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Australian Trade Unions

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It CAN hardly be claimed that Australian trade unionism has been a neglected field of study. Yet the fact remains that until now the only extended studies with any real claim to be comprehensive contemporary surveys have been of chapter-length rather than of book-length, despite one or two deceptive book titles. For this reason alone *Australian Trade Unions* (Sin Books, Melbourne, 1968, pp. 225, \$3.25) is a landmark; and all with an interest in the subject can be grateful to those associated with the publication of this book—not least to the editors, P. W. D. Matthews and G. W. Ford, whose inspiration it was and whose enthusiasm and tenacity were instrumental in getting it off the planning board and into the press.

The book's comprehensiveness is indicated by the titles of its seven chapters written by contributors well known as either students or practitioners in the field—R. A. Gollan on "The Historical Perspective"; N. F. Duffy on "Unions in Action: Aims and Methods"; P. W. D. Matthews on "Trade Union Organization"; W. P. Evans on "The Australian Council of Trade Unions"; R. D. Williams on "White-Collar Unions"; D. W. Rawson on "Unions and Politics"; and G. W. Ford on "Unions and the Future". The most penetrating, as well as the most polished, is Dr Rawson's contribution which is particularly notable for the further stage to which he carries the argument about the consequences of Communist (and anti-Communist) trade union leadership. Mr Evans, in the longest chapter of the book, gives the most comprehensive single account published to date of the formal structure and functioning of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, together with a useful appendix on State trades and labour councils. Mr Matthews makes a substantial contribution towards filling the largest gap in the literature with his study of internal union organization.

But it is perhaps a little invidious to single out particular contributors, either for praise or blame. For the book is not merely a compilation of available writings, but a planned attempt to provide "a basic survey of unionism in Australia" (p. 11). As such, it is more appropriately judged as a whole, since individual contributors are largely dependent on editorial guidance in avoiding the many hazards involved in a joint enterprise of this kind. Judged from this standpoint, it must be said that the editorial hand has lain far too lightly on this book.

At the most elementary level, there are the flat contradictions. On one page, for example, we are told that the Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union is affiliated to the High Council of Commonwealth Public Service Organizations, but on another that it is not (pp. 122, 163)—the latter being correct. Two different dates are given for the formation of the Ministry of Labour Advisory Council (pp. 55, 124, 171), and for a crucial application to an arbitration tribunal (pp. 157, 160). The total affiliated membership of the Australian Council of Trade Unions varies, if marginally, between text and appendix (pp. 117, 212), as also does the number of unions affiliated to the HCCPSO and the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations respectively (pp. 117, 163, 214, 215)—and if, in the case of ACSPA, the discrepancy might be ascribed to differing dates of compilation, it would surely have been preferable to rely solely on the more recent. There is also unnecessary

repetition. The story of the rise and decline of the Ministry of Labour Advisory Council is recounted, with only slightly varying but in some measure contradictory embellishment, on three different occasions (pp. 55, 124-5, 171-3). There is an extraordinary flurry of repetition in the compass of five pages (pp. 158-62). The composition and functions of the Joint Council of the Commonwealth Public Service are outlined twice (pp. 56, 163)—and the two accounts do not tally. A superficial and rather strange four pages on political aims and political action (pp. 53-4, 67-9) have been allowed to stand despite the fuller and more knowledgeable treatment of the subject in a later chapter. The contradictions and the repetition are irritating because they are both confusing and readily avoidable. But the book is open to more serious criticism—even if it is approached on its own terms in the sense that one does not choose to quarrel with the assumed scope of its topic, with the structure of the exposition, or with specific interpretations advanced in the course of exposition.

First of all, at a relatively minor level, it is surely misleading for the purposes of a "basic survey" to reproduce in two appendices (and cite them elsewhere) the memberships on which individual unions are affiliated to the ACTU without explaining that these are frequently understated, sometimes grossly, in order to reduce affiliation fees. Again, for the purpose of such a survey, it is expecting rather much of readers to throw even abbreviated income and expenditure accounts and an expenditure diagram on to the page (pp. 94-6) without giving some explanation of *how* they illustrate what they are asserted to illustrate.

More important is the "historical perspective" given. The contributor of the chapter with this title was apparently required to cover only up to 1950. There is no connected account of the trade union story and its background for the period of nearly two decades that follows; there are only bits and pieces that emerge, according to the interests of particular contributors, from subsequent chapters. Bits and pieces, in any case, are virtually all we are given of the story of the crucial 1940s also, which are dismissed in one and a half pages. Moreover, it should surely have been explained why it was decided to omit the long history of white-collar unionism altogether from the general historical perspective, as if it were some insignificant oddity. Even when that history is recounted, in the chapter on white-collar unions, there is no mention of the great and, in white-collar terms, ancient organizations of public servants other than those relating to teachers and some sections of the Post Office.

Another kind of omission is reflected in the bloodless formalism of the chapters on union organization, the ACTU and the white-collar unions. There is a tantalizing reference in the first of these to the "much greater differences" involved in the "current informal structure" (p. 83) of the two unions whose formal structure is detailed in preceding pages; but nothing more. Again, there are one or two more or less oblique references of a similar character in the ACTU chapter, but for the rest, attention is unrelentingly confined to formal relationships; as it is also in the chapter on white-collar unions. This is perhaps particularly unfortunate in the case of the account given of the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations, which leaves the impression that once the ACSPA had been created, its development from then on was a matter of course. In reality, the rise of the ACSPA is a much more impressive achievement, the measure of which is to be found in the difficulties it has faced within its own structure and in its relations with other white-collar organizations, with the manual unions and with governments.

But it is not merely modesty which prevents Mr Williams from mentioning these things and thus indicating the full extent of what he and his colleagues have achieved over the last twelve years. As secretary of the ACSPA, with its past to consolidate and its future to work for, and as one of the most able and dedicated trade union leaders in this country, he is plainly not free to speak publicly on such matters. The puzzle one is left with is the possibility that the editors of this book imagined he was.

Even more puzzling, however, is the small attention paid to compulsory arbitration. A short section on arbitration viewed as a method of union action is restricted in scope to arbitral structures and procedures and to union attitudes to arbitration (pp. 59-63), the latter also being touched on in the historical chapter. Elsewhere (p. 72), the "organizational obligations" to which unions are subject under arbitration legislation are curiously disposed of after being summarized in a dozen lines (though "enabling unions to sue for dues" sits uncomfortably under this heading; and the list, while including members' legal ability to challenge union elections, fails to mention their right to secure "court-controlled" ballots). These are the only substantial references to the unions' legal environment. And yet in their introductory remarks, and again in the last paragraph of the book, the editors rightly emphasize the distinctive feature of Australian trade unionism—that it operates in the context of a comprehensive system of compulsory arbitration (pp. 12-13, 208). They also point out: "Although there has been considerable discussion of the legal aspects of this system, there has been little attempt to analyze its effects in (sic) the institution of unionism" (p. 13). After this, the reader is entitled to feel mystified that no attempt whatever has been made to provide such an analysis in this book.

Then there is the "select bibliography of further reading", which consists chiefly of works on overseas union movements. It is a pity that the opportunity was not taken to provide, instead, a full bibliography of both books and articles specifically concerned with Australian unions. This would bulk small enough, as is indicated by the cited list of articles in Isaac and Ford (eds.), *Australian Labour Relations: Readings*; and it would have been most valuable had this list of articles been brought up to date, its omissions remedied and books added to it. As it is, the Australian section of the bibliography that we are given is decidedly odd. It includes *Labour History*, but not the *Journal of Industrial Relations*. Of the eight other items in it, all but one are histories, only two of which (each dealing with a single union) venture past the Second World War. Above all, however, apart from some other titles that might have been added to give the list some balance, it omits J. Hutson's *Penal Colony to Penal Powers* (Amalgamated Engineering Union, Sydney, 1966, \$1.50) which, for all its frank partiality, remains the most genuinely knowledgeable contemporary comment on major aspects of Australian trade unionism that is currently available in book form. It is, in my view, to be disagreed with on many points; but not to be ignored in this way.

Mr Hutson's book (written as it is by a full-time union official) presumably does not come up to the standard one of the editors of *Australian Trade Unions* has in mind when he complains of the union movement's failure to produce a "quality publication to set out its story to (sic) its potential members" (p. 200). This comment is made at the point in the book where prescription takes over from analysis. Here, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the desirability of more trade union education and publicity. Both, of course, are safely fashionable proposals. But the terms in which these proposals are usually

discussed are notable for their lack of precision, and arguments supporting them for their lack of evidence. The treatment of the proposals in this book is no exception, and there is about it an unfortunate sloganizing flavour. It is surprising that in a book of this character it was not considered necessary, for example, to make some attempt to take up the complex point raised earlier by Mr Evans when he remarks that while the need for education and training programmes is appreciated within the ACTU, yet "the exact forms to achieve the best results are not so clear" (p. 142). And if, as is asserted, youth committees, along with "union-run social functions for youth" and the "Youth and Unions Week" approach, are ineffective as means of interesting young people in unionism, what is it precisely that constitutes the suggested alternative—"an imaginative, flexible and well worked out continuing programme" (pp. 201-2)? In any case, what are the grounds for assuming that the alternative can be any more effective? Also ignored is the question of priorities in relation to the advocated expansion not only of education and publicity programmes, but of union research facilities as well. This is plainly a crucial question in a situation of scarce resources. Had some thought been given to the question in this book, there might have been a rather less uncritical reception of the ACTU Congress's decision to appoint an education officer and a publicity officer at this stage. For it is at least arguable, in the light of the experience of the British Trades Union Congress for one, that the interests of the ACTU and the trade unions in general would be better served at this juncture if this portion of the ACTU's limited finances was instead used to expand its hard-pressed (as Mr Evans points out on p. 142) research section.

When all is said and done, however, this is in existing circumstances a useful book. Its value could be increased if, as is to be hoped, there are further editions of it and the opportunity is taken to improve it. The publishers themselves have responsibilities in this respect also. The book is appallingly bound (the review copy fell apart at two places after one reading); there are too many misprints; and although paginating from the front cover through the fly-leaf and title-page may not be unethical, it is certainly unusual and formally adds something like a dozen pages to a paperback that seems steeply priced.