

Songs and Poems of the Patrick Dispute in Australia 1998

Easter 2018 marks the twentieth anniversary of one of the most extraordinary disputes in Australian labour history.

In 1998 Australia's Federal or National Government led by a Conservative Prime Minister John Howard conspired with the waterfront company Patrick Stevedores to destroy the Maritime Union of Australia, the MUA, by sacking the union workforce and replacing them with scab labour.

The MUA has a long history of militant action in support of workers rights, and the reactionary Howard Government had another history - of attempting to take those rights away.

In this presentation I'm going to chart a little of the MUA's activist history and discuss the ways in which a creative protest developed against the government's illegal activities during what became known as The Patrick Dispute.

Gramsci and "The Popular Creative Sprit"

Confined to a prison cell at the Italian dictator's command during the war against against fascism, the famous Italian working class leader Antonio Gramsci wrote of many important aspects of rebellion and resistance including what he termed "The popular creative spirit."

Gramsci Scholar Renate Holub has expanded on Gramsci's short phrase in the following way:

This creative spirit is subject to domination, discrimination, marginalisation and oppression because it consists of people capable of producing a consciousness, a consensus to their state of subjugation. It is this spirit which is capable of producing an alternative or counter-cultural consciousness to the predominant or high culture, capable of rupturing the continuity of the flow of domination, capable of rupturing the silence which is imposed.

MUA history of opposing war and campaigning for peace.

The MUA has a long history of peace activism and the union's resistance to war includes several key actions which go some way to explaining the Conservative government's hatred of this organisation.

As far back as 1937, two years before the outbreak of WW2, union members in the New South Wales industrial city of Port Kembla refused to load pig-iron onto boats that were destined for Japan.

The action was carried out in protest against the Japanese imperialist invasion of China. And of course, Japan later attacked Australia during the war.

The union understood that the pig iron was destined for the Japanese arms industry. The Conservative Attorney General at the time was Robert Menzies - interestingly John Howard, the PM involved in the Patrick dispute was an ardent admirer of Menzies. Following his failed attempts to break the union boycott Menzies was known by the nickname "Pig Iron Bob".

The MUA has also been a great supporter of the Aboriginal Land Rights campaign. During what is known as The Wave Hill dispute which began in 1966 when Gurindji stockmen and women walked off Wave Hill station and demanded Wage Rights and Land Rights, members of the MUA and other unions in Darwin raised money to support the protest which lasted seven years.

Uncle Sam and Vietnam

Again, during the American war on Vietnam MUA members refused to load weapons destined for Australian soldiers' use on the ships Jeparit and Booneroo that were bound for Vietnam.

What is relevant also to this symposium is that the union also has a long history of involvement in cultural production - during the 1950s it ran the Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit which produced several important documentaries.

Lunch time concerts were not unusual, poster workshops for May Day, support of New Theatre are among some of the union's involvements.

And we should not forget the union's support for Indonesian independence from the Dutch and their involvement in Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens' famous documentary about the struggle for independence titled *Indonesia Calling*.

The Patrick Dispute – War on Workers

So, This long history of cultural, political and social activism combined with a strong control of workers' conditions on the waterfront meant that the union was a thorn in the side of conservative governments and stevedoring companies.

That's pretty normal, but what was different in 1998 was the conspiracy that developed between government and industry and the attempted use of soldiers to replace the unionised workforce.

The revelation that the Australian government and Patrick Stevedores were conspiring to lock out 1400 MUA members from their place of work and that the government was intending to send Australian special forces soldiers to Dubai to train as a substitute workforce on the docks with the objective of destroying the union was leaked by one of the soldiers to the union and to the press and created a storm of protest that involved hundreds of thousands of protestors in every port in Australia.

Two Old Ladies Hold Up A Train

This support created an atmosphere where creative community resistance took many interesting forms.

For example, in Melbourne a train carrying materials destined for the waterfront was stopped from taking these goods into the dock by two grandmothers who sat on the tracks, refusing to move and ultimately preventing the train from going forward. Like so many others these women, Molly Hatfield and Edith Morgan, had a long history of protest for women's rights and were happy to support the picket.

The tracks they sat on were subsequently pulled up and welded overnight to become a sculpture for the duration of the protest.

“With These Arms” Songs and Poems Composed During The Dispute.

What I want to focus on here is how during the relatively short period of the protests, another form of creative protest production burgeoned.

My website *Union Songs* functions as both a collection, repository and distribution site, an archive, for old and new lyrical works relating to union actions, philosophy and cultural life.

The site was an important agent in during the Patrick dispute as it offered writers a repository where the



Molly Hadfield and Edith Morgan Lead the Women's March

works which were written in response to what was happening, contemporaneously with the protest, could be accessed anywhere including internationally. An amazing 32 songs and poems were written or composed at this time.

In fact the site served as a rapid distribution agency for these new works, some of which, boomeranged back to the community of protestors and were performed at rallies and fund raisers. Ultimately this material served as the core of a CD I produced, “With These Arms”, to mark the centenary of the MUA.

Final Remarks

We have seen the way that community changed the power relationship during the dispute and I'd like to say a little more about Molly and Edith, the two women protestors who staged a sit down on the rail line leading into the docks preventing trains from entering the docks.

When Molly's daughter heard about the MUA Centenary CD Molly was in a nursing home. After I sent her a copy of the CD her daughter told me how proud her mother was of the CD which she kept on her bedside table and told visitors "this is my CD." And of course it was because without longtime activists like Edith and Molly things might have turned out very different.

Now I'll give you a taste of some of the songs composed at the time of the strike. Maurie Mulheron, whom I just mentioned is also a songwriter and singer. During the Patrick dispute he composed "Right That Time."

Right That Time a song by Maurie Mulheron

This song discusses the long radical history of the MUA and some of the important victories the union had been in historically like the refusal to load pig iron on a ship bound for Japan in 1932 as I discussed earlier. The song also lists the MUA's refusal to allow Dutch troop Ships to leave Australia to claim back their former colony in Indonesia, the union's refusal to load Australian war ships destined to take part in the American war in Korea, and later its refusal to load Australian ships during the American war against Vietnam. The last verse suggests the reasons for the massive support of the MUA in the fight to survive the attempts to destroy it.

With These Arms a song by Tim O'Brien offers a quite different emotional tone and mood from the historical argument of Mulheron's **Right That Time**.

With These Arms is a song about solidarity – and unlike Mulheron's strident, more traditional approach – O'Brien's work is more idealistic, almost romantic as he writes and sings about the events taking place – the protests, the community pickets around Australia where large sections of the community, men and women supporters came to the aid of the MUA, linking arms to prevent the destruction of the Union. He's appealing to our better selves, to our hearts.

We Belong To The Union a song by Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien's **We Belong To The Union** is perhaps more traditionally a Union solidarity song, more in the tradition of Mulheron's **Right That Time**. It's another song that details the rock solid community support for the MUA. And it's angry.

There's a warning here
To the men in grey
The pipers come
it's time to pay

We're taking back
What you stole away
Cause you can't break me!

There's a real contrast in approach between a song like **With These Arms** and the **Black Armband** a song by Economist and school teacher John Hospodaryk. If we think **We Belong to the Union** is angry, **Black Armband** must be considered enraged.

The title **Black Armband** is ironic – John Howard, the Prime Minister during the Patrick Dispute was well known for his cynical description of progressive historians view of history, particularly in relation to the long years of suffering and privation of Indigenous people under colonial and more recent conservative democratic rule. Howard used the term “black armband history” to denigrate those historians.

The song denounces the reactionary neo-liberal policies of the Howard Government and its ministers involved in massive privatisation and anti-union legislation on behalf of the US Conglomerates that own so much of the country.

It's a raging lament.

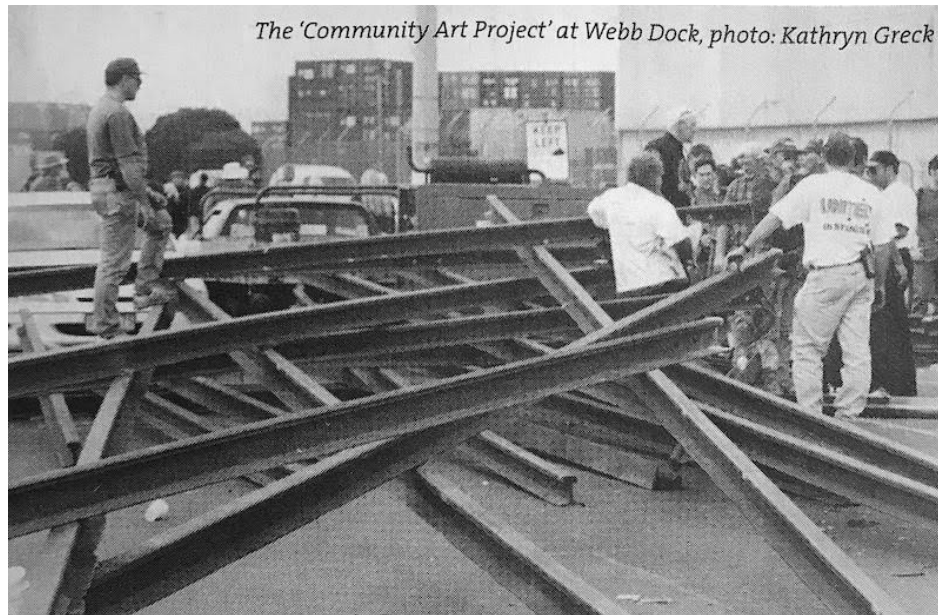
Balacava guards rottweillers and alsatians
Such is the face of your industrial relations
Anti-union tyranny right across the nation
On the waterfront and down the mines you're proud of your creation
You've got the gall to call it reforms in the workplace
When waging war on workers is a retrograde disgrace

Wendy Lowenstein's Poem – The Telephone Tree

Oral Historian and Folklorist Wendy Lowenstein paid the Patrick Dispute special attention and used her experience of her and waterside worker Tom Hill's oral history of Melbourne Waterside workers “Under The Hook” to publish an updated history. In doing so she added her own poem to provide a Brechtian response to the lockout, rounding up the local community and international response to the dispute.

On the tree,
burgeoning flowers of solidarity,
thorny twigs of resistance,
strong stems of disobedience
and seeds of victory.
Alight with love,
strong in struggle,
two old women (with comrades)
the next and
not-to-be-forgotten day
defeat black cargo,
turn a train away.

Each of the songs and poems collected during the short lived Patrick Dispute show a striking proof of the Gramsci–Holub thesis, and how important is the creative spirit in community attempts to thwart social injustice.



And the MUA and its supporters locally and internationally won the dispute.

There's a satisfying postscript regarding the government following the negotiated end of the dispute.

The chief instigator and organiser of the the attempt to bring the union to its knees, the man who thought up the illegal plan to have SAS soldiers trained to replace union workers, the then Minister of Industrial Relations, Peter Reith, resigned in disgrace and decided not to stand for re-election in what had been the safest seat in Melbourne.

Just a few years later Prime Minister John Howard suffered the same humiliation when he lost his very safe Sydney seat.