

We built this city: An image from Paul True's *A Walk In Our Boots* shows the construction of Sydney's famous Opera House – a job built with union labour

THE ESSAY: UNION HISTORY



Time for working-class heroes to fight again

Safe work sites and good pay only came about through the long struggle and sacrifice of workers and their unions. Now the victories of the past are under threat, writes [Liam Phelan](#). Are you ready to fight for your rights?

“Workers need to look up – these things don’t just fall from the trees”

CFMEU Organiser Tony Papaconstuntinos

CFMEU Organiser Tony Papaconstuntinos is a man who knows his labour history and he has a simple piece of advice for you: “Look up.”

As scores of hard-won conditions that took decades of struggle to achieve disappear in Howard’s full frontal assault on Australian workers, old hands in the union movement are shaking their heads.

“A labourer working today might take home \$1000 a week. They have decent workplace safety, amenities, annual leave. They get public holidays, leave loading, site allowance, productivity payments. Your average worker presumes society has provided all of this,” Tony says.

Now, these conditions are being taken away. Leave loading, overtime, travel allowance, productivity payments, site allowance – all will go. Workers are likely to lose \$200-\$500 per week out of their pay.

“A lot of young people don’t really understand the struggles that took place to get these conditions. They think they came about because of the goodwill of the employer. They are bewildered about what is happening,” Tony says.

But the truth is decent conditions didn’t come from the bosses or from government. “Workers need to look up – these things don’t just fall from the trees,” he says. “Howard has the cheek to say there have been substantive movements in wages since 1996. And there have been – but not because of him. They came about because of the union movement. Every single wage case put forward by the unions was opposed by the Federal Government.”

And it’s not just wages. Improvements in safety, superannuation, annual leave, workers compensation – all were achieved by the struggle of workers.

“People have achieved change by taking industrial action. It was done on the ground and it takes years to get improvements.”

Captured on the film *A Walk In Our Boots*, retired judge Jim Macken puts it this way: “The issue that the Howard Government hopes to achieve is not just the smashing of a trade union movement, it’s the construction of a society in which the whole of the people are a servile workforce for the multinationals and the chief executive officers and their million-dollars-a-year salaries.”

Tony, an ex-seafarer and former official of the Seaman’s Union and the MUA, reflects on some of the past achievements.

In 1971 the BWIU, led by Pat Clancy, mounted a push for accident pay, which went on to become workers compensation.

“Decent workers compensation only came about in the 1980s. There was an eight-to-ten week stoppage to establish the right of workers to get decent pay if injured. That is a big sacrifice everybody made.”

Workers today get four weeks’ paid leave. But that took almost 70 years to win – first it was a 40-year fight, which started in the early 1900s, for two weeks’ leave and then after World War II it took another 30 years of agitating to increase this to four weeks.

According to *you can make a difference*, the story of the ACTU-Lend Lease Foundation, Lend Lease set

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Looking back at past victories

1897
first building industry safety laws

1875-1920
44-hour week

1897
first Workers' Compensation legislation in Australia

1902
the first building industry safety legislation in the NSW Scaffolding & Lifts Act

1902 - 1980s
campaigns for proper amenities on construction sites

1904
penalty rates for overtime

1904
waiting time for late payment of wages

1904
fares and travelling allowance

1943
one-week annual leave

1947
40-hour week

1957
wet weather pay

1974
four weeks annual leave plus 17.5 per cent loading

1984
industry-wide superannuation

1995
new redundancy scheme (ACIRT)

2003
36-hour week

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up a company superannuation scheme in 1963. It wasn't until 1984 that the BWIU was able to establish an industry-wide superannuation that applied to all workers, even casuals, according to retired leader Tom McDonald.

You need to know the history to understand the struggles to achieve progress. Tony says he grew up with left politics, which taught him how and why things came about.

"Australia was at the forefront of change, but now we are going backwards rapidly. One hundred years of achievement have gone almost overnight."

His advice for young workers is to become better informed. "There is a tremendous amount of information on the CFMEU website about the struggles, hardships and sacrifices of the past. There is information in the parliamentary library, in the State Library of NSW."

Perhaps the best education a young worker can get is to come to the union and go out with organisers, Tony says.

"Kids are not encouraged to be involved. Delegates today are far from being as active as they used to be. The union culture is under extreme threat."

A worker in the middle of these changes is carpenter Nick Rawson, who's been in the industry for around 12 years.

"The past few years our industry has been through a boom. People get used to it. But now things are about to change," Nick says.

One key to getting workers active is to give them a historical perspective about the labour movement. "The only place workers will get any history from is the union. I have never seen government or employers educating workers about where their conditions come from," Nick says.

Tony got his political education while sailing the world. "Blokes I sailed with taught me. There was a guy called Kenny Swift on the Iron Monarch. He was collecting donations for the party every Wednesday. I thought it was a piss-up, but it was actually for the Communist Party.

"Another bloke gave me a book about Karl Marx. I'd sit out on the poop deck with Kenny Swift and Jack Chalmers. We'd talk politics, history, seamanship. The best school I ever went to. Talking about class struggle, how to rig a yard arm. It's priceless."

Working-class heroes

While the union movement is based on collectivism, certain people stand out. Tony was inspired by Eliot V Elliott, the leader of the Seaman's Union from 1941

to 1978. He also worked with Pat Clancy, who was National Secretary of the BWIU.

Others influences were Big Jim Healy. "I worked with his brother, John. He is someone who really stands out in class struggle. He made a huge impact."

But it was the power of collective action that really influenced Tony, as unions became involved in issues as diverse as helping Indonesia gain independence, protesting against the Vietnam War and pushing for the end of apartheid in South Africa.

"We are fortunate in this country. There have been a lot of things achieved. We are still somewhat fortunate when you look at South Africa, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua."

The changes pushed by the Howard Government are moving Australia towards the US model, where there is minimal regulation of the labour market and competition between workers is savage.

"We seem to be heading towards being another star on the US flag. We are going to have to struggle a lot more if we are to defend what we have," Tony says.

He argues it is time to draw a line in the sand. "Historically, there have always been fighters, and there's always been people who prefer to be observers. Whatever we have achieved today has been achieved by the minority.

"Sadly, I think many people have lost the will to fight. But the fight will still be there, because there are sufficient people to stand up."

Nick suggests there are periods in history where collective struggle is weaker. "Now is one of those periods, but it won't always stay weak. Just as it goes down, it can also go up."

The culture of work has changed in Australia, and people like Tony argue the union's approach needs to change with it. Part of the problem has been the lack of a credible political alternative to the industrial changes. In a recent article on the death of Kerry Packer, John Pilger wrote:

"Long before the rest of the western world, Australians gained a minimum wage, an eight-hour working day, pensions, maternity allowance, child benefits and the vote for women. The secret ballot was invented here and became known as the 'Australian ballot'.

"The Australian Labor Party formed governments 25 years before any comparable social democracy in Europe. In the 1960s, with the exception of the Aboriginal people – who are always the exception – Australians could boast the most equitable spread of personal income in the world. It is a proud history that is barely a memory in Howard's Australia. His is an undeclared union with the "opposition" Labor

"Australia was at the forefront of change, but we are going backwards. One hundred years of achievement have gone almost overnight."