Trade unions and the election by Hugh Hamilton

The purpose of this report is to try and make some assessment of the political consciousness of those people employed in the building industry.

The opportunity for this assessment comes with the involvement of all the building trade unions with other unions affiliated with the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland in the campaign to re-elect a Labor government to Federal Parliament on December 13.

To my knowledge there has been no other occasion or no other issue where the trade union movement has been so intensely involved in a political campaign.

The building unions, particularly the BWIU, were involved in the anti-war, anti-conscription movement during the Vietnam war. However, it never reached the great heights this campaign has for the return of the Whitlam government.

The Building Trades Group of unions has never been more united on a political campaign for decades; and never more united on broad social issues (including democracy).

- The Building Trades Group has produced over 100,000 leaflets - 7,000 of these were in Greek, Italian and Russian.
- The Building Trades Group has distributed or sold over 1,000 Daily Tribune.
- Distributed 3,000 Building Worker.
- Produced 30,000 helmet stickers for Queensland.

Hugh Hamilton is Queensland State Secretary of the Building Workers Industrial Union. This report was given to a meeting of union members on December 10 last year.
building workers. A majority of workers support what the unions are doing and support the return of the Labor government.

However, there is a substantial minority that strongly objects to the unions being involved in a political campaign.

It is a romantic myth to think that because the workers are a class in society, they reflect a class consciousness that is a working class consciousness.

The reality is that this is not so. Even with many Labor supporters, the ideology and the values are not based on working class interests, but are based on the capitalist ideology and capitalist values.

In the struggle for ideological hegemony the capitalist class per the media and other forms have impacted the working class to the degree that workers identify in a thousand and one ways with their ideas, their way of life, their values.

The fact is that in the building industry the capitalist class and the capitalist system exercise considerable influence. This is related to the fact that work in the industry lends itself possibly more than any other to selfish values of the system - doing your own thing - the self-made man theory, getting to the top by being a cockroach contractor, a system that is very much encouraged by big building companies. The incidence of self-employed persons in the building industry, labor only contractors, piece-workers, persons who work for an all-in hourly rate and cannibalise award conditions - all these are very prevalent within the building industry. A large section of these workers are anti-union and anti-Labor.

Along with those methods and the form of "status" that it gives the worker - that is, he assumes he is not a worker but self-employed or a sub-contractor - with this comes the logical outlook of the capitalist system and a... attitude that traditional union men are "bludgers" or weak persons who cannot look after themselves.

Among this group, but not only there, are large pockets of Liberal and Country Party supporters who are quite vocal about their political position, particularly with their anti-communist, anti-socialist and anti-union attitudes.

The dialogue and the meetings reveal many weaknesses in relation to the union's activities over past years. The most noticeable is that we have not been getting out enough propaganda to members explaining the basic issues to them. More so, we have not been holding enough job meetings with the rank and file whereby a form of dialogue could pass between the union representatives and the rank and file. This would have enabled some assessment or gauge of support or opposition to the union's actions and policies on various issues. Many of our past assessments have been made from the hilltop with fleeting knowledge. Here I refer more to the broader social and political issues than to job conditions or award matters.

Reflecting on many of the wage struggles and other disputes that have taken place in Australia over the past ten years, particularly in Queensland on the major construction projects, a large number of struggles have been based purely on self-interest certainly not on a principled trade union attitude. Such struggles have been far removed from any form of working class loyalty.

Other disputes have been ones to get the highest possible rates for job "A" and the workers haven't given a damn for others, often doing the same type of work, in the same area, but receiving up to $50 to $60 to $100 per week less.

On other occasions, there have been elitist groups within the various industries, and also within unions who want to be "prima donnas" whereby, instead of joining in the general trade union struggle for wage justice, have, because of their strategically placed position within an industry said "To hell with other workers - let's grab what we can for ourselves".

This attitude and the consensus politics of union officials, including myself, who have gone along with this for varying reasons, has helped to add to the general corruption of workers where they by-pass traditional trade union and working class loyalties and set out on the path for naked selfish interests.

My point in dwelling on this is that I think in some areas the unions have helped to encourage such selfish interests in workers. In other circumstances we have looked at the situation with a Nelson eye. This is a part of the reason (a small part but nevertheless a part) for the backlash.

The best results the Building Trades Group has achieved have been on jobs where there is
union organisation, where there are job delegates and job committees - more so on those jobs where job delegates and activists have participated in the union's trade union education courses.

The unions' experience in this political campaign in the building industry is similar to some of those in other industries. For example, in the meat industry some of the sheds are substantially for Labor. However, in some of the country areas such as Murgon and other places the sheds are supporters of the National Party.

There is little or no trade union organisation in the countryside. It would be few indeed who belong to a union other than in the organised sugar and meat areas. Few leaflets or other forms of literature would go to these areas.

Yet these areas have been inundated with newspapers, particularly a monthly paper got out by Bjelke-Petersen and organisations whose basic aim is anti-communist, anti-socialist government in Canberra; and basically anti-worker.

Labor Party supporters get a rough time in some country areas. Attempts have been made to chase Labor spokesmen out of town.

A recent trip in the north coast area of Brisbane revealed hardly one ALP poster, but thousands of posters put out by the National Party and the Workers' Party.

Within our own industry we have found that loyal union job delegates who have made valuable contributions to the union over the years have presented themselves as National Party or Liberal Party supporters. This is besides those minor, but in a relative sense, large pockets of Liberal-National supporters referred to earlier in this report.

As I said in the beginning of this report, this is not an attempt to make an assessment of the current political situation, but to use the experiences in this campaign to make a general assessment of the consciousness of building workers to political and social issues and their attitudes to the wide stream of political philosophies and parties that prevail in our society.

It is for this reason that the report has dealt more with the negative attitude of the workers than the positive. The negative, more precisely conservative to extreme reactionary right wing, does not outweigh the positive position of the thousands of rank and file building workers as can be seen from some of the selected portions of reports from organisers who have been involved at the grass roots level of this campaign. The report is an attempt to look reality square in the eye.

Some quotes from organisers' reports:

"Rockhampton has been saturated with the leaflets and all jobs I have been on to I have had political discussion with them relative to the election."

"I haven't received any resentment in regards to the union's involvement. In fact the leaflets have been received by all workers with the comment that the BWIU is doing a good job and the leaflets are great."

"Some of these young people are still under the impression they cannot have their say at union meetings. I had two young people on a job at Coronation Drive tell me they would not attend a meeting at Trades Hall in case they would be beaten up."

"My impression is that most of those in the Brisbane area, who are engaged in work in the industrial, commercial, high rise and social building sections of our industry will vote for the ALP - 75 per cent for and 25 per cent against. Leightons 3 jobs at the Expressway are all OK. The three jobs at QCL Pinkenba sound alright; Stocks and Holdings very good; Block 7 pretty sound; AMP is overwhelmingly pro Labor."

"I feel that on some or the majority of jobs the main problem is that most just don't seem to care either way. You naturally get some people who are completely opposed to us but that is to be expected. Therefore I think that more education at job level would overcome this uncaring part of the people. Bringing more people on side. If you get them thinking, with a little prompting you must get them on side."

"Jobs with a well informed delegate are easier to hold discussions on. Stickers are a popular form of publicity. Newspapers are far better than leaflets. They are kept longer. The BTG should hold more meetings after this campaign, to encourage our members towards this form of communication."

"On the jobs under private enterprise I find it hard to judge the support as the vocal ones have been LCP supporters and there appears to be an antipathy to these type of meetings -
this being expressed by either non-attendance
or the irritation at being interrupted in their
card games. It has become evident that the
average voter on the job has made up his
mind."

This report, or more precisely, the activity
around the current political crisis has revealed
that we have a long row to hoe with many
obstructions on the way.

The essence of the struggle must surely be
the radical social change in our society, the
awareness by the rank and file members of a
socialist alternative, the need to be free of
exploitation of man by man for power, greed
and profit.

These are the type of aims which must be
fought for by the trade union movement if it is
to be viable and have a real use value.

Quality of life issues are the basic issues for
the trade union movement. This is not to say
one must neglect bread and butter issues such
as wages and conditions - it means integration
of all these issues into the aims of the trade
unions, into the fighting policy and the new
work style.

An attitude has been prevalent, particularly
amongst officialdom of unions, including our
own of “look after the bread and butter issues
and the workers will tolerate officialdom’s
attitude of being ‘way out in front’ on many of
the broader issues”.

That is a form of elitism which is like the front
engine of a triple header doing all the pulling
and puffing whilst the other engines are
passive partners with many of the carriages
being pulled being casual observers, and other
carriages rolling along the tracks with their
brakes on hoping that the train would stop so
they can get off the track.

This attitude and method of work must be
corrected whether the Labor government or a
Liberal-Country Party government is elected
to office on December 13.

The campaign has revealed the importance
of the trade union education program, limited
and all that it has been. Officials and delegates
have commented on the contribution made by
the union in this area.

New initiatives, including new forms of
presenting the workers’ cause must be
developed. Ways must be looked for and found
as to how we involve far greater participation
of the rank and file.

The report reveals that there are pockets of
workers who would very readily lend
themselves to the extremes and excesses of
the Fraser policies, particularly his union
bashing policies.

Also organisations on the extreme right
would find a ready response to their anti­
communist, racist and sexist policies.

This can only be countered by a labor and
trade union movement with strong ties with the
workers - unions with a strong understanding
of the cause and effect of reactionary policies
like those being enunciated by Fraser and
more so by Bjelke-Petersen.

Fundamentally the basic issue in this
election campaign whether revealed or not is­
who is going to control the country?

The workers must be made aware of the
connection between the Fraser policy and
reactionary policies generally, and the base
and superstructure of capitalist society. (By
base we mean social production on the one
hand and private ownership of the means of
production on the other - and by
superstructure we mean the institutions that
are there to protect the base, to protect
the exploitation of man by man).

It is important that an effective rank and file
organisation be developed, an organisation
that has more say in the decision making
processes of the union than at present, a rank
and file that is developing initiatives on mass
issues that affect the members and workers
generally.

Essential to this is the promotion of socialist
ideas through a movement for workers’ control
raising the basic questions of who should
control industry, who should control people’s
lives, who should be the decision makers in
our society - people, young people, old
people, useful working people or the directors
of big industrial, financial, commercial and
multinational companies.

This is a contribution attempting (hopefully)
to initiate a dialogue as to what we are all about
in the building industry.

I thank the organisers and others who
detailed their experiences around this
campaign thereby assisting me with the report.