THE SOUND OF TRUMPETS

Reviewed by
Dick Blackburn


This substantial book deals almost exclusively with events in South Australia as constituted since 1911. References in it to Broken Hill, NSW, are not extensive, but they are obligatory for this work; those concerning the northern part of the state before 1911 relate particularly to the Chinese question. There are five parts in chronological sequence, followed by a brief conclusion, three appendices, 28 pages of references and notes, 11 of bibliography, and 14 for the index.

The Wakefield Press was established by the South Australian government and is the official Jubilee 150 publisher. The book is well presented and appears to have few errors. It was launched with enthusiasm last August by Clyde Cameron, well-known Labor Party stalwart, to an audience of trade union officials, party leaders, writers, educators, journalists, and friends.

The author has worked in the metal trades, served as an editor of the South Australian Tribune (1946-51) and was secretary of the Communist Party in SA during 1963-73. He has previously written pamphlets and a longer work Representatives of Discontent — History of the Communist Party in South Australia 1921-1981 — which was published in 1983. That book should be consulted for more detail than can be found in Sound of Trumpets.

The first part of this new publication, with nine chapters for the period 1815-1880, shows distinctive features of the new British colony. It was founded by a company, not as a penal settlement. Mining of copper ore was important from the 1840s, and brought thousands of migrants from Cornwall. Another distinctive group — the Germans — contributed to early success with agriculture and horticulture. Labour disputes were evident from the outset — on ships making the first settlement at Kangaroo Island in 1836 Churches and pubs were important for workers, and they gained more experience of organisation in friendly and building societies. In the prosperous 1870s, South Australia was the third most populous Australian colony, with a mix of mining, agriculture, and manufacturing. Aborigines had been dispossessed, trade unions existed, and class divisions were evident.

The maritime strike of 1890, and events leading to it, including establishment of the United Trades and Labor Council (UTLC) in 1884, are dealt with in the three chapters of the second part. The third — Labour in Politics, 1891-1908 — records the formation of the United Labor Party and the introduction of new ideas.

Henry George had an enthusiastic reception when he came to Adelaide to speak about Single Tax. His admirers in the state were among the settlers in William Lane's South American colony and in the village settlements of the 1890s, most numerous along the River Murray.

George Buttery, a trade unionist once involved in the First International in London, and thus acquainted with Karl Marx, became president of the UTLC in 1890.

After the 1890 strike, the numerical strength of the UTLC declined for some years. However, workers turned to political struggles. Their demands were pressed at first by supporting the more liberal parliamentary candidates; later they elected Labor men. Parliamentary support by Labor was given in the 1890s to the liberal Kingston government; in 1908, the first Labor government ruled with liberal support. One chapter in this third part deals with the women's movement, including reference to the Working Women's Trade Union, formed to combat sweating in the clothing trade, and to the achievement of women's suffrage in 1894.

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The fourth part, with four chapters, covers the influence of socialist and syndicalist ideas from before World War I, the divisions within the labour movement during and after the war, and the turmoil in Adelaide in 1926-28 associated with the wharf strike and effective in combating the industrial Groups and preserving their own influence. No emphasis seems to be given by the author to the long existence of the UTLC as a united body — without the complications known in some other states. Labor governments have been formed from time to time in South Australia, usually from extreme dissatisfaction with more conservative regimes, but they have only once remained long in power. They have achieved some important reforms in more prosperous times, but fascism has been the consequence of a Labor government undertaking repressive actions or otherwise becoming isolated from the workers.

The great strength of the book is the lucid and coherent account of workers’ struggles over nearly 150 years. The large collection of references is a measure of the author’s industry in searching the files of metropolitan and provincial newspapers, archival material, university theses, pamphlets, books, etc. The publication will provide a basis and stimulus for many students of South Australian labour history; perhaps it will be an example for other parts of Australia. The men and women who became prominent in the movement are mentioned throughout the text. Except for a few like John Verran, these people generally qualify for no more than a line or two about their background. Clearly, the book is not rich in personalia — there is just enough to whet the appetite for more details.

The final chapter mentions some changes since 1965. It refers to publications as recent as 1984, including Dunstan’s political memoirs (1981), but it fails to touch on the impressive recent growth of the trade union movement. In 1961, more than 78,000 were covered by affiliations to the UTLC. By 1974, the number was 118,000 (Appendix III), and in 1984 it had risen to 170,000, according to the centenary history of the UTLC. This growth may have been due principally to the new affiliations of white collar and professional unions, including administrative and clerical officers, municipal officers, nurses, college academic staff, and CSIRO research workers. These changes make the UTLC more representative of the working population which now includes many in tertiary industries and a large proportion of women.

Readers will look in vain in the author’s brief conclusions for any comparison with other Australian segments of the labour movement. His last pages show concern, above all, with central issues of power and the role of parties. It would have been valuable to have gained some leads for interpreting the apparent failure of the labour movement in this state in respect to municipal government. Is there in the trade union movement some old-fashioned nationalism towards politics which affects the SA local government scene? In the same line of speculation, is it true that this labour movement surveyed by Jim Moss has little interest in social and cultural affairs, to which he makes prelatory reference? At least there appears to be almost nothing in the text on these matters. There have been significant developments in these respects at least elsewhere in Australia — and not all recently. Examples are presented by the Lidcombe Workers Health Centre, the Victorian Labor College, and the WEA, the Society of Labor Lawyers, and the Green Bans by the BLF. The influence of the Australian labour movement has certainly been evident for years in literature and song, theatre and cinema, and the pictorial arts. It is remarkable that a study which seems to have left no stone unturned in its search should thus indicate no working class contribution from SA to these issues.

In the 19th century, newspapers were often given portentous names such as Tribune, Clarion, Herald, or even Trumpet. It is from The Penny Trumpet, first circular of the UTLC in 1884, that Jim Moss drew the title for his book. One might say of it that trumpets of the SA labour movement are certainly now heard far and wide, even though their sound is limited to a few notes. On the whole, however, the author has done extremely well in recording the history of the most significant and deep-seated conflicts in sunny South Australia.

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