

NINE STONE SIX WRINGING WET

Ted Bull retires—end of era on Melbourne Waterfront

Born in “The Fitzroy Narrows”, from Catholic to Communist, from humping bluey to Secretary of the Melbourne Branch of the Waterside Workers’ Federation — after 30-odd years on the Waterfront Ted Bull retired in mid-1979.

“My family was no different from many other working-class Catholic families. I was a son of the church, an altar boy no less. I was only nine when dad died. He was 42, a wharfie, a bit of a knock-about, and an excellent boxer.”

In 1929 Wall Street crashed. The depression came to Australia. Young Ted was sent to the Presbytery by a desperate mother. “The priest gave me a five-bob grocery order to feed mum and six kids. The effect of this on a lad who had such complete faith in the church was devastating. “I recall saying to him that, from this moment on, you’ve lost a good Catholic family. I was only nine years old then, but the memory is crystal-clear.”

Bull saw his friends and their furniture thrown out into the same streets he had played in as a young boy. He saw the stones fly and the punches land. He saw his neighbours on one side and the police on the other.

At the age of 17 he hit the road, mainly tramping

the eastern states; trying his hand at stooking, pitching hay, milking, on the wheat and can-stacking. “There was a saying among the unemployed who sought work from the cockies — fifteen bob a day and keep — bring your own cows.”

Hounded from haystack to railway station this huge column of unemployed snaked its slow way around Australia, kept on the move by the paid prodders of the system, the police and railway narks.

“You’d be sitting in a goods wagon and a bloke would knock softly on the side: ‘Any room there, mate?’ ‘Sure,’ and then the railway demons would jump in and give you a good hiding.”

Some of the railway police became notorious. Everyone knew about Wingey Ross of Gympie — “had only one arm but made up for it with a loaded piece of piping”. And of course there was Baxter the Bastard.

“The narks didn’t always get away with it — Baxter got a few good hidings — one a very good one.”

Hard times threw the unemployed together. “The blokes stuck like glue to a blanket in blues with the coppers, but although there was a common bond there was not a common understanding.”

“There were a lot of angry men and some deep thinkers among them. While we broke our backs hammering

rocks to build Studley Park Road for an extra deener a day, it was an obvious case of making a road for the rich; but other blokes saw further than this and put up alternatives."

"I met this bloke Ross along the track. He was a couple of years older than me and had read a bit. He got onto the cause of the depression. For the first time I got past effects."

Back in Melbourne Ted's commitment to communism grew. With the courage of his convictions the outspoken Bull "jumped the stump" at Smith Street, Collingwood every Friday night, and every time he came home with at least one eye black. "As you won 'em you wore 'em. It's no use blueing like a bad mug."

After the war he worked in one hundred and one places and occupations. He drove a tipper for a while at Starvation Creek, but had to move on after a "misunderstanding" with the foreman. At Mooroopna he excelled as the best stacker in the cannery. He bailed out of this job when they tried to pit the workers against a new stacking machine. "What do they think a bloke is?"

Not just anyone could get a job carrying the hook. The workers had their own competent methods for culling out the unsavouries. You had to be nominated and seconded by members of the union, and then you went before the committee. The final stage was acceptance by the blokes. At the next mass meeting of waterside workers you marched onto the stage and you stood open to challenge. "Of course you had the right to stand up for yourself, but it was a good system then. Odds on if you'd been a provost, a copper or a scab, someone would remember."

When Ted joined the Waterfront conditions were "absolutely pitiful".

"If you didn't keep your head down and your backside up, you'd be sent up the road. The foreman could sack you for just looking at him."

Being "sent up the road" also meant an appearance before the Chairman of the Australian Stevedoring Industry

Board who was empowered to suspend wharfies for periods ranging from one day to life.

"There was no permanency then; it was a casual industry. Up to three thousand men would gather in what we called 'the compound'. It was like a big concentration camp from where you'd be picked for work, if work was available."

"We had to fight for everything — protective clothing, gloves, overalls, dirt money, protection against obnoxious cargoes, walking time, short shifts, limits on weights.

"You only got threepence for handling ammunition, including detonators, down at the Altona powder grounds."

"In 1948 we didn't have canteens and we used to eat our meals sitting on the cargo which could include hides, kangaroo skins, or even poisonous substances. Many a lunch was lost to the draught horses that used to pull the cargo."

There was even a Harbour Trust ban on rank-and-file meetings on the dock.

Regulation 275 of the Melbourne Harbour Trust Regulations provided: "Every person who shall commit any of the acts following shall be guilty of an offence; that is to say: . . . 36. Hold any meeting or address any assemblage within the Port without the consent of the Commissioners in writing."

It was against such a background that Ted Bull and other rank-and-file wharfies stood up and were counted. This soon led them into confrontation with the union officials and the Stevedoring Industry Board, behind whom stood the predominantly-English shipowners.

"If you couldn't talk, you couldn't organize; and if you couldn't organise, you'd be kept right down." It was that simple.

Ted began to hold shipside meetings. "The union officials threatened to run me off the Waterfront." The response from the police was equally direct.

On the 25th of February, 1952, I was speaking at 9 Victoria Dock, standing on some cargo, addressing about



200 men. A policeman came along and ordered me off the cargo. He asked me if I had permission to speak, to which I replied: 'No, I don't need permission'. He then said: 'Well, get down from that cargo or I'll charge you with wilful damage to cargo'. I got down and spoke in the shed itself, right at the foot of the cargo. He then said I was speaking on Harbour Trust property without permission and that I could not speak in the shed.

"I wanted to make a stand there, but the men advised me to jump onto the roadway from the shed. They gathered round the door and indicated that they wouldn't return to work until I'd had my say.

"I followed their advice and the policeman ordered me to accompany him to the police station. I asked him for the charge, to which he replied: 'There's no charge'. I refused to give him my name, address and bureau number because he had not charged me. He kept asking and I kept refusing.

"Finally, we walked from 9 Victoria Dock to 6 Victoria Dock where the police stations and cells used to be inside the dock area. As soon as we left for the station the men at 9, 10 and 14 Victoria Dock stopped work and resolved not to return to work until I was back on the job. Tom McCool came to the station to make sure the police didn't get into me. He was told to leave, or he'd be locked up too.

"Inside, they sat me down and asked for my name and address. This time I changed my tack. I said: 'Look, you don't want my name and address. I've done nothing wrong. I know my rights as a law-abiding citizen and I want to see a solicitor'.

"One of them gave me a nice couple of back-handers that made me know what they were about. Then they called out to their sergeant: 'Do you know this smart bastard?' One of them answered: 'He's one of these blokes who knocks around with Doctor Dobbin - he's a Communist. This smart bastard reckons he knows about the Law and

what he's entitled to'.

"Well, they nearly went berserk. They rushed over and gave me the hiding of my life. They had everything about me in a file."

The arresting policeman was Constable Eric Clements who charged Bull that he "did at Victoria Dock within the Port of Melbourne on 25/2/52 address an assemblage of persons without the consent of the Harbour Trust Commissioners" and that he "did, when requested to state his name and address, refuse to do so."

Ted was then taken to Bourke Street West Police Station and bailed out by a solicitor named Rex Mortimer. The men on the job had marched on the union office and demanded that the officials assist Ted.

When Ted returned to work, the men also resumed work and all ships started again.

The ensuing legal wrangle, 'The Harbour Trust v Bull', is still cited in cases concerning civil liberties and free speech.

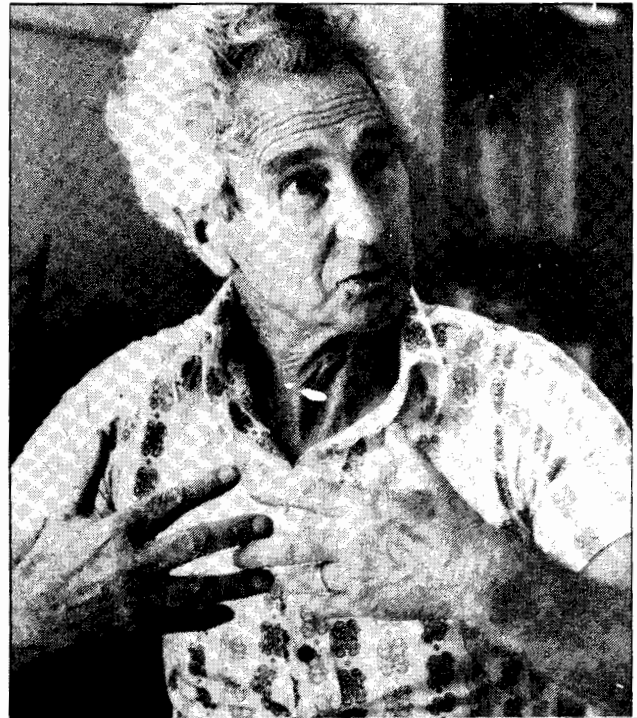
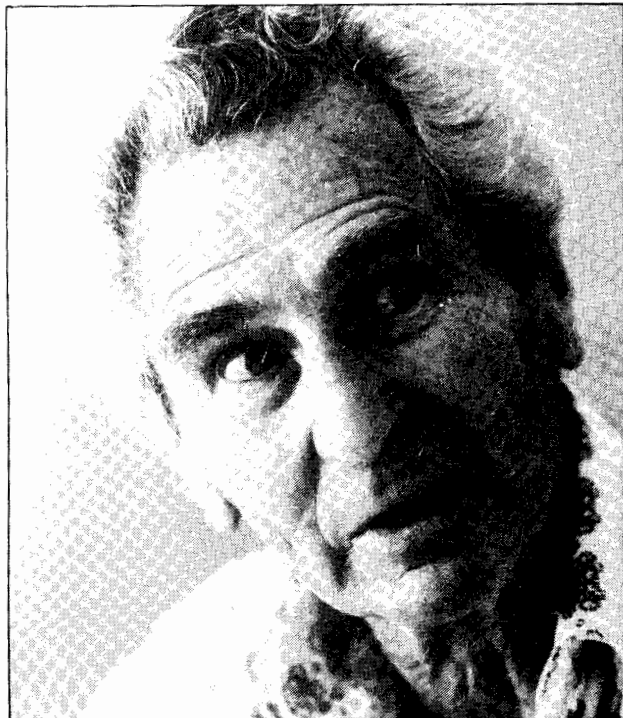
The two charges against Ted were heard together on March, 3, 1952 at the Melbourne Court of Petty Sessions before Mr. Addison S.M. Ted was acquitted.

An appeal against his acquittal was lodged on April 3, 1952, to the Supreme Court. On July 18, Justice Shall ordered that the case be referred for hearing and determination by the Full Court of the Supreme Court.

On November 27, 1952, the Full Court of the Supreme Court, constituted by Justices Herring, Martin and Smith, dismissed the appeal.

On March 12, 1953, the High Court of Australia dismissed yet another appeal against Ted's acquittal. Justices Kitto and Williams dissented from the ruling of Justices Webb, Fullagor and Taylor.

The struggle for free speech and proper conditions was made all the more difficult by the absence of a genuine union leadership. The Executive was dominated by corrupt



and violent "Industrial Groupers". It was not until 1954, with the election of Charlie Young as Secretary, Frankie Bates as Committeeman, and Ted as Vigilante Officer (Union Organiser) that the Groupers' stranglehold was challenged.

The Groupers refused to issue Bull with a union car with which to carry out his duties. Not to be deterred, he bought a bike and did the rounds of the wharves by muscle power.

"The blokes got their backs right up. Three months later we broke through in most key positions.."

The elections also solved the mystery about how an unpopular leadership always beat a popular opposition.



"The ballot box was like a huge tea-chest, only twice the size. It had a false bottom about a foot deep. That's how we had been beaten in previous elections!"

The ballot box was put on display for many years. From 1954, a Returning Officer and Scrutineers were introduced and "whenever the box went down onto the job for a vote, at each ship there were representatives from each side present. The box was sealed and deposited in a bank every night.

"The State Electoral Officers came down to look at the ballot and said it was better conducted than any government ballot. We got a turn-out as high as 97.8 per cent, with the rank-and-file ticket winning overwhelmingly."

It is a matter of history that The Groupers were driven from power on the Waterfront. Following the initial breakthroughs in the early 'fifties, the progressive forces swept to power. A new era came to the Melbourne Waterfront.

Ted has seen, and been part of, changes that have affected not only the rights and conditions of the men, but the very nature of their work. The draught horses that used to steal his lunch were soon replaced by the little Lister machine. Then came the small three-ton forklifts and the steam, water and friction winches. Today, a visitor to the wharves is overwhelmed by huge container cranes with a

240-ton capacity, big hydraulic winches, forty-ton power forks, and jumbos that lift 500 tons.

"Much of the back-breaking work has gone."

The Stevedoring Board, that later became the Stevedoring Authority, has been abolished, replaced by a system of direct negotiation with the ship-owners. The Board's offices, in which so many hardworking wharfies were charged with "impeding the safe and expeditious handling of cargo" have now been taken over by the Waterside Workers' Federation.

The number of stevedoring companies has dwindled to about three, as the big have gobbled up the small. The former British monopoly has been cut down by American, Japanese and Soviet interests.

Ted is very much the forward-looking 'young man', with a clear and splendid vision of the future. An unequivocally patriotic Australian and Communist, his feelings for the people are matched by his feelings against their opponents.

"Australia shouldn't be dominated: we should own and control our own shipping line. Here we are, an island continent, surrounded by water, with 80 per cent of our exports and imports going by sea. Yet foreign multinationals do it for us.

"In the 1920s we had our own national line, the Bay Line or "People's Ships". The Bruce-Page government sold it to British interests somewhere round 1925. A scandalous situation developed with Lord Inchcape renegeing on payments. As an aftermath -- during the war we were charged for transporting our own troops in our own boats!

"Now it's in the wind that the few ships we do have are also going. The Australian National Line needs to expand and develop its own stevedoring company. It's only recently that A.N.L. have built ocean-going ships for overseas trade.

"We've proven that we can build ships. Some of the millions going out of the country each year could be diverted into ship-building, employing thousands of men."

Traditionally, the Conference Line (a type of cartel of the most powerful ship-owners who meet to determine freight rates) ships have posed the main threat to the National Line. An announcement by the Russians in the early '70s that they intended competing with the Conference Line, therefore lowering rates for Australian farmers, manufacturers and other exporters and importers of goods, was supported by the Waterside Workers Federation.

"The Soviet shipping line wanted to break the Conference Line domination. They offered to transport our wool 15 per cent cheaper. However, once the Soviets got their slice of the market, they joined the Conference Line -- and up went the freights!

"The Soviet lines also threatened to undercut the A.N.L. freight rates by 25 per cent in order to capture A.N.L.'s small slice of the market. This time we were wiser . . ."

Bull has now retired. Union rules prescribe compulsory retirement at 65. Since he left there have been no big splashes in the daily press. Bull himself has avoided publicity. He is an intense man, certainly a leader, but with a capacity to stay among men. Throughout the interview he reiterated: "I was one man among thousands of workers. It is the might of the working class that changes history."