective acting through his public, official position.

On this point Hagan says:

Why was it that the constitution of the ACTU won endorsement so easily ....? Part of the answer seems to lie in what Garden had recognised: that building the new organisation on the basis of the Trades and Labour Councils would allay the worst fears of the craft unions .... But another important part of it lies in the combination of that structure with .... government by a biennial congress, a body which the larger industrial unions were better able to influence. Thus the structure was a compromise .... whether they believed in bringing the revolution out of big unions, whether they believed in working for socialism by established labourist methods, or whether they merely believed in concentrating on winning a maximum advantage from an existing capitalist system. (p.83)

The communists and the ACTU

The communists backed the ACTU from the beginning. Except for the period in the early 1930s when the ACTU leaders along with other union and ALP leaders, including many of the left, were stigmatised as social fascists, and a leading CPA trade union figure moved that the NSW Labor Council disaffiliate from the ACTU, this backing has continued. Although the communists differed theoretically from their predecessors, say, in the IWW, fundamentally the communist strategy for revolution, especially in Australia, depended on establishing strong workers’ industrial organisations.

Communists have differed over how much weight should be given to direct influence over the established union structures, in particular the significance of holding high union office, but there is no doubt that where and when communist workers held senior official positions they were able to influence ACTU policy debates and decisions. When backed by an active rank and file and helped by propitious circumstances, they assisted large groups of workers (miners, metalworkers, seamen, etc.) and the class as a whole, to improve their lot very materially by shortening the weekly hours of work, increasing pay rates and improving working conditions, etc.

Where the communists adequately recognised the role of the ACTU, such as in the 1930s after 1935, they were successful. At any particular time the ACTU embodied the actual level of trade union unity, and ACTU sympathy and support constituted a crucial element in any contemplated strategy or campaign. Hagan beautifully illustrates this point with the approach of the communists in the Miners’ Federation before and after World War II.

The two situations were not equal in all other respects, but the fact that the post-war situation was politically more difficult — a Labor government, a more clearly stalinist, and also anti-communist, international and domestic atmosphere, etc — made it even more imperative that an industrial strategy based on a broad trade union unity followed. However, whereas in the period 1937-40 the Miners’ Federation took great pains to get
the ACTU onside with consequent solid gains, in 1949 the Miners’ Federation went it alone except for the support of the other leading militant unions. Thus the 1949 Coal Strike became a head-on contest between revolutionary industrialism and labourism. The CPA political leadership implicitly estimated there would be a weakening of reformist labourism, both industrially and politically, and in some ill-defined way such industrial struggles would lead to a socialist revolution.

In the more than thirty years since the failure of the 1949 Coal Strike some of the misconceptions about a revolutionary strategy have been straightened out, but there has been a never-ending debate about industrial policy and tactics. A vigorous industrialism boiled up again in 1969 over the imprisonment of the leading militant official Clarrie O’Shea. It continued to make substantial headway until 1974.

The trade union movement has been changing. In the 1960s and '70s we witnessed considerable fragmentation of the communist movement. The rise of new left forces — often left labourist and associated with new and growing technical and sub-professional sections of the workforce — has further complicated the picture. Such diversity tends to confound simple scenarios about a strategy for radical and fundamental social change. Even tactical left unity is something that sometimes defies the wit of today's revolutionary industrialists.

**Revolutionary industrialism**

The heyday of revolutionary industrialism in Australia occurred between 1920 and 1950. One of its successes was the compromise that brought the ACTU into existence. It made an important contribution to strengthening individual trade unions, to building a stronger movement and raising the Australian standard of living. For a period in the late 1950s and early 1960s, communists such as Alec Macdonald, Tom Wright, Jim Healy and Gerry Dawson made significant contributions to the work of the ACTU executive. But in the last thirty years the revolutionary push has faltered — enough to give some credence to Hagan’s conclusion that in the ACTU labourism has won. How far this is a result of unpropitious circumstances or deliberate design is hard to say. To some extent since the 1970s it has probably been due to a weakening of resolve and theoretical uncertainty about trade unions as such opposed to grassroots industrial ideas and organisation.

If revolutionary industrialism in the ACTU ultimately failed, there may be a case for arguing that the original compromise was wrong, that revolutionaries would have been better served if they had remained organisationally separate in the industrial sphere from labourism just as many of them came to keep themselves political separate. They then would have avoided unpalatable compromises and would have advanced revolutionary objectives, such as industrial unionism, without the hesitations and preoccupation with every-day struggles that have so often characterised militant trade union policies. But the answer is, surely, no. In this matter of principle they have largely been correct even if on the purely industrial level they haven’t always been as vigorous in promoting general class issues as they might have been.

But perhaps the case against the different variants of the basic idea of “Bringing the revolution out of big unions” is that they failed in the contest with labourism, not in the sense of a pragmatic deal, which often happened, but in the sense of realising what they were up against. The revolutionaries followed Marx, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and Mao Zedong. But they lacked sufficient grasp of a political culture firmly rooted in Australian realities. International communism contributed much to working-class consciousness, but it failed to address adequately the central issues of the indigenous political culture. Hence, frontal-assault ideology predominated in thinking about social change. The intricacies of positional political warfare defeated nearly all those who attempted to understand how
ruling -class strength could be effectively challenged.

The politics and dominant culture of the parliamentary state were entrenched and could not be overborne by direct attack. The existence of the Labor Party and the possibility of the occasional reality of a Labor government provided sufficient opportunity for the expression of most of the political interests of the working class. The general level of political class consciousness did not pose anything more daring than a reformed parliamentary government.

As employers' interests were challenged and capitalist governments responded, using the parliamentary state against the working class, the ALP took up the issues that the unions expressed through the ACTU. The Labor Party counter-attacked with new constitutional policies to reform and democratise the state, thus satisfying the main political aspirations of the majority of trade unionists. If this well-tried formula for change seemed to come under direct challenge, as in 1949, not surprisingly most trade unionists (and necessarily the ACTU) resisted the challenge. So the revolutionaries quickly found themselves outside the mainstream of the class, dramatically at odds with the majority of the class and unable to influence effectively enough the development of its essential character.

Compulsory arbitration

Discussion of compulsory industrial arbitration and conciliation is a major part of The History of the ACTU. Rightly, Hagan features the special, almost unique nature — only New Zealand has a basically similar way of dealing with industrial disputes — of Australia's industrial relations system. Nevertheless, it is difficult to be sure just what Hagan's view of industrial arbitration is. His account is mainly descriptive, and while it is fairly even-handed between labourist views and a revolutionary critique there is too little overall analysis. By very largely dividing the discussion on principles (the chapters on government) from the practice of conciliation and arbitration (the chapters on the court/commission), Hagan sets up an additional obstacle to a full appreciation of the role of a system of legal enforcement in Australian industrial relations.

Doctrinally, revolutionaries attacked any reliance on compulsory arbitration, and sometimes advocated withdrawal. Although some unions especially in the 1910s and '20s fought hard against acknowledging the court's power (the seamen in 1918-19 and 1935-36, engineering workers in 1927, waterside workers in 1928 and timber-workers in 1929), by the mid-1930s, the miners and ironworkers under communist influence were accepting the court's imprimatur on whatever portion of their claims they could secure by direct negotiations and industrial action.

As Jack Hutson, then an AEU (Amalgamated Engineering Union) research officer, wrote in 1966:

The main question therefore is not so much whether the arbitration system should be abandoned or not, but to what extent it should be used. Experience has shown that the best results are obtained by making the minimum use of it, and as far as possible on our terms and not on those of the system.1

Paradoxically, compulsory industrial arbitration represented an extension of the role of the liberal-democratic state into industrial relations — what Justice Higgins, the second president of the court, called "a new province of law and order". Higgins strongly upheld the liberal theory of the rule of law and he argued that it could be properly applied to industrial relations and the resolution of industrial disputes. Despite the initial wariness of a substantial proportion of trade unionists, due to what seemed the reasonable practice of Higgins' court, the majority of trade unionists came to accept this view. But a significant minority, especially in the period 1919-21, became increasingly disillusioned. Starting in 1921 the Hughes and Bruce governments steadily eroded what independent capacity the court appeared to have, and the arbitration system became
steadily more coercive, both in principle and practice. As this process unfolded, while not changing fundamentally, the mood of the unions and the ACTU became progressively more and more adamantly reformist; they pressed for radical reconstruction of the system.

Since 1930, the ACTU has tried to get Labor governments to bring about reforms in the direction of a conciliatory, non-coercive system, but it has had minimal success. In fact, the Chifley government in 1947, by raising the court to the status of a court of superior record gave it the sort of judicial authority necessary to punish offenders for contempt of its orders, thus opening the way to an increased use of the generality of the Act's penal clauses by subsequent conservative governments. At other times, such as in 1930, an anti-Labor majority in the Senate has blocked the more conspicuous amendments that were intended to repeal the penal provisions of the Act.

Penal powers and the state

The long campaign against the so-called penal clauses in the 1960s reached its climax in 1969 with the jailing of Clarrie O'Shea for contempt, and a national protest stoppage. The Gorton and McMahon governments had to respond by modifying the force of certain of the punitive sections of the Act. In 1973, as in 1930, Senate obstruction undid Labor's amending bill's reforms. The majority of the ACTU's submissions proposed total or partial abolition of penalties, but in order to get the bill through the Senate the Labor government redrafted it leaving the penal clauses intact. The conservative Senate majority then insisted on thirty further hostile amendments.

What follows from a study of compulsory arbitration in Australian industrial relations is that while the industrial arbitration system may be an area of class contest, it is the coercive aspect of the modern parliamentary state rather than the state as alienated social power (settling disputes), that is the stronger aspect. The system cramps the workers' struggle into a tight framework. Under the pressure of the policies of its more militant affiliates, the ACTU has moved to loosen the grip of compulsion and heavy penalties for breaches of awards and orders but since the 1920s regardless of the party in government, the ultimate power of the parliamentary state has been used to defeat reforms beneficial to the workers. The plain conclusion is that significant structural reform of the federal arbitration system is highly unlikely without a radical reform of the parliament itself, particularly the role and powers of the Senate.

What has been said here really only scratches the surface of a long and complex book, with its wealth of new research. (Hagan had the help of several able research workers.) Two other very important topics dealt with are, first, the character of employers' organisations and how conservative governments and these organisations relate; and secondly, the circumstances of the late 1960s that played a part in Bob Hawke's succession to the ACTU presidency and his role as president in shaping ACTU policies. They are both of major importance but deserve fuller treatment than is possible now.

What emerges from Jim Hagan's major study of the ACTU is that, at the basic economic level, the ACTU is increasingly the national expression of the existence of a class of wage and salary earners. In its economic aspects at least, but politically too, to some extent, the ACTU expresses the degree and level of class unity, both ideological and structural. In a meaningful sense, without the ACTU the modern working class in Australia would not exist.

The ACTU is a crucial part of the emergence of class and class consciousness in Australia, and those who are engaged in the socialist project in the 1980s ignore the ACTU's history and present reality at their peril.

NOTES