

TRADE UNIONS, MYTH AND REALITY

EDWARD DAVIS

An examination of trade union operations quickly reveals that both the character and nature of union activities differ sharply from the stereotyped image depicted by media powers. This paper will review the popular mythology, and note its departure from the reality of union operations. This account is presented in four sections. The first gives examples of media comment, the second investigates the source of, and rationale for such statements, the third suggests the reality of trade union activities, and the fourth presents a proposal for remedial action.

THE MYTH

The myth that is propagated about trade unions habitually constructs the following picture: trade unions are large, extremely powerful and dominated by a 'coterie' of subversives. These people are ruthless in their determination to wreak havoc in order to expedite a socialist revolution. The image that is presented is invariably a variation on this theme, sometimes accentuating the unrepresentativeness of the subversives, sometimes the suffering of the poor, sick and old who are always depicted as the ailing victims of any union activities. It is instructive to look at some typical comments and witness both their assumptions and their language.

Paul Johnson, a sometime socialist, has had the honour of making probably the most widely disseminated anti-union comments. His description of trade union leaders as

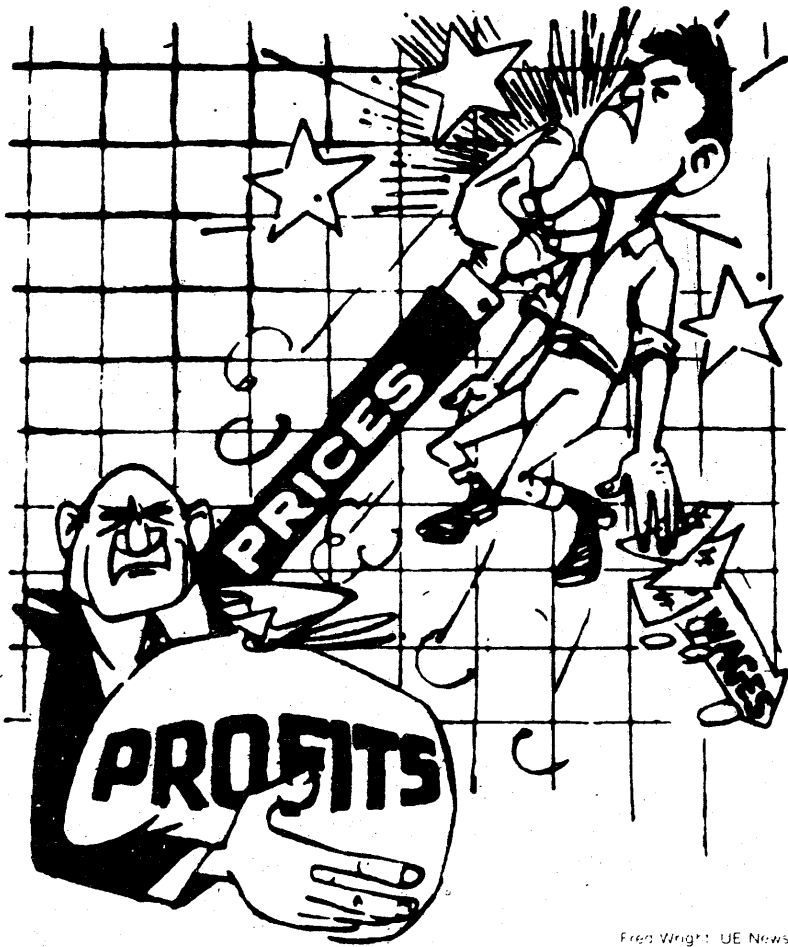
a band of determined men occupying key positions in society, and using their collective power to raise their incomes, regardless of the needs and interests of the rest...powerful men who conspire together to squeeze the community (like) gangsters (New Statesman, p. 653)

captures the essence of anti-labour feeling. In his article, hailed in boardrooms the world over, Johnson draws attention away from the vast decision-making power of the managers of banks, insurance empires and the business world, preferring to single out the unions as the source of all social problems. It is a theme, often repeated, in the organs of the capitalist press.

Worsthorne, in similar fashion, provided the following description of union activities, again eagerly paraded through the journals of the business world:

The trade unions, by ruthless use of the strike weapon can reduce a country like Britain to chaos in a few weeks far more effectively than the Luftwaffe was ever able to do...Herr Hitler was not a gentleman. Nor are the Communists in the unions who are also fighting to win... (Encounter, pp. 24, 28).

Such comments do not hide their intention to strike a terror of unions in the minds of people. By these tactics the media have achieved some success in



Fred Wright: UE News

eroding support for trade unions and the labour movement.

To turn a little nearer home, what is to be found in the Australian press? It is necessary to look both at reported comments (and their placement in newspapers and in broadcasts on the radio and television) and editorial observations. The following random selection are typical.

The Prime Minister: "we are entitled to ask whether union leaders are trying to sabotage the prosperity of this country ..." (Age, July 11, 1977, p. 1). Thompson, Acting Victorian Premier: "Communists, left-wingers and anarchists are doing their best to put this country out of business...They have been bashing the people of Victoria for some years. It is about time something is done before the unions wreck Australia" (Age, June 17, 1977, p. 3). An Age editorial, on the unions' stand against the mining of uranium at Mary Kathleen, described union

action as "the use of muscle by a minority, to dictate national policy, to impose its will on the majority, to usurp the role of government..." (Age, June 30, 1976, p. 9). And in an Age editorial on Newport, a policy decision was attributed to "a coterie of union bosses, representing at best only a section of the community, or at worst only their personal whims and ambitions" (Age, May 10, 1976, p. 9).

As can be seen, the Age flaunts the character of its political sympathies, both in the prominence given to anti-labour statements by such leading lights as Malcolm Fraser and Thompson of Victoria, and in its own editorial comment. But in terms of unsubstantiated observation and unmitigated bigotry the Bulletin surpasses other efforts. Witness the recent series on trade unions, written by Alan Reid. Two comments portray his disregard for the truth, and delight in scare-mongering. The AMWSU comes in for considerable attention. It is billed as "the prize industrial citadel of the Communists, able to shut down the nation's most vital industries on the orders of a handful of dedicated Communists". Its leaders are described as men "prepared to sacrifice jobs to further their ideological aims" (Bulletin, pp. 44,45). Both comments are an abrasive departure from the truth, even if it is the material most welcome to the Bulletin's audience. Three observations on the AMWSU are relevant: members of the ALP probably hold five times the number of posts held by Communists. Shouldn't the union be called 'ALP-dominated', a more accurate if less sensational label? Secondly, strike decisions, "able to shut down the nation's most vital industries", could only come from the rank and file members concerned. On some occasions, the decision to strike will be recommended by the official concerned, but probably as frequently, the membership will choose to strike against the advice of their official. On the basis of this daily experience, it is obviously nonsense to suggest control by a minority. (Reid, wisely, did not attempt to substantiate his allegation). And thirdly, far from seeking to "sacrifice jobs", the AMWSU has run an employment scheme for its out-of-work members during this year. In addition, unions are not prone to seeking

unemployment, which would curtail their own income, dependent on the dues of their members. From this cursory analysis, it is apparent that the prejudice of Reid's comments is only surpassed by the lack of common sense he has brought to his 'union-bashing'.

Before examining the source of the imagery depicted above, it is of interest to note the language used. Where Worsthorne used 'guilt-by-association' tactics, the majority rely upon emotive terminology. Prickett, in a review of anti-communism in the USA, remarked how non-communists win elections, communists capture posts; non-communists join a union, communists infiltrate or invade them; non-communists influence groups and communists dominate them (Industrial Relations, p. 220). As indicated by the Age's statements this strategy of double standards is one that constantly assails the Australian labour movement, and demands exposure.

THE SOURCE OF THE MYTH

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it (Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, p. 64).

The relevance of Marx's observation has not been dimmed by time. The owners of capital have not neglected the business of news and entertainment, indeed its control has been central to the profit-making purpose. The media have been instrumental in attacking the unions on a number of fronts. The very existence of television has diverted working people away from communal forms of entertainment, thus constraining solidaristic tendencies. In terms of content, news and 'current affair' programmes do not conceal their bias. Strikes are rarely reported in anything but unfavourable terms, wage claims are generally viewed as ruthless and unprincipled and trade union leaders are noted for their authoritarian tendencies. A serious problem confronts the unions, since the bulk of union members will tend to assess their union through the subtle tones of judgement implicit in mass media communications. A further problem is, of course, the class values which are imbued in the content of programmes and features, and are ever-present in the barrage of advertising that buffets the media's captive audience. Marcuse's analysis of "one-dimensional thought" is of relevance. Like him, we ask,

Can one really distinguish between the mass media as instruments of information and entertainment, and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination? (One Dimensional Man, p. 21).

McQueen has recently provided a trenchant critique of Australia's Media Monopolies. His analysis pinpoints the source of the anti-labour imagery in the media, and presents a persuasive rationale. He devotes some attention to the big three media monopolies, the Herald Group, and Murdoch and Fairfax empires. He correctly identifies their dominant attribute:

It is often said that the media are on the side of big business. This is not so. The media are big business (p. 39).

Murdoch and Golding in the 1973 Socialist Register have also documented the business properties of the media, noting both their tendency to market concentration and their increasingly conglomerate appearance. It is necessary to elaborate on the importance of these propensities. The media do not oppose wage-claims, strikes and demands for worker control on someone else's behalf. As enterprises,

employing 20,000 workers in Australia, they take this stand because they would suffer from increased wages and strike action and loss of managerial prerogative like all other big business. It is also instructive to investigate the critical role of advertising in the media. McQueen argued that for an accurate understanding of the relationship between the media and the advertising they carry, the 'conventional wisdom' must be turned on its head.

The commercial mass media are advertisements which carry news, features and entertainment in order to capture audiences for the advertisers (p. 10).

In short, the media's job is to sell audiences to advertisers. Programmes are not fashioned for the edification of the people, but are designed to attract the highest possible bid from big business. This insight helps explain the content of much of today's media.

An Aside on Strikes

It was earlier suggested that the media were unlikely to report fairly on strike situations. Firstly, it is necessary to look at the way strikes are reported. There are usually a string of comments as to 'man-hours lost', and 'lost wages' but very rarely are the social and industrial conditions which give rise to strikes reported. This tendency has been well-documented in Britain by the Glasgow University Media Group, who found, for instance, that in newspaper coverage of a strike by National and Local Government Officers, of 800 column inches on the strike, only 15 were devoted to the background and cause of the strike (Beharrell and Philo, p. 61). A similar criticism of media reporting is applicable in Australia. O'Neill, of the Media Action Group, remarked:

I can never recall when the printed media supported a strike or even advocated a wage increase. But there are thousands of times when they have attacked trade unions for going on strike. It is a heavy bias (Age, June 13, 1977, p. 7).

And it is important to note that unions are usually debarred from presenting their viewpoint; the airwaves are closed for them (see Ruff, AMWSU, Monthly Journal, p. 11).

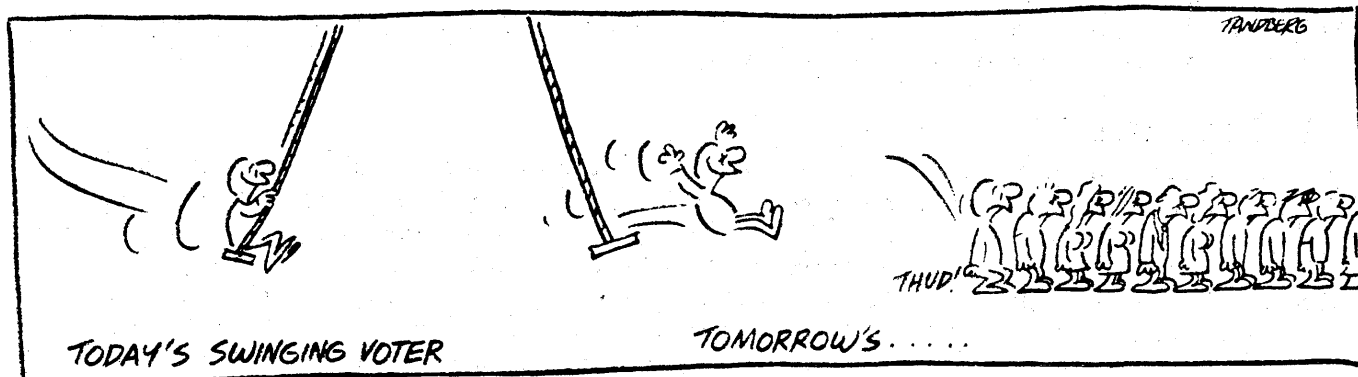
Frayn has also looked at strike-reporting. He notes that while public opinion is represented as unquestioningly conceding the right of men in a free society to withdraw their labour, it firmly opposes wages' strikes as materialist and greedy, and political strikes as challenges to the decisions of democratically elected governments! Frayn suggested that, to please public opinion, strikes should be held in the men's own time, rather than in the employers' (Frayn, p. 161).

Finally, on strikes, two observations should be made. Firstly, in terms of responsibility for production time lost, strike activity falls well behind other phenomena such as industrial accidents and certified sickness. Hyman, in Strikes, estimated that in the United Kingdom, industrial accidents caused the loss of twice as much time as strikes, while certified sickness accounted for thirty times as many days lost (Hyman, 1972, p. 34). In Australia a similar situation exists with the 'sickie' accounting for 4 percent of the workforce each day. This can be contrasted with the less than 1 percent of the workforce taking strike action on an average day (see Department of Productivity, Absence Rates, 1977). And when potential production lost through unemployment is taken into consideration, time lost through strikes can be seen as of little significance. It is then clear that strike statistics have been used to divert us from a proper understanding of poor production levels. Secondly, it is important to note the actual number of strikes, and labour involvement in strike activity. Through the supposedly strike-torn

years in Britain, 1971-73, the Department of Employment found that 98 percent of manufacturing establishments (where the strike disease was painted as at epidemic proportions) had had no strike at all (Guardian Weekly, December 12, 1976, pp. 1, 4). These findings reveal the need for a close scrutiny of industrial reporting, especially in regard to strikes and their impact on the economy. If such work is not undertaken, the myth of an economy beleaguered by strike action (and hence worker culpability) will be perpetuated, a myth that cannot be sustained by the relevant statistics, as indicated above.

THE REALITY

The reality of union operations is of a very different order from the promulgated myth. Take the usage of the term "Trade unions". The media have succeeded in conjuring up an image of impersonal and bureaucratic organisations which has diverted attention away from the extent of member-involvement in union activities. The use of such a re-ified concept has also implied a certain degree of similarity between unions, when, in reality, they are starkly diverse. To take two obvious differences, the 10 largest unions with over 80,000 members have little in common with the 59 unions which have under 250 members (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Ref. No. 6.24, December 1974, p. 4). And, as is well-known, the Australian union movement is made up of unions with greatly different political aspirations. The so-called right-wing is renowned for its support for the system, while left-wing unions are dedicated to its overthrow, and replacement with a socialist system. In addition, there are a wealth of other differences in terms of membership and trade characteristics, historical experience, structural form, etc. Therefore the reality is not a mass of similar institutions with like form and like determination, but probably the opposite.



Any examination of Australian unions must recognise two significant restraints on union power. Both the Arbitration system and collective bargaining are legalistic systems which surrender little authority to the workers and their representatives. Through these systems, norms are established which determine the appropriate areas for workers to negotiate. In other words, even those matters on which the unions bargain are selected and deemed appropriate by the managers of industry and the Judges of the Arbitration Commission. Workers and unions of all political persuasions then content themselves with making demands for marginal improvements in these selected areas. In addition, few unions can be seen to have mounted any significant opposition to the notion of the management's right to make every decision of importance in the workplace. For most workers, this has never even been recognised as an issue.

When these observations are brought together, it is clear that trade unions do not enjoy the power attributed to them, and pose little threat to the system. Such analysis does not provide new insight into the logic of trade union activities, indeed it has digressed little from the classical views of Marx and Lenin, and greatly enriched by Gramsci. Both Marx and Lenin, while noting the importance

of unions as workers' organisations and the raising of consciousness which accompanied workers' involvement in struggle, stressed that the revolutionary contribution of unions was necessarily limited by their preoccupation with gaining improvements within the system, rather than challenging the system itself (see Wages, Prices and Profit, pp. 77-78, and What is to be Done?, p. 70). Gramsci further elaborated this theme, seeing unions as enmeshed in a web of "industrial legality" which union officials grew to accept as a permanent state of affairs (Soviets in Italy, pp. 22-59). It was, after all, their daily reality much as arbitration hearings and management negotiation sessions are for today's Australian union organisers (for a restatement of Gramsci's views, see Wright Mills and Anderson). The ACTU plea that workers should be rewarded through National Wage Cases for "compliance to the guidelines" again indicates the strength of the system and the unions' subordination to it.

To turn from the plane of theory, to a research project which I have carried out, and which further substantiates the relevance of the classical interpretation of union activities. From late 1975 to mid-1977 I attended the decision-making meetings of the Victorian Branch of the AMWSU. During this period I attended the National Conference, two State Conferences and countless State Council and Administrative Committee meetings. The AMWSU co-operated in every respect with my study. Two findings of significance are relevant to this discussion. Firstly, the AMWSU, far from concentrating on political matters, as the media would have us believe, focusses the bulk of its attention on improving the wages and conditions of its members. That is their stated priority, and while the officials may nurture the hope that action around wages will have political repercussions, it is hardly a revolutionary goal. Secondly, while the organisers may espouse radical causes, the nature of their job determines that they spend their days in negotiation over improved wages and conditions, or travelling between one session and the next. They are not continually engaged in radical political action. This is the reality, but one that is ignored by today's press.

A PROPOSAL FOR ACTION

What can be done? It is evident that action can be taken on a number of different fronts. Unions can increase the flow of pamphlets designed to combat the 'conventional wisdom' as established by the media. A recent example is the leaflet distributed by the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations, which tackles the myth that 'unions have too much power'. Their discussion of the considerable power of the very large corporations that dominate the Australian economy places the influence of unions in its proper perspective (Gorz has also treated this point, pp. viii and ix). Union support for ventures such as 3CR, Melbourne's Community Radio station, is also a means of transmitting an alternative viewpoint to the people. But I would like to concentrate briefly on another way of combatting the willful miseducation that envelops us. It has relevance for trade unions, and it is a proven method.

There is every indication that where a shop steward plays an active role, he or she can undermine the myths daily cast before the workers, and in that process, raise the political consciousness of his/her fellows. I visited a number of workshops with AMWSU members and found a strong positive correlation between workers seeking the shop steward for information about union activities, and their support for the union, and its policies. Where shop stewards failed to play an active role, did not pass on union communications, and did not call regular meetings to discuss shop and union matters there was an appreciable fall-off in support for the union. This can be illustrated by the following table. This illustrates the experience of two small metal work shops with differing attitudes towards the union.

The point is well-made by the table. In shop A, where the shop steward showed little interest in union affairs and did not attend either area shop steward or branch meetings, 46 percent of the workers found the television and radio and

newspapers the most informative source on union policy. They regurgitated the popular myth that their union has 'too much power'. This result stands in some contrast to shop B where the shop steward took a keen interest in union affairs, attended union meetings and in addition was a delegate to the State Council. A shop committee had been formed and regular meetings were held to discuss both shop and wider issues. In this shop 72 percent found the shop steward the most informative source on union policy, and 21 percent the newsletter. Only 5 percent turned to the media. Sixty-nine percent then rejected the notion that their union had 'too much power'. I suggest that these are important results. If trade unions are to gather increased support among their members and potential members, they have to resist the flow of lies about their activities. They have to extend the shop steward movement, and increase training programmes for stewards. It is not enough merely to increase the number of stewards (as the experience of shop A indicates), they must also be encouraged to perceive and enact their vital role within the union. By cementing this link between members and their organisations, unions can do something to oppose the implacable efforts of the media.

Table I
SURVEY OF ATTITUDES OF AMWSU MEMBERS

	Shop A (n=26) %	Shop B (n=39) %
"What are the most informative sources about union policy?"		
Shop steward	19	72
Union newsletter	31	21
Television and radio	27	5
Daily papers	19	-
No reply	4	2
Total	100	100
"The AMWSU has too much power?"		
Agree	62	26
Disagree	38	69
No reply	-	5
Total	100	100

Source: Survey of AMWSU workshops, May 1976.

CONCLUSION

There is a mythology, propagated by powerful business enterprises, about union behaviour. The myth lacks any substantiation. The reality, as noted by classical writers and illustrated here, indicates that unions do not have the power attributed to them and do not challenge the capitalist system. Indeed, they are part of the system. However, one path in particular has been suggested which might serve as a means to transform the predicament of working people. The shop steward movement, conceived at the point of production, can assert the hegemony of the working class, at present constrained by its powerlessness in the factory, and socially mesmerised by the media's pretty pictures.

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