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THE A.C.T.U. CONGRESS OF 1965

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THE biennial Congress of the Australian Council of Trade Unions opened in Sydney on 13th September. Some 570 delegates were present. Viewed as a battleground of the political extremes within Australian trade unionism, the Congress had been preceded by widespread predictions of a right-wing "steamroller". Its performance, however, turned out to be more complicated than this, chiefly because of the shifting support of a few key delegations and delegates who declined to commit themselves unequivocally to either bloc and, in doing so, undermined the determining role of considerations that went beyond factional alignments. In the event, it was a matter less of the right-wing triumphing than of the left-wing suffering heavier losses.

There were five voting divisions during the Congress. Three of them arose from recommendations of the Interstate Executive, one of which was defeated. The other two divisions, the first and the last, involved the leadership's authority only indirectly, and to the extent that they did so represented one defeat and one win.

The first division occurred on the morning of the second day, and was inspired by the internal politics of the Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union. The federal leadership of the A.P.W.U. opposed a recommendation of the Credentials Committee that three nominees of the union's New South Wales branch should be accepted as Congress delegates in place of three nominated by the federal officials. This objection was upheld by 307 votes to 236, the majority of 71 being the largest recorded at the Congress.

The second division occurred on the same morning in relation to an Executive recommendation, originally sponsored by the right-wing Federated Clerks' Union, which proposed that each of the six Industry Group representatives on the Executive should be elected by Congress as a whole, instead of by the delegates of unions in the Group concerned as in the past. This previously well-publicized proposal was designed, on the assumption of a left-wing minority on the floor of Congress, to unseat one left-wing and two Communist members of the Executive. The recommendation was defeated by 288 votes to 260, a majority of 28, after a debate which was notable for the only really serious and sustained display of acrimony during the Congress and for the failure of any of the nine speakers to mention the purpose of the proposed change.

The third division, on the morning of the third day, involved the Executive's recommendation on wages policy, the controversial section of which authorised a basic wage claim based on productivity and capacity to pay. It attracted two amendments, both moved by Communists. The first would have committed the A.C.T.U. to a basic wage claim based wholly on a "needs" formula (to be devised) and specifically set at a minimum of £22. The second would also have required the adoption of a "needs" criterion, but it was softer in tone, did not specify a figure, and allowed that at least the next basic wage claim might be based on productivity and capacity to pay if time did not permit the working out of an adequate "needs" formula in the meantime. The mover's belated attempt to withdraw the first amendment signalled to delegates that the issue was to be fought

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on the second, which was subsequently defeated by 276 votes to 259, a majority of 17.

The fourth division, on the afternoon of the fourth day, occurred when Congress was considering anti-strike penal provisions. The crucial section of the Executive recommendation on this question was concerned, however, with setting out in some detail a procedure designed to bring even intra-state stoppages likely to attract penalties explicitly under the direct control of the federal officials of both the A.C.T.U. and the unions concerned. Both the amendments drawn by the recommendation, each of which was moved by a non-Communist, involved the deletion of these strike-control provisions. The first amendment, from the Transport Workers' Union, also sought Executive sponsorship of a 24-hour general strike in the event of strike penalties being imposed; while the second, from the Waterside Workers' Federation, proposed instead that threats of penalties should be met by an "immediate protest" from the A.C.T.U. and the calling together of unions in the industry concerned to decide on "protest and/or retaliatory action". The Transport Workers' amendment was not carried to a division after being declared lost on the voices. The Waterside Workers' amendment was defeated in a division by 293 votes to 245, a majority of 48.

The fifth and final division, on the morning of the last day, was on a motion that Congress disagree with the President's ruling that the decision of the Returning Officer about the results of elections for Executive positions was final, the Returning Officer having resolved a tied vote in the election for the Services Group representative by declaring the retiring member, J. M. Riordan, re-elected. The President's ruling was upheld by 270 votes to 221, a majority of 49.

In each of the five divisions held, opposing positions were taken up by the left-wing and right-wing blocs, but the issues involved were seen differently and evoked less stereotyped reactions in the case of a number of delegations and of individual delegates not bound by caucus decisions—an unusual illustration of the latter being the way the Waterside Workers' Federation delegation split on the fifth division. In the end it was these "swinging" votes, and considerations which had little or nothing to do with the left/right confrontation, which were decisive. Thus in the first division on the question of the composition of the Postal Workers' delegation, the political alignments of the warring factions inside that union predictably determined the way the left and right wings voted on the floor of Congress. But other considerations, more important to those not so committed, were chiefly responsible for producing what was easily the largest majority of the Congress. Not only did the issue not involve a direct challenge of the Executive (it arose from a majority recommendation of the three-man Credentials Committee of Congress), but it also stirred instincts opposed to any suggestion of "outside interference" with the control of union leaderships over their domestic arrangements. Similarly, in the case of the fifth division, it is apparent that the determining consideration was the fact that a direct and personal challenge of the President, A. E. Monk, was involved; and it was this, rather than the political considerations also involved, which yielded in his favour the second largest majority of the Congress even though it took the division in which by far the fewest delegates were present to take part.

The other three issues on which divisions were held (Industry Group electoral procedure, wages policy, and penal provisions) directly involved the authority of the Executive, which was defeated only on the issue about which it had been most strongly divided—its recommendation on Industry Group elections which, as had been well known before Congress, it had adopted by only a 10-6 majority. Moreover, a number of moderate delegates

preferred the existing system on general grounds, and were prepared to ignore the matter of political advantage; while one sizeable uncommitted delegation apparently voted against the recommendation primarily because a majority of its caucus believed that the electoral prospects of one of its moderate leaders could suffer from the proposed change.¹

The Executive won, however, on the two issues of wages policy and penal provisions; and these, particularly the latter, provided the crucial test of a successful Congress in the eyes of the A.C.T.U.'s moderate leadership. Not only was the Executive less markedly divided on these two issues than it was on that of Industry Group elections, but in both cases a personal factor was injected in an unusually stark and persuasive form. The introduction of the wages policy recommendation had been preceded by a report from the A.C.T.U.'s Research Officer, R. J. Hawke, in the course of which he implicitly converted the subsequent division on the recommendation into a vote of confidence in himself. The division on the Executive's penal provisions recommendation was also effectively converted into a personal vote of confidence by the terms in which the President, A. E. Monk, spoke on the central issue at stake in both his opening address to Congress and his speech during the debate on the recommendation. These personal interventions played an important, and possibly decisive, part in securing majority support for the Executive's comparatively strait approach to two sensitive issues on which feelings ran high as a result of the decision in the 1965 basic wage case and the widespread imposition of strike penalties over the last two years.

The only other Executive recommendations which showed any real sign of being contentious were those dealing with automation and equal pay for women, but left-wing amendments of both these recommendations were not pushed to a division after being declared lost on the voices. There was no serious opposition to the Executive recommendations on the 35-hour working week, on aborigines, or on the formation of a committee to investigate the question of affiliation fees and their method of assessment. Congress accepted without debate an Executive declaration on apartheid in South Africa, a Building Workers' Industrial Union motion on housing, and the Executive's proposal of a levy to finance the legal costs incurred by the North Australian Workers' Union in its claim for award wages for aboriginal pastoral workers in the Northern Territory.

The political highlight of an unusually unpredictable Congress, however, was the outcome of the elections for the eight positions on the 16-member Interstate Executive which are decided at each Congress. J. D. Kenny and W. P. Evans both survived a challenge from A. E. Horsburgh of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, and were once again re-elected as Senior and Junior Vice-President, respectively. Four of the six retiring Industry Group representatives secured re-election: M. O'Brien of the Transport Group and J. Petrie of the Food and Distributive Services Group were unopposed, while R. E. Wilson of the Manufacturing Group and J. M. Riordan of the Services Group each defeated a single opponent, the latter on a tied vote declared in his favour (see above). The remaining two Industry Group positions changed hands, J. B. Holmes of the right-wing Australasian Society of Engineers defeated the retiring Metal Group representative, T. Wright, a member of the Communist Party; and another member of the Party, P. Clancy of the Building Workers' Industrial Union, lost the Building Group seat, vacated by Party-member G. Dawson, to J. E. Anderson of the Operative Painters and Decorators' Union. Communist membership of the Interstate Executive was thus reduced from three to one, the lowest it has been for many years, leaving only A. Macdonald representing the Queensland Trades and Labour Council.

From the viewpoint of the left-wing in general and the Communists in particular, the Congress was anything but a success. Their leaders had refused to allow themselves to be drawn into supporting extreme propositions, and in particular had refrained from launching an outright attack on the arbitration system in circumstances that were more favourable for such a move than at any time since the early 1950s. Despite their caution, however, they had failed to secure acceptance of even comparatively mild amendments to the Executive recommendations on the major issues of wages policy and penal provisions. Worst of all, and most unexpected, the early and heartening defeat of the move to alter the procedure for electing Industry Group representatives had been almost nullified by the results of the Industry Group elections.

The right-wing, as well as showing signs of more painstaking organization than in the past, had also played its hand with relative caution—one indication being the way in which its two most fiery spokesmen, L. Short of the Federated Ironworkers' Association and J. Maynes of the Federated Clerks' Union, were kept out of the major debates. The initial confidence of their leaders was plainly dealt a shattering blow by the defeat of the recommendation on Industry Group electoral procedures, but by the time Congress ended, their jubilation at the results of the Industry Group elections overshadowed all else.

The A.C.T.U.'s moderate leadership, for its part, could derive a great deal of satisfaction from the adoption of its wages policy and penal provisions recommendations, particularly since its one defeat at the previous Congress in 1963 had occurred on the second of these issues.² The results of the Industry Group elections, on the other hand, may have given the leadership less cause for satisfaction. Left-wing representation on the Interstate Executive, though reduced, has by no means been destroyed. But in terms of the personalities and temperaments involved, its character has been altered—notably by the exclusion of T. Wright. The absence of his moderating influences on the left-wing of the Executive could be seriously missed by the leadership. Moreover, the numerical drop in the left's Executive representation, whatever it does for the A.C.T.U.'s public "image", could prove damaging to the Interstate Executive's domestic authority because it leaves the moderate leaders more open to the charge that they are prisoners of the right. Such a charge, whatever its truth or falsity, may well carry more weight among unionists in the future than it has in the past. It is certainly a charge that will be made, and not least in connection with moves already initiated in New South Wales and Victoria to form industry associations of unions outside the framework of the A.C.T.U.

FOOTNOTES

1. Some observers have suggested as particularly significant, in connection with this division, the fact of the absence from it of some 25 credentialled delegates. It is to be noted, however, that a fluctuating but usually substantial number of delegates is invariably absent when A.C.T.U. Congress divisions are held, however important the issue (whether this is because absence is the only method of abstention available, or for other reasons, is unascertainable); and in the case of this division, in which the total of votes recorded was the largest of the Congress, the number of absentees was comparatively small. See, e.g., R. M. Martin, "The A.C.T.U. Congress of 1961", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 3/2, October, 1961, p. 141.
2. See R. M. Martin, "The A.C.T.U. Congress of 1963", *ibid.*, 5/2, October, 1963, p. 151.