THE LA TROBE VALLEY POWER DISPUTE

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAX OGDEN

The La Trobe Valley maintenance workers' strike in 1977 was probably the biggest dispute for 50 or 60 years in Victoria.

Issues of the dispute are complex and often clouded in people's minds. As a contribution to an analysis of the dispute, Greg Wicks interviewed Max Ogden, A.M.W.S.U. Education Officer and a member of the Victorian State Committee, C.P.A.

BACKGROUND TO THE DISPUTE

March 29, 1977
The Central Gippsland Trades and Labour council served an eleven point log of claims on the S.E.C. The claim included a $40 wage rise.

April 6
The S.E.C. told the Council it would not negotiate on the log of claims.

June 15
A mass meeting of 2300 La Trobe Valley maintenance workers decided to impose overtime and availability bans.

August 5
200 workers walk off at Morwell depot in reaction to provocation from the S.E.C. in standing down two workers for imposing the bans.
August 6
Mass meeting of maintenance workers agree to a call by the shop stewards committee for a week long strike.

August 24
Workers agree to return to work and lift all bans after Commissioner Vosti refused to hear their claim while the workers were on strike.

August 25
Workers go back out after the S.E.C. sought postponement of the Arbitration hearing.

August 29
Workers agree to go back.

August 30
Workers go back out after the S.E.C. said it was only prepared to negotiate the claim in seven days time - provided there were no strikes or bans in the meantime. At four more mass meetings the workers decided overwhelmingly to stay out.

October 13
Workers agree to return after the Full Bench of the Arbitration Commission agreed to consider an “anomalies” case over the weekend.

October 18
Workers out again after the Full Bench gives them a flat zero.

October 25
Workers decided to return to work while Commissioner Mansini undertakes a “work value study”. (The work value case was supposed to analyse the difference in work load resulting from changes in work methods and wage relativities.) Mansini also to consider the setting up of a special award for the power industry.

March 1978
Mansini decision after five-month study: Rises between $1.60 and $5.50 per week. Maintenance workers in the building trades and those with less than two-years service with the S.E.C. received no increase.

April 1978
A mass meeting of the workers rejected calls for strikes or bans, but did approve a call for the Trades Hall Council and the A.C.T.U. to co-ordinate a campaign to secure a separate industry award.

Firstly Max, how important were the often referred to traditions of the Valley in setting a backdrop to the dispute?

Yes, there’s been a long standing tradition in the Valley of distrust of “the city”, and this reflects itself in the unions. Through past experience they don’t have much confidence in such organisations as the Trades Hall Council.

The whole lifestyle of the Valley tends to be a fairly insular one and this attitude has its negative and positive effects.

In relation to this dispute?

Its negative side was shown in that it was a while before a lot of people, including the stewards, knew what they were getting into, and how big the implications were. On the positive side it also makes for a high degree of unity, and more importantly, the fantastic role of the rank and file that was displayed in this dispute.

There are, I think, some misconceptions about the “colour” of the dispute. Some people saw it throughout as a struggle of “workers against capitalism”. Was it so?

Subjectively it wasn’t that in any shape or form. By that I mean that the Valley workers never saw themselves in that light. It only became in any way a political dispute when it became a very big public issue, when the government started to move on things like the Essential Services Act.

One can certainly say that it had no wider political connotations when it started. Quite the contrary. They were concerned about three main things:

- To try and level up conditions and wages within the blue collar sector where there is quite a disparity because of the type of awards that prevail.
To reinforce the relationship between tradesmen and non-tradesmen, and those sorts of groupings within the Commission.

To get a commitment to try and develop this towards an industry award; I might add, an enormous bloody job.

In fact, it was a very economist, fairly narrow log of claims. And these demands remained central to the dispute right through to the finish.

I remember two mass meetings where any question of politics coming into it was strongly resented as outside interference in what they saw as a dispute purely about wages and conditions.

Naturally, a dispute of this kind objectively takes on a “workers versus capitalism” position, which was exemplified by the role of the S.E.C., the media, the federal and state governments, and so on.

You’ve said that the involvement of the rank and file made the dispute a very democratic one. Criticisms have been levelled that the rank and file were “sold out” by the leadership, that the leadership manipulated the rank and file mood. How do you react to this criticism?

That’s absolutely absurd! Of all the disputes one could have seen this was quite remarkable for the level of rank and file control. They were determined to take all the important decisions. For instance, when John Halfpenny became involved, the stewards and the rank and file made it perfectly clear that he was there at their invitation and that if he did the wrong thing he would be promptly dispensed with.

I think it’s also important to say that by the time the dispute had ended, John’s role was extremely highly regarded as having represented the rank and file and of having given good advice both at the shop stewards’ meetings and the mass meetings.

At all the mass meetings, all John ever did was report the situation fairly briefly and answer some questions. The recommendations were always moved by Sammy Armstrong on behalf of the shop stewards’ committee.

I think it an insult to the workers to assume that John or someone else conned them into it. I think some people are a little selective when they make suggestions like these. Earlier on in the piece, our recommendation against their calling for quick arbitration was in fact rejected.

The C.P.A. has been criticised for simply wanting to solve the dispute, to get it over and done with, for not trying to develop the struggle to higher levels. How do you view this?

When you are thrown into the middle of any dispute it is extremely difficult. It’s much more difficult than in situations which are initiated with much wider and clearer perspectives. The communists that were involved (mind you, very few) were confronted with an issue that had to be solved there and then. In that situation, it is not easy to try and develop wider and more long-range horizons - they can only come out by examination of the specific experiences. This is typical of the problems confronted by union activists.

I think to some extent the left (communists, if you like) were somewhat instrumental in helping interpret those specific experiences coming out of this dispute. The workers, and particularly the stewards, now realise that it’s not possible to smash through the wage freeze on your own, even in a dispute as massive as this. They learnt, for instance, to think through the sorts of demands that need to be put. They learnt a most deep-going lesson on the Arbitration System, that it requires much greater planning and much greater unity throughout the trade union movement.

There is a lot of nonsense talked about people going into strike action and then you pound them with political newsheets - this is done by the little left sects. Far from this creating a wider political consciousness, the response from my experience has been one of total rejection as being interference and quite insincere.

I think that what one can do best is to rediscuss the issues with those who were involved, which we (A.M.W.S.U.) have attempted to do in this case. I’m confident that their future actions will be of a much more wide-ranging character, a greater
challenge to the S.E.C. and the seeking of wider unity throughout the Commission, than was the case in this dispute. (See addendum: “Points arising from the two-day S.E.C. Course, La Trobe Valley”.)

There were some criticisms of the public role that the C.P.A. played in the dispute. Some thought the Party was tardy in acting to publicise, to work to build the bonds of solidarity that were such a feature of the dispute and which developed despite the lack of co-ordinated public work. Do you think the C.P.A. could have done more, particularly in the metropolitan area, in this regard?

Yes, I think that’s a legitimate criticism. One of the problems however, is that because of the union and mass positions we hold, we find ourselves involved in the day to day issues, particularly in the big disputes, and therefore the people with most of the information at their fingertips find themselves too busy to produce things like news-sheets. But I think this must be overcome in the future. We must become more effective in putting our voice forward in the middle of those situations, so that it doesn’t remain for the little left groups to do. However, given the circumstances, I think the public contribution of Sam Armstrong and John Halfpenny, both well known communists, was outstanding.

One of the big problems in a dispute of this kind is that one is never too sure of what is going to happen, and there’s a tendency to put off doing something because there might be a return to work in a day or so. I think in the future that we must work on the principle that the thing is going to last for some time. Then if we do too much that’s better than doing nothing or too little.

What of the role of Hawke in the dispute?

Within certain limits, Hawke played a constructive and positive role. This can be compared to the role played by Stone, which was very destructive and negative.

Hawke realised very quickly that the rank and file were making all the decisions and anything he said would not necessarily have been agreed to. Towards the finish the A.C.T.U. was saying “we might have to withdraw our support if you don’t accept this”. That, of course, becomes a quite important factor in such a big dispute.

What of the Trades Hall Council?

From the outset we sought to keep the dispute out of the T.H.C. in order to prevent it becoming bogged down, and where people like Ken Stone could take charge of it. It was only done when the anomalies decision came down, when the workers walked off after being back for a few days, where Hawke made a very good statement and backed that up at a union meeting. Then a good resolution went to the T.H.C. and despite the fact that Ken Stone had strongly opposed such an approach at the A.C.T.U., he had to stand up and support the resolution. We were quite happy to do that then as it broadened the support.

It is a sad comment on the T.H.C. that in the middle of the biggest dispute in Victoria for fifty or sixty years, the T.H.C. didn’t meet for several evenings because there was a power shortage!

What of the role of the A.L.P.?

The stewards were very appreciative of the role of the A.L.P., particularly the parliamentarians, and the A.L.P. machine where a lot of money was donated.

A sub-committee of the A.L.P. state parliamentarians was formed, met regularly with the stewards, and were trying to do things to help the strikers through the political wing. All A.L.P. members of the state house were contributing to the strike fund.

The stewards thought that in the future this was an area that ought to be expanded and taken cognizance of earlier than it was.

How accurately do you think the grouplet newspapers treated the dispute?

Oh yes, calls for “total blackout” coming from the Sparticists were just ridiculous seen in relation to the level of consciousness that prevailed.
The point about these little left sects is that they don’t have to have any responsibility for their policies, because they are not involved. In that situation you can say whatever you like because it won’t affect anything or anybody. On the other hand, the stewards and workers involved have very deep responsibilities with every move they make.

It all comes back to the fact that the workers in the Valley were out after a very limited set of demands. If they had been a much wider range of demands, obviously you’ve got a much greater range of negotiation and can talk more about the political struggle in a more meaningful way.

The role of TRIBUNE? It has been suggested that TRIB didn’t report the issue “as it was”; nor in an optimistic light, and that it didn’t give as adequate a picture as other left papers.

One thing we should have done is to have despatched someone to the Valley. That was a serious weakness. I think that limited us in being able to give a more detailed up to the minute account.

I think TRIBUNE could have played more attention to some of the things emerging in the Valley. For instance, the women played a fantastic role, a story yet to be written; and the role of the Credit Co-operative which at one stage had loaned out $200,000.

There is a strong feeling that at the crucial point - the decision to return - solidarity was building state-wide and nationally. What do you think is the accuracy of that? What do you think would have happened if the workers had voted to stay out?

No doubt in most situations there are a number of options open. Bearing in mind that no-one was happy with it, I personally think that to have rejected the arrangement was much worse.

It would have gone on for a little while longer, however there would have been a larger number than previously voting against it. Then it was almost certain that the A.C.T.U. was going to back off, which would have led to a degree of isolation. Then there was the attempt to use legislation. Was it better to maintain the unity and to return to work and fight another day? After all, it was another battle in the war. So one has to take the longer view.

Another of the difficulties that was not realised by many people is that the maintenance workers in the La Trobe Valley are a minority of the maintenance workers in the S.E.C. A meeting of all the maintenance people, despite the fact that it was a struggle for their wage rise, would probably have outvoted the La Trobe Valley workers. As it was, a poorly attended meeting of one thousand in a metropolitan area, only voted
by a majority of eight to stop for forty-eight hours in support of the Valley. This was further emphasised by the fact that the financial support from these workers left a lot to be desired.

Probably the most important aspect to be considered was the public position. This had two aspects: one was the positive side. The enormous amount collected finished up around the $200,000 mark; the other side was that with so many people stood down over a long period of time, a lot of people were coming into difficult, even desperate, financial situations. We had to seriously consider that part of it.

How long could we go on paying strike money, as we in the AMWSU were to our members in the Valley, while at the same time many others of our members were out of work as a result of the strike and not getting money?

It was generally discussed that if it went much longer, the public position would have changed. It was amazing how well it was maintained as it was. People simply can’t cop it forever.

It raises the whole question of workers’ responsibility to other workers. One has to think about how far one group of workers can go on inflicting a considerable amount of problems on another - even if we know that these were accentuated by the S.E.C. and the government.

It has something to say about the kinds of actions we take, how we should try and hit capital hardest, without affecting too many other workers, etc.

**Should the C.P.A., when it is so inextricably involved in such a dispute, be putting forward the same point of view as the trade union movement?**

That is a very difficult problem. It is part of us not being able to develop a perspective that goes beyond the everyday economic struggles. Therefore, because we’re so heavily involved in those things whenever they occur, it is very difficult to develop perspectives in the middle of a dispute. It is a different thing if the dispute is about wider challenging issues - then it is more simple to point to the more long-range questions.

It is very difficult to challenge the system when people are only on strike about relativities and their wages. It puts the whole question of the challenge to the whole society just so far away from the consciousness as to be almost irrelevant. Far from, say, the question of who should set the electricity tariffs - workers or the boss.

I think that our role has got to be much more to elaborate a socialist strategy for the working class. Then the policies that are taken up from time to time by the union will be in agreement with ours, except we are the ones who are seeing them and trying to develop them within that perspective.

I think that our role has got to go way beyond specific tactics and demands. These have to develop from the mass movement. Our task is to articulate the perspectives within which the specific demands and tactics evolve, so that they offer a more effective challenge.

**At the beginning of the interview, you talked about the traditional insularity of the Valley. Do you think that this has changed as a result of the dispute? In other words what sort of lessons have been learnt in the dispute?**

Well, I think the change was reflected in the A.M.W.S.U. Shop Stewards course (held in late November) that was attended by about forty stewards from all unions in the Valley. The long draft of future perspectives that came out of that course showed that people were much more prepared to look at it on a wider basis than just how it affected the Valley.

If we are able to put into practice all the ideas arising from the course, we should be able to change if significantly. That’s a big “if”. But most of the things were very concrete. For example, an overall shop stewards organisation in the power industry has to really develop before they embark on such an enormous project again; or taking up issues that unite much wider sections of the S.E.C.; or challenge the S.E.C.’s total control; the development of a regular bulletin throughout the industry, etc.

If they’re carried out, we can say that the Valley dispute will be of great historical importance.
The following are a number of points that emerged from the two-day course held in the La Trobe Valley for the stewards to examine their recent dispute.

These, of course, don't represent any decisions or recommendations - just purely the points that emerged from the group and general discussions which took place following the various lectures and other activities over the two days.

1. Wide State involvement was regarded as absolutely necessary in the drawing up of a log of claims and activity that would proceed from that.

2. A State Council of S.E.C. Stewards and Delegates to cover all organisations involved with the S.E.C. For example, M.O.A. and F.E.D.F.A., etc.

3. That, in compiling any future log of claims, a considerable amount of research and documentation would need to be done, at the same time bringing the argument to the public and the S.E.C. generally.

4. That before embarking on any major action, attempts be made to get State-wide pre-publicity for the issues and the type of action to be taken.

5. That contacts be made with sympathetic elements in the media very early in the piece.

6. That under no circumstances, if it can possibly be avoided, should they be involved with Arbitration.

7. At all times examine very closely the type of action that is to be taken in order that such things as 'work to regulations', 'occupations' and other forms are looked at closely.

8. That it be aimed to have the whole thing handled as much as possible by Shop Stewards and Job Delegates.

9. That strengthening of the Central Gippsland Trades & Labor Council, as an important contact point for co-operation through the unions, be seen as very important.

10. That, in drawing up a log of claims, it be looked at in such a way that all sections of S.E.C. workers can make gains from it.

11. At all times to examine very closely the role of the Trades Hall Council.

12. That all unions involved be kept in touch with events, perhaps more so than was the case recently.

13. That steps be taken very early to build up a Distress Fund so that, as much as possible, reporting to job meetings in the middle of any disputes will be more concerned with the issues involved and less with the collection of finance.

14. That it is a desirable aim for an Industry Award, and flowing from that an
Industry Union, but recognising that it is still a long way off.

15. Under the heading of “Likely Issues”, the following are listed as being the ones which are more likely to unite right across the S.E.C.:
(a) Levelling up of conditions between blue and white collar workers.
(b) Election of, and limiting the powers of, Foremen and Supervisors.
(c) Discount power rates for S.E.C. workers.
(d) Greater control of a Superannuation Scheme by the workers involved in it.
(e) A greater voice in management of the S.E.C.
(f) A voice in the job planning.
(g) Claims to include a greater challenge to the general control the S.E.C. currently has over the workers in the industry.
(h) The questions of health and safety and the environment become very important, especially remembering the recent report of the high level of lung cancer in the La Trobe Valley.
(i) A demand to have meetings of both stewards and members in the employer’s time.

16. The need to maintain co-operation and communication with Members of Parliament associated with the Labor movement.

17. Under the heading of “Type of Things to be Done” immediately:
(a) To begin producing a regular bulletin that keeps everybody informed right throughout the S.E.C. of developments relating to union activity.
(b) To establish a committee of stewards and others who would be available regularly after work, perhaps of a Friday afternoon, for contact with the local media in the La Trobe Valley to pass on any activities or actions that are taking place at any time right throughout the year.

18. Under the heading “Information Required”, the following points were made:
(a) That, in seeking to develop an Industry Award, it is necessary to get the details of each and every award and agreement and regulation currently applying in the industry, and these to be closely studied.
(b) That we seek access to such information as the S.E.C.’s profitability, information on the state of the plant, information on pricing policies, and information on overall planning in the Power Industry.

19. In the area of the role of official union structure, the following suggestions were made:
(a) That as a step towards an Industry Award, moves be made to consolidate Maintenance and Building Awards.
(b) That the unions involved in the dispute, along with the F.E.D.F.A., hold discussions as to the methods of sorting out the award differences.
(c) A thorough examination to be made of relativities in order that some acceptable formula can be arrived at providing for proper such relativities.
(d) That the A.C.T.U. may be able to assist in discussions towards such consolidation and the sorting out of award problems.

20. That we seek, as soon as possible, a forum for a discussion on a number of common questions for workers throughout the industry.

21. That preparations be got under way for a seminar on all aspects of the Power Industry, to be conducted some time next year for unions, interested people and employees and stewards throughout the industry.

22. That many more people be encouraged to join the local Credit Union.

23. That, as soon as possible, a discussion be organised for the women in the La Trobe Valley to examine their experiences during the dispute.

24. That a big campaign be launched to join apprentices into the Union.

This list to be circulated among the stewards in the industry to assist with the discussion on each campaign and the organisation of activities in the industry.

There was also a number of points made as to how an Industry Union would work, if and when it came into being.