

THE WISDOM OF OUR CLASS

*Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.*
William Wordsworth on the French revolution.

And bliss it was on 1 February 1968 to wake to the news up that the Viet Cong were attacking the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.
And on the Good Times rolled, carrying us through the May Days in Paris and past the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring, to be buoyed by the on-going Cultural Revolution in China, thrilled by uprisings across Latin America, and transfixed by 'The Fire This Time' as Black Panthers brought the war home to the United States.
That was the year that was 1968 when 'to be young was very heaven.'

But not only for the young. To insert a personal note. My father turned 70 in March 1969. He was secretary of his ALP branch and job delegate in a Brisbane tannery. Recalling the class wisdom he'd acquired fifty years earlier from the Wobblies, he stuck up hand-written notices: FAST WORKERS DIE YOUNG.

The sweep of revolution around the globe raised our expectations for radical reform.

A week before Clarrie's gaoling, I took part in a four-hour stoppage by Victorian secondary teachers for more pay. But we were also pressing for control of the curriculum and the abolition of the inspectors. Worker control spread from the Opera House site to factories facing closure.

At the the dawning of 1968, much was necessary for our class while more seemed possible.

In January, postal workers held an eleven-day national strike.
At that time, one thrust of militancy fed into the forest fire that would be sparked by Clarrie's imprisonment.

In December 1967, the Arbitration Commission had increased the Metal Trades Award by \$2.00 a week.
A win for the workers.

But the Commissioners told the bosses to absorb that increase into existing over-Award payments.
A loss for the wage-slave.

On February 6, 200,000 metal workers struck nation-wide in defiance of the 'bans clauses'.

A big blow against capital.

On February 20, the Commission back-tracked on absorption.

Another win for us.

That head-to-head saw qualitative changes in the contending classes over the campaign to abolish the Penal Powers.

Yet those Metal union victories did not end them.

Indeed, the boss class intensified its resort to them.

By 16 February, its agents had secured 52 'no-strike' orders in New South Wales alone;

had laid over 200 charges for contempt, and got the Industrial Court to impose fines totaling \$20,000.

Indeed, the total of fines on all unions during 1968 hit \$100,000, one-third of all the fines imposed since 1951.

Yet, what looked like a win for the bosses spurred our class to end that way of punishing strikers.

The workers' victory over 'absorption' spotlights three pillars in the wisdom of our class.

The first is that every contest over wages and conditions is decided by the relative strength of the contending classes.

Our strength binds together our creativeness on the industrial, political, intellectual and cultural fronts.

The shop stewards knew that there can be no such thing as a fair day's pay under the rule of capital. Drawing on the wisdom of our class,

The third pillar of class wisdom is that: 'We won't get from the courts what we can't hold at the gate.'

The state is not our friend. On the contrary, the state organises capital and disorganises labour. Sometimes, the state disorganises our class by organising us into the 'proper channels' of arbitration and the parliamentary road to nowhere.

At every turn, we struggle under a covert dictatorship of the boss class.

That truth was the foundation of Clarrie's Marxism-Leninism.

He understood why there could be 'no peaceful transition' to socialism.

Clarrie summed up this wisdom in the title he gave to the pamphlet he penned after his release: 'Penal Powers or Workers Power.'

He and his comrades based their tactics on these strategic pillars of class wisdom.

Not brute strength but how to sharpen your tools.

One other element in the relative strength of the contending classes is our ability to make a critical analysis of political economy.

WHAT WHY so many walked off even after Clarrie's release.

To give but one instance of what 'affluence' meant inside a worker's home. To be poor in 1949 meant not being able to afford a radio. By 1959, being poor meant not having a record player. By 1969, it meant having to rent a television.

Mass marketers expanded the socially necessary costs of reproducing our labour-power.

We had to cover expenses that were being induced in us to meet the needs of capital's expansion. We sought over-award payments and overtime, while leaning on hire-purchase.

Even when wages keep pace with prices, the necessity that capital has to expand if it is to survive means that households **need** a wider range of commodities.

That double-bind goes some way to explain why teachers and nurses were also striking, and why even bank clerks walked off in November '69.

The labour lieutenants of capital

On 8 March 1969, 'Lord Monk of Lygon' announced that he would not re-contest the Presidency at the A.C.T.U. Congress.

His preferred successor was ACTU Secretary, Harold Souter.

A few days later, Hawke met one of the three Labour Attaches in the U.S. Embassy, Emil Lindahl, in the Downtowner Motel, Carlton. Lindahl came out of their discussion to inform the waiting leaders of the Industrial Groups that the Embassy would be supporting Hawke, not lackluster Souter.

The CIA's assessment was a measure of how the balance of class forces had shifted. Only a Left personality would be able ride the storm.

That assessment is also why ASIO would pay Clarrie's fines.

'Boxing clever'

O'Shea strikes cannot be conjured out of the air, not even by chanting through a megaphone.

Only by making sense of what was possible and necessary in 1969 will we be able to draw useful comparisons with today. We've a duty to deepen our appreciation of what happened but even more to grasp 'exactly how.'

Santamaria's Industrial Groups dominated the Trades Hall in Melbourne. The DLP got 15 percent at the Federal elections in November 1969. Rank-and-file workers who voted DLP had to be won over.

The boss class can never give up. Its reaction after May '69 began in South Australia with a series actions for Torts, legalise for 'harms'. Howard's 1977 secondary boycotts amendments attacked our capacity to 'stand truly by each other.'

Since then, the political agents of capital have striven to turn the balance of class forces back to where it hovered before 1968-9.

From WorstChoices and the ABCC to Un-Fair Work Australia.

They've trampled on their 'new province for law and order.' We are back to the nineteenth century when unions fell under the Criminal and Commercial Law.

CONCLUDE

In 1970, I asked a French comrade how they planned to commemorate the Paris Commune of 1871.

"We did that in '68," he exploded. With a stereotypical French flourish he added: "To remember only anniversaries is like celebrating a marriage only on the wedding day. It means that love is dead."

We've gathered to recall a famous victory.

Yet we know that its finest celebration came in 1998 when we rallied to prove that the MUA is here to stay.

The spirit of standing truly by each other – the spirit of Eureka - swelled again as tens of thousands joined forces to beat back Worst Choices until sold down the river.

Which ever lot wins on Saturday, the results can do no more than initiate a further bout in the wisdom that Clarrie had learnt from a lifetime of struggle:

There is an irreconcilable conflict between capital and labour.

Humphrey McQueen

At the Tram and Bus Union celebration

Newport

15 May 1969