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Illawarra Unity: Editorial 2007

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Abstract
Class and the very concept of class struggle seem almost quaint today. They speak, it is sometimes assumed, to different times. Yet in the battle around WorkChoices, in the struggle for public education and the public sphere generally, class is ever present. Paradoxically, participants on both sides of the culture and history wars have tended to slide past class, elevating instead gender, race and sexuality, on the one hand, or national pride and economic progress, on the other. Terry Irving brings class back to life in his new book The Southern Tree of Liberty: the democratic movement in New South Wales before 1856. The book is no simple historical curiosity. It has much contemporary resonance. Unity is pleased to be able to publish a talk, based on his book, given by Terry to the South Coast branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History earlier this year. The book is also reviewed in this issue.
CREW OF THE "DALFRAM," who support the Port Kembla watersiders' refusal to load pig iron for Japan. A number of them are Indians. With them are Gordon King (left front) and Frank Hylander, a prominent seaman (5th from left at rear).
Class and the very concept of class struggle seem almost quaint today. They speak, it is sometimes assumed, to different times. Yet in the battle around WorkChoices, in the struggle for public education and the public sphere generally, class is ever present. Paradoxically, participants on both sides of the culture and history wars have tended to slide past class, elevating instead gender, race and sexuality, on the one hand, or national pride and economic progress, on the other. Terry Irving brings class back to life in his new book *The Southern Tree of Liberty: the democratic movement in New South Wales before 1856*. The book is no simple historical curiosity. It has much contemporary resonance. *Unity* is pleased to be able to publish a talk, based on his book, given by Terry to the South Coast branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History earlier this year. The book is also reviewed in this issue.

As the trade union movement struggles to preserve its democratic rights, battles from the past can seem distant, yet they do often speak to our times. Rowan Cahill explores the history of the struggle for a 40-hour week and draws some contemporary implications. In a world dominated by political amnesia, the act of remembering is intrinsically radical. Doreen Borrow’s reminiscence about Captains Flat in the Great Depression years is an evocative portrait of community and class and, most particularly, of individual characters.

Tom Uren is one of the heroes of the Australian labour movement. A veteran of the Burma railway and Changi prison, he became a strong anti-war campaigner. A tireless advocate of social justice, Aboriginal rights and the environment, both natural and urban, Tom was also a Federal minister in two Labour Governments. *Unity* is particularly pleased to publish a talk given by Tom recently to the South Coast Branch of Union Aid Abroad (APHEDA). It was a talk that reflected Tom’s commitment and his optimism and his straightforward philosophy of life. In this context, *Unity* notes the sad recent passing of one of Tom’s close comrades and friends Ted Wheelwright. Ted was an inspiration to many, a voice for economic sanity in an increasingly insane world. As a university teacher, he struggled against the dominant economic orthodoxy and was successful...
in helping establish political economy as a separate discipline at the University of Sydney. He was a remarkable public intellectual, a prolific publisher of books and articles and a regular voice on ABC radio. Yet the University of Sydney never saw fit to elevate him to a full Professorship, reserving that title for those who taught neo-classical (or bourgeois) economics. And whoever said that class and class struggle are not present in our university system?

Education and class interweave in significant ways. With regard to schooling, the Federal Liberal Government has systematically shifted funds from the public sector to the private sector. This has represented an assault upon a key democratic foundation stone: compulsory, free and secular schooling. Sadly the Labor Party today refuses to challenge this. Yet Kevin Rudd claims to be a Christian Socialist and rails against what he calls “Howard’s Brutopia”. Anthony Ashbolt explores Rudd’s schooling policy in a short article that continues work he has done on public education for *New Matilda* and *Overland*.

The interview with Tony Kevin in *Unity* last year (vol. 6, no. 1) elicited a great deal of public interest and is featured on Tony’s own website. Tony highlighted the essential inhumanity of government policies towards asylum seekers, particularly as manifested in the tragic SIEV X affair. In this issue, Sue Fleet explores the whole question of mandatory detention from a human rights perspective and argues that Australia has breached its international obligations to asylum seekers.

Part of this issue is devoted to the Port Kembla Dalfram dispute of 1938. Waterside workers took an historic stand against the Japanese war effort in China and refused to load pig-iron onto the Dalfram. Last year the Chinese Ambassador to Australia unveiled a plaque commemorating the event. Photos of the event and images from the time of the struggle itself are featured, along with a tribute by Mairi Petersen. This is followed by a play written by Betty Roland during the dispute. Originally published in *Communist Review*, it is a fine example of agitprop theatre even if it lacks dramatic finesse. *Unity* concludes with three book reviews, including one of Greg Mallory’s book *Uncharted Waters: Social Responsibility in Australian Trade Unions*. The book looks at both the Dalfram dispute and the BLF ‘Green Ban’ struggles of the 1970s. It reminds us of the powerful role unions can play in struggles for social justice, peace and democracy.

*Anthony Ashbolt*