

CONFERENCE REPORT

Labour Traditions

Donna Dwyer

Labour Traditions: The 10th National Labour History Conference, University of Melbourne, ICT Building, Carlton, Victoria, Australia, 4-6 July 2007.

On a wet, winter morning in Melbourne – not that drought-weary Melbournians were complaining – a diverse crowd, a pleasing array of young and not-so-young, men and women, was given a warm welcome to the opening of the biennial 10th National Labour History Conference that this year centred on the broad theme of labour traditions.

Peter Love's brief spirited address and don't-stand-on-ceremony approach set the tenor for a smorgasbord of offerings that were at once challenging and provocative: papers reworking the past and the present and forums in which activists and academics debated current controversies. For me, the conference stirred memories of the past and posed, once more, the dilemma in positioning important work/histories of so-called minorities.

Among the opening sessions there were strong performances. We heard from a local young man, Jeff Sparrow, on the continuing debate on the legacy of Stalinism for socialism examined through the lives of three dissident Marxists. This was juxtaposed with Kerry Taylor's analysis of the Communist Party's positioning of itself in New Zealand political history, a reminder of the similarities and differences



Senators John Faulkner and Robert Ray

Photo courtesy Peter Love



Verity Archer, Sigrid McCausland and Brian McLure

Photo courtesy Peter Love

in Left politics across the Tasman. As with all densely packed conference sessions, however, the parallel offerings meant that it was possible to discover at morning tea, from the lively discussion that spilled over from another session, that there had been equally stimulating papers elsewhere. Fortunately these presentations appeared in the comprehensive set of papers we had been given and I marked them for future reference.

The following session 'Gendering the labour movement' (perhaps the reason for the high proportion of older women in attendance?) offered three very different perspectives on women's representation in the workplace. Joanne Scott examined the positioning of women's work in the Brisbane Exhibition during the first four decades of the twentieth century; Judith Smart explored the response of the Women's Political Association to the 1917 Wharf Labourers strike and Diana Covell offered a comparative study of groups of women workers in Australia and Canada in the steel industry. This shared feminist perspective offered significant insights into another landscape of women's work and political activity. But in a parallel session we were reminded that there are other ways of positioning women's history.

For an audience specifically interested in a gender perspective, there was a difficult decision to be made between attending this session or one that included Clare Wright's work on female political activism on the Ballarat diggings. A chance encounter with this young, leading woman historian just prior to the session left no doubt that she considered it important to position her work in the mainstream history of popular movements for democracy, no doubt in her quest to seek what she has termed 'common ground' in the writing of Australian history.

The male tradition of Labor politics was well in evidence at the post-lunch forum. John Cain, Wally Curran, John Faulkner and Robert Ray spoke of the debates that have preoccupied the Labo(u)r movement. Wally Curran warned against factionalism and the barring of members from decision-making; John Faulkner, National President of the Australian Labor Party, was keen to defend Labor's approach to recent attacks



Nikola Balnave and Greg Patmore

Photo courtesy Peter Love

on wayward unionists and Robert Ray, provocative as ever, suggested, among other things, that it was time that some serious academic work was done on the factions within the party. John Cain provided a number of warnings for contemporary Labor in his succinct overview of post-war Labor policies and practices. In particular, Cain's comment on the bitter fall out within the Labor party during the DLP split in the 1950s that 'meant that no Catholic could get a job in the party for 18 years' resonated in a later conference paper on B.A. Santamaria.

In this session on the DLP, the room suddenly ignited as ex-seminarians/historians queried the material being presented. Those of us with memories of bitter divisions in Catholic families pondered the nature of historiography, whilst others were able to reflect on the capacity of the Conference to bring together a mix of highly engaged academics and political activists.

For me there were many other highlights (doubtless others had their own preferences): Verity Burgmann's comprehensive work on the IWW and Phillip Deery's dynamic performance expounding his analysis of recently released ASIO files on one of its own agents. The latter contrasted nicely with the droll account by Andrew Moore of the Fitzpatrick-Browne affair as an event in labor politics during the Cold War.

Other offerings I attended included a showing of the Archive Project which, despite a battle with technology, conveyed enough of the work of the Melbourne Realist film movement to gain an insight into its amazing content and potential. At one point, an impromptu choral group sprang into life when a slight glitch occurred in the program, although the audience clung steadfastly to the fact that they were Melbournians and refused to join in.

From a gender perspective there was much to be cheered about. There are clearly many practising women historians working across a diverse range of subjects.

Women also appear to be well represented in union activism. In a highly informative session, Phil Cleary, David Kerin, Michelle O'Neill and Jess Walsh

gave us some idea of the issues confronting contemporary union leaders including the use of new technologies, the experiences of workers in the cleaners union and the implications for unionists in a bargaining landscape that has been completely transformed. O'Neill argued that workers need to participate in capturing their own stories of the past and queried the union's campaign in focusing on workers as victims. Jeannie Rea, in an excellent final forum that included Chris Sheil's intriguing analysis of the 1998 waterfront dispute and Brian Boyd examining the union defense campaign, warned, too, of the danger of over reliance on media campaigns.

Nevertheless – in a climate of economic rationalism when equal pay remains elusive for many women, poor superannuation entitlements affect the lives of generations of retired women, and evidence suggests that women are less equipped to handle bargaining in a climate of AWA's – research on women's work is still pertinent, in whatever forum it is presented.

Overall, the 10th National Labour History Conference was a wonderful experience, deftly and unobtrusively organised, offering the experience to stand for awhile among people of like mind and face our future, hoping for the best.

Donna Dwyer is a senior lecturer in the School of Communication, Culture and Languages at Victoria University. She has completed a PhD in the history of women teachers in the Victorian Education Department with a specific focus on the impact of the marriage bar on women teachers and the teaching profession.

<Donna.Dwyer@vu.edu.au>