

E.B. Hutchinson.

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LABOUR HISTORY

By R.A. Gollan

To the question, why write labour history, there are at least two general answers. Firstly, it can be of immediate practical value to the labour movement. The funding of past experience, of successes and failures, can provide guide posts for present and future actions. This is recognised in practice by trade union officials, politicians, and even by rank and file members who, with their vote, take part in the making of decisions. It is the task of the historian to try to ensure that the picture of the past is accurate. Secondly, there is a reason which applies to all history. Every society from the most primitive to the most sophisticated needs a vision of its own past. Whether it be based on legend or scientifically established knowledge this vision constitutes one of the most important components of its culture. The role of the labour movement and the men who made it should have their proper place in that culture.

It is often stated, sometimes seriously, that in Australia historians have paid too much attention to labour. If this means that there are vast areas of Australian history that have not been properly studied it makes some sense: but if it means that the history of Australian labour has already been written it doesn't.

Good work has been done in Australian labour history but it is all within quite narrow limits. It has been confined largely to biography and political history. Work on trade unions has been practically restricted to the central trade union bodies and the general relations between unions and political and legal institutions. These veins are far from exhausted: there is still no satisfactory general political history of the labour movement; the politics of labour in a number of critical periods and regions have not been studied in detail; there is no worthwhile biography of a trade union leader; and even where work has been done there is plenty of room for different interpretations. If we continue within the established tradition there is useful work to keep many hands busy for many years.

But why keep to the established tradition? As Professor Asa Briggs said in his inaugural address to our sister society in Britain, new lines of approach suggest themselves. He cited as examples: "a study of the working class 'situation' taken in terms of health, leisure, etc... social history in the fullest sense, including politics, but not tied exclusively to politics; studies which focus attention on class relations, the impact of other classes and class organisations on the workers; and a strictly economic history of labour". In Australia one would add, because they have received less attention than in Britain, individual histories of major unions, the history of ideas and opinion, and the history of popular culture.

The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History was formed in the hope that it would help to foster study in these fields. Many different kinds of people with varying experience training and opportunities, can play a part in this work. Reminiscences, written and verbal, may have value in that they record events, opinions, and interpretations not otherwise available. Official histories of unions, written by union activists, are likely to be limited to the bare bones of union history or to be polemical works expressing the views of the writer or the official policy of the union. In either case they are a contribution to the study of labour history. The former provides a chronicle; the latter becomes an historical document itself.

For more substantial work we must rely on people with the necessary technical skill and opportunity. These qualifications are not possessed exclusively by professional historians and political scientists: there are self-trained men who because of the nature of their jobs or because they are retired have the necessary leisure to write major works; but we must assume that professionals, in the main university staff and students, will be the major contributors.

This raises the question of partisanship. A sympathy with, or support for, the purposes of the labour movement, so long as it is combined with a scrupulous regard for evidence, can provide the creative drive necessary to the writing of good history. To-day there are many people in universities with these qualities. The work that has been done and is being done by lecturers and students, much of it so far unpublished, is clear evidence of this. This is not to say that there is only one view within the universities about the labour movement; in fact all the trends of opinion within the labour movement itself are represented by people writing labour history. There are also some interested in labour history who are

opposed to labour. This is as it should be for it imposes on all the need to work conscientiously.

The aim of the Society is to assist in creating a climate for mutually beneficial contacts; for the exchange of information; for the location, preservation and collection of historical records; and for discussion and debate on questions of fact and interpretation.

The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History was formed in May, 1961. The constitution, officers and minutes of the inaugural meeting of the Society appear on pp. 62-67 of this Bulletin.
