

UNIONSWA

A Brief History of UnionsWA: Reflections after 50 years

By

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A Brief History of UnionsWA: Reflections after 50 years

In 1963 the Trades & Labor Council of Western Australia (TLC) was established as an independent peak union body¹. This marked a new era for unions and the labour movement in WA. De-Politicised and separate from the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the WA labour movement became free to forge its own path in the constantly changing political and industrial climate, its independence granting it room to adapt and respond to challenges of the day. In 2000, responding to the changing industrial landscape and growing affiliation with “white” collar unions, the TLC became UnionsWA, better reflecting all affiliated unions and an attitude that, while still inclusive, went beyond trades and labour to encompass far broader aspects of a worker’s life and community.² At the 50-year anniversary we reflect and explore the transformations, successes and challenges of UnionsWA and its relationship and significance to the state it represents. By looking at how it came to be an independent body, its part in the Third Wave resistance and the MUA dispute, and the recent challenges of the last decade, we can begin to understand the story of UnionsWA at this reflective point in its history.

The end of industrial labour’s marriage to the Western Australian branch of the ALP (WA) was wrapped up in the political turmoil of the labour movement at the time, creating what Bobbie Oliver called “a vexed issue for WA unions.”³ Driven by anti-communist sentiments in 1955 the ALP split leading to the formation of the conservative Democratic Labour Party (DLP), which was destructive for Labour at electoral ballot.⁴ While gains were made during the second half of the 1950s, attitudes like those of ALP State Secretary, Joe Chamberlain, expressed keenly that in WA the continual relevance of the ALP (WA) was contingent on its association with its industrial body, known at this

¹ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. “The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia”. Essay, Edith Cowan University; Oliver, Bobbie. 2007. “Chamberlain, Francis Edward (Joe) (1900–1984)”. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 206; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013.

² Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013; Smith, Bruce A. 2010. Trades & Labor Council of Western Australia (1963 - 2000); UnionsWA. Brief History.

³ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. “The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia”. Essay, Edith Cowan University, 12-38; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 194-206.

⁴ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. “The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia”. Essay, Edith Cowan University, 33; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 173-202.

time as the Trade Unions Industrial Council (TUIC) (ALP WA),⁵ created by the State Executive in 1947 to achieve affiliation with the national union body, the ACTU.⁶

In 1948 the ACTU President and Secretary, Percy Clarey and Albert Monk, visited WA to investigate setting up a state branch.⁷ As most WA unions were affiliated with the ALP, Monk determined that the TUIC was best suited as the state's representative. However in 1959 registration became contingent on including unions and union members that were not ALP members.⁸ While this requirement was met with some resistance, the prevailing attitude in support of an independent body eventually won out.⁹ The first federally affiliated Western Australian Independent Trades and Labour Council (TLC) met in Trades Hall Perth in 1963, making the start of a new era in the WA's labour history¹⁰

In the following decades the TLC faced many of the same challenges from its inception to the mid-90s. Through the 60s and 70s campaigns run by the TLC resulted in improved health and safety in the workplace in the form of OHS, workers' compensation, equality of opportunity for disadvantaged groups including women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds and disabled workers, along with improved working conditions in company towns in the North West of the state.¹¹ While work continued on these issues, the 80s and early 90s reignited debates regarding freedom of speech,

⁵ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. "The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia". Essay, Edith Cowan University, 33; Oliver, Bobbie. 2007. "Chamberlain, Francis Edward (Joe) (1900–1984)". *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University.

⁶ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. "The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia". Essay, Edith Cowan University, 12-13; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 193-195.

⁷ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. "The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia". Essay, Edith Cowan University, 13; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 194.

⁸ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. "The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia". Essay, Edith Cowan University, 22-24; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 197-199.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Elliott, Lyla. 1994. "The Marriage and Divorce of Industrial and Political Labour in Western Australia". Essay, Edith Cowan University, 37. Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*, 204-206.

¹¹ Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 257-277; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013; Walker, John. Part 1 interview by Benjamin Archer. 26 Aug. 2013; Walker, John. Part 2 interview by Benjamin Archer. 26 Aug. 2013.

Aboriginal land rights, privatisation and deregulation of the labour market.¹² Perhaps the most spectacular and fondly remembered success came during the campaign against Graham Kierath's industrial reforms during the Richard Court Coalition Government of the mid to late 90s. Often referenced as the "third wave," meaning the resistance movement to the third wave industrial reforms, this period was characterised by several interesting events. In April 1997 it produced the largest recorded protest in Perth with some 30,000 people marching from the city to Parliament House. This occurred after an interesting media stunt orchestrated by Secretary Tony Cook and the TLC in jamming the freeway with slowly moving cars driven by union activists to raise public awareness about the third wave reforms.¹³

This led to the establishment of the Workers Embassy opposite Parliament House, a makeshift settlement operated by the WA unions which served as an activist centre, but also generated a space of heightened unionism and community, expressed acutely in the handing over of the barbeque tongs at the changing shift of each union at the site.¹⁴ With the building of additional structures over time, in particular a memorial wall dedicated to victims of industrial accidents, what was a small patch of dirt and grass became a WA heritage site known as Solidarity Park.¹⁵ During this period unionists occupied the Upper House overnight in an attempt to stall the passing of the third wave legislation in May 1997. The nuisance they caused with singing and floor banging was so great that proceedings were later moved in secret to a committee room where the legislation was passed.¹⁶ The occupiers

¹² Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 331; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

¹³ Gaines, Jo. interview by Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013; McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 356; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

¹⁴ Gaines, Jo. interview by Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013; McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 356-357; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Gaines, Jo. interview by Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades*

were assisted by all manner of people outside, and while they were unsuccessful in preventing the legislation from passing, the public disapproval of the reforms coupled with the dubious circumstances in which they came to pass meant that the legislation was never acted upon during the remainder of the Court government.¹⁷

An equally significant event occurred a year later in the form of the Patricks Dispute. Following new industrial relations laws introduced by the Howard Government, a dispute that started with Maritime Union of Australia members in Queensland spread around the country when Patrick Stevedores sacked 2000 waterside workers on the 7 April 1998.¹⁸ In Fremantle the MUA, with the support of the TLC, members of the community, labour representatives and ACTU, responded with round the clock picket lines at Patrick's wharf, which stood for several weeks until the conflict was resolved on the 21st of April.¹⁹ The dispute concluded with victory to the unions, with Justice North calling for the reinstatement of all Patrick workers.²⁰ The success was celebrated with unionists calling the picket line; Tom Edwards Stand, in reference to another dispute 79 years earlier.²¹ While these successes demonstrate the qualities of the labour movement, they also point to a darker image. The unity shown during the MUA dispute and the resistance to the third wave legislation, while admirable, are comparable to early struggles of the movement, implying that perhaps the union movement is still fighting the same battle from a century ago.²² In moving beyond the 90s', Oliver suggests that, "just

and Labour Council in Western Australia. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 357; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

¹⁷ Gaines, Jo. interview by Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

¹⁸ Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 358-359; Freeman, Janine. Part 1 interview with Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Robertson, Iain, eds. 2013. *Heritage, Culture and Identity: Heritage from Below*. Farnham: Ashgate, 204. .

¹⁹ McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 359-360; Robertson, Iain, eds. 2013. *Heritage, Culture and Identity: Heritage from Below*. Farnham: Ashgate, 204.

²⁰ McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 359-360.

²¹ Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 360.

²² *Ibid*, 360-361.

as in the political arena – new tactics and strategies [are] required to stem this trend.”²³ Looking at the last 10 years, there is strong evidence to suggest that UnionsWA has risen to this challenge.

The 2000s represent a harsh period in the TLC’s (now UnionsWA’s) history. The heavy attack on unions during the Howard era, followed by the controversies of the Rudd and Gillard Governments, has meant that UnionsWA faces unprecedented challenges in its continued relevance.²⁴ In spite of this, UnionsWA has achieved notable success in protecting industrial rights, adapting its operations, representing its affiliated unions and engaging with the community.²⁵ Transiting to an organising model, UnionsWA sought to actively engage the community in new ways, a value that had been refocussed during the third wave resistance.²⁶ Along with rallies, such as those that organised against the defeated Work Choices legislation during the mid-2000s, delegates were encouraged to activate their communities as part of collaborative movement.²⁷ A greater focus was placed on grass-roots campaigns such as “Save our Services” and “WA Jobs from WA Resources.”²⁸ At the same time UnionsWA has achieved a delicate balance between the unions it represents, working with its locally, nationally and internationally affiliated unions in their disputes and achieving significant and persistent success in public campaigns.²⁹ Internally the declining relevance of the tribunal court has led to a transition away from lawyers to media officers, showing a shift in focus to the relationship between unions, its members and the community.³⁰ No longer is unionism simply about fighting for a better wage, it never has been, as commented by Dave Robison, “UnionsWA is about leading a

²³ Oliver, Bobbie. 2003. *Unity is Strength: A history of the Australian Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council in Western Australia*. Perth: Australian Public Intellectual Network, 361.

²⁴ Freeman, Janine. Part 2 interview with Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013; Walker, John. Part 2 interview by Benjamin Archer. 26 Aug. 2013.

²⁵ Freeman, Janine. Part 1 interview with Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Freeman, Janine. Part 2 interview with Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013; Walker, John. Part 2 interview by Benjamin Archer. 26 Aug. 2013.

²⁶ Freeman, Janine. Part 2 interview with Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

²⁷ Freeman, Janine. Part 1 interview with Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; Maymen, Stephanie. interview by Benjamin Archer. 08. Nov. 2013; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013.

³⁰ Ibid

debate in the community... shaping a direction in society... a humanitarian concern for each other.”³¹

The ways in which UnionsWA has adapted in the last 10 years demonstrates this quality better than ever. It is complex message; one that is still largely misunderstood yet remains significant in the current industrial and political climate. The provisions and achievements made by UnionsWA express their successes in engaging WA with this message, demonstrating for the community the value of collaboration and unity, not just for workers and unionists, but for everyone.

The WA TLC, later renamed UnionsWA in 2000, was established as an independent peak union body in 1963. Decoupled from the Australian labour movement’s political wing, the ALP, the TLC was able to register with the ACTU as its representative in WA. This became an important factor in the disputes that were to come, especially against the aggressive anti-union legislation of the late 90s. Amongst other successes over the decades, the TLC drew support from its affiliated unions, members, community, labour representatives and the ACTU to achieve positive outcomes during the third wave legislation in 1997 and the MUA dispute in 1998. Despite legislative attacks against the union movement during the 2000s, UnionsWA achieved success in both industrial action and adapting its approach to better engage the community. There is an apparent steeliness used when speaking about the recent struggles of the union movement. But the adaptations made by UnionsWA speak to its continued relevance. While the successes of the late 90s are significant, its role as a facilitator of WA unions and its commitment to community development are what drives UnionsWA forward into the future.

³¹ Freeman, Janine. Part 1 interview with Benjamin Archer. 21 Nov. 2013; Gisbourne, Anne. interview by Benjamin Archer. 13 Nov. 2013; McGurk, Simone. interview by Benjamin Archer. 11 Nov. 2013; Robison, Dave. interview by Benjamin Archer. 18 Nov. 2013; Walker, John. Part 2 interview by Benjamin Archer. 26 Aug. 2013.

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