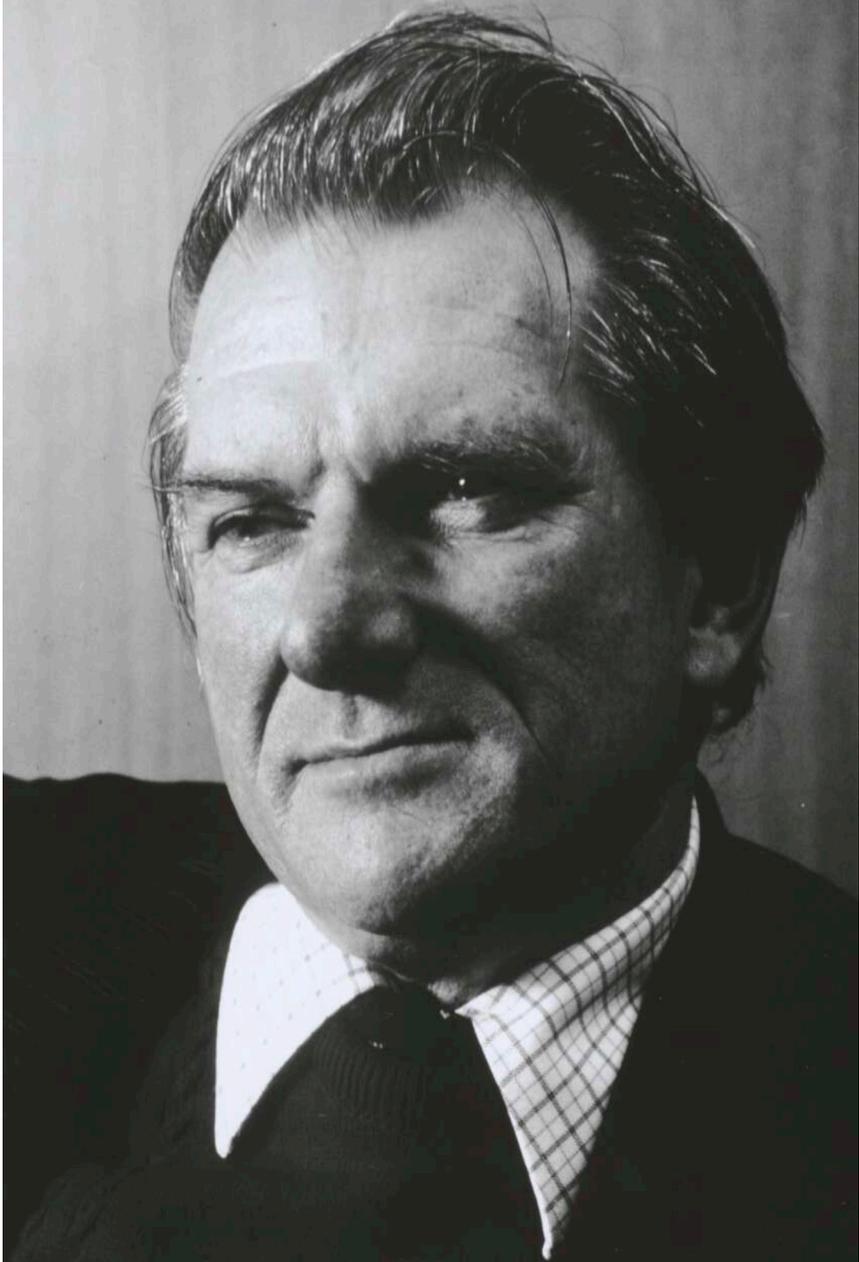


1925 – 2018



Remembering Laurie Carmichael

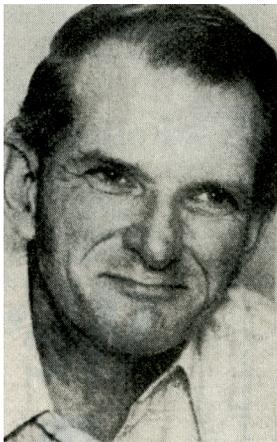
The life of Laurie Carmichael was one of service, passion, ideas, and courage.

In his 93 years, Laurie was an innovator, a leader, an advocate, a thinker, and a speaker of unparalleled inspiration. Most of all, he was a trade unionist and communist. And a husband and father.

Laurie was born in the Melbourne suburb of Coburg in 1925. He attended Merlynston and Coburg State Schools, and went to Brunswick Tech until he was apprenticed to the Dominion Can Company. After war service in the RAAF, he resumed his apprenticeship, qualified as a fitter and joined the union.

Laurie married Valerie Shanahan in 1947. Their son, Laurie junior, was born in 1948.

Laurie first came to prominence when he won the position of Melbourne District Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) in 1958. He had been a shop steward and convenor at Williamstown Naval Dockyard for the union for a number of years.



Laurie Carmichael -
ACTU Bulletin April - May, 1984

Laurie joined the Communist Party of Australia at the age of 16 via the Eureka Youth League. As a 16-year-old apprentice, Laurie became an activist. Campaigning under the slogan, “The Days are for Work, the Nights are for Love”, Laurie and his apprentice comrades, including AEU activist and later North Queensland Organiser, Fred Thompson, campaigned in wartime Melbourne around the issue of day release and purchase of books. And won.

Laurie was an active member of the Young Engineers, a group of men and women who spent time together discussing and activating around issues. They often met at Camp Eureka in the Dandenongs outside Melbourne.

The world of workers in 1950s Australia was very different to today. The Menzies Government had come to power in 1949 promising to outlaw the CPA. Lance Sharkey, the CPA Secretary, had been jailed for sedition. And ASIO was aggressively subjecting CPA members to surveillance.

Laurie took on the role of AEU Secretary straight from the Dockyard. The AEU was the focus of attention by Santamaria’s Industrial Groups, and his election followed a period of instability. In those days AEU rules provided that only hand-written election material could be distributed to members. Laurie won on a unity ticket with both CPA and left ALP support after a bruising election campaign, during which the Groupers tried to demand a court-controlled ballot. Frank Cherry, later AMWU Victorian State Secretary, was the Returning Officer. At the age of 33, Laurie found himself Secretary.

The transformation may not have been immediate, but Laurie welded the AEU office into a formidable team. Organisers like John “Cup” Southwell, Jack Arter, Steve Horrigan and Wally Butler were tough and militant. They had to be; there were only 5 officials in total to organise a membership of nearly 40,000. It was probably just as well that the shop stewards of the AEU were independent. Melbourne alone had 8 branches, all meeting regularly and acting as the focus of rank and file activity.

Laurie played a key role in the struggles of the 1960s, and was an articulate advocate for the union. In 1968 the old system of “basic wage and margins” was breaking down. The award system which had been in place since the Harvester judgment of 1907 was to be replaced by the “total wage”. The problem with the Arbitration Commission’s decision was that workers were expected to absorb the increases that would otherwise be made. Laurie led the campaign against absorption, and while the total wage came into being, AEU members and others in the metal industry gained significant pay rises. All of this took place in the era of the “penal powers”, which resulted in the jailing of Clarrie O’Shea in 1969; again, Laurie was in the forefront of the campaign and the resulting nation-wide strikes and demonstrations to demand his release. This successful struggle effectively ended the use of penal powers to restrict the right to strike.

Organising in Victoria continued and the AEU membership continued to grow. With organisers like Neville Hill and Alan Ritter on board, the AEU was a formidable campaigning machine, and Laurie was often in the news discussing the latest campaign and defending members in his distinctive voice.

At the same time Laurie continued his activity in the CPA. He said that the party’s training in political economy and industrial strategy was central to his success as a union activist and leader.

Laurie was for many years a member of the CPA’s Victorian State Committee and a member of its National Committee for 20 years. He was CPA National President for a period during the late 1970s.

Laurie strongly supported the CPA’s condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, and the party’s commitment to a democratic road to socialism and the expansion of democracy at all levels of society. Combined with that activity was his involvement with the peace movement.

Always opposed to nuclear war, Laurie became increasingly concerned about Australia’s support for US policy in Vietnam. Much of this activity was organised by the AEU Peace sub-committee, with active participants like Frank Cherry.

Laurie was an early opponent of the war, and he always counted his active involvement in the campaign to end the war as one of his proudest achievements. He recounted how the first protest rally he attended in 1965 attracted just 50 people but the movement grew

as people saw the atrocities and failures of the war, culminating in the massive nationwide first Vietnam Moratorium in May 1970, which brought over 100,000 Melbournians onto the street. While Jim Cairns became the figurehead, Laurie's activity on the Melbourne Peace Committee was critical to its success.

Laurie's involvement in the campaign against the Vietnam war, and conscription for that war, also resulted in his arrest, and that of his wife Val, when they attended Williamstown magistrates court to oppose the conscription of their son, Laurie Jnr, who was a conscientious objector.

The early 1970s were also a time of great change in the AEU. The Metal Trades Federation of Unions had been formed in the 1930s to better coordinate the activities of the metal unions, and in particular to encourage their amalgamation.

The Boilermakers' and Blacksmiths' Societies had amalgamated in 1968. The BBS and AEU had been in talks for some time, but the BBS refused to deal seriously with an amalgamation until the AEU had disaffiliated from the parent AEU in the UK, which finally happened the same year. Consequently, the amalgamation discussions commenced seriously in 1969.

This would have been a two-way amalgamation but for the fact that



Laurie was friends with the Secretary of the Sheet Metal Workers Union, which was then included in the scheme of amalgamation. Hence in 1972 – and in the teeth of significant opposition from the McMahon Government, employers, and right-wing unions – the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union was formed. Laurie became the Assistant National Secretary and left the Victorian branch in the

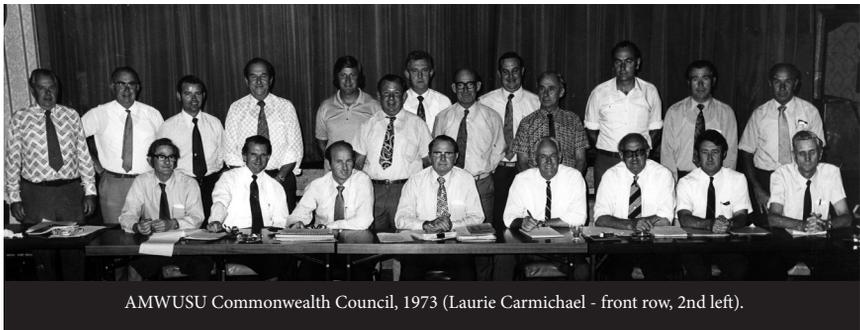
hands of his great protégé and rival, John Halfpenny.

Laurie was convinced that the “stagflation” and mass unemployment of the mid to late 1970s could be resolved in part by working shorter hours. The AMWU began a campaign for a 35-hour week, in 1978. But this was the result of serious campaign preparation by Laurie and the AMWU. The campaign was not supported initially by some other unions, especially Laurie Short of the Ironworkers (FIA), nor by the ACTU. Laurie patiently built the campaign and showed his aptitude in the international sphere by obtaining the support of the International Metalworkers Federation for the shorter hours campaign.



Arrest of Laurie Carmichael - Karatha, WA, 1979.

Through this means he developed the campaign for shorter hours. And he ultimately won the support of Bob Hawke and the ACTU for the campaign. The campaign went on for a number of years, involving strikes, mass meetings, bans and pickets: the whole symphony, as Bill Kelty later described it. While the 35-hour week was won in a number of industries, notably petrochemical and oil, the matter was finally hammered out in 1981 with the compromise of a 38-hour week. This win flowed across the entirety of Australian industry during the 1980s. And before the recession of 1982 hit, the AMWU and metal unions won two major pay rises in 1980 and 81.



AMWUSU Commonwealth Council, 1973 (Laurie Carmichael - front row, 2nd left).

It was not without drama; Laurie and 19 other unionists were arrested by the Court Government in 1979. He was released after massive stoppages. Laurie took it in his stride. He considered the notoriety to be just part of his job of working-class leadership.

Laurie was deeply engaged as a union leader with the Whitlam Government. He regarded Whitlam highly, but never thought that his Government had been able to achieve its full potential. Along with many others he reflected on what was needed to ensure that a Labor Government would do good things for working people. Part of that thinking was around what sort of relationship trade unions would have with a Labor Government.

Laurie, Bill Kelty, Simon Crean, Cliff Dolan and others finalised the Accord with the ALP in late 1982. Arguably it was the basis for the success of the Hawke Government, elected in 1983.

Laurie's health was often a source of worry, not least of all to himself. After the struggles of the 60s and 70s he decided to step back from his role as Assistant National Secretary and in 1984 become a Research Officer. While this didn't really diminish his power or leadership it did mean that he no longer had to deal with the day-to-day running of the union. He continued to generate ideas and actions; he was very proud of the fact that the AMWU was the first major union to computerise our records. Tony Quinn, our National Computer Systems Officer, remembers Laurie affectionately from those days; the Qantel system he introduced, not so much.

In fact, computerisation became the next of his great campaigns. Laurie recognised that the era of CNC machines, CAD/ CAM and VDUs were the way of the future. In the same way that we are currently grappling with the 4th Industrial Revolution of cyberphysical systems, Laurie realised that workers would need new skills to deal with these aspects of work.

In the first instance Laurie had linked the revolution in technology to the shorter hours campaign. His report to the 1980 AMWU National Conference detailed the expected impact of new technologies into industry, as well as many other implications for workers and unions. In his new role he supported and worked for the creation of the new classification of Special Class Fitter in the Metal Industry Award. This was a major departure from the AMWU's Solidarity approach, designed to maximise pay outcomes for metal trades people (often put as: "A fitter is a fitter is a fitter.") But he also realised that this was insufficient to deal with the reality of the changes brought about by the technological revolution.

Along with Bill Kelty, Greg Sword, Ted Wiltshire, Cassandra Parkinson, and others, Laurie began to look at how Australia needed to change to tackle the future. He visited Sweden in 1985. With a larger delegation, he visited Western Europe in 1986, and the report, Australia Reconstructed, was published in 1987. Australia Reconstructed developed a blueprint for industry, unions and government for a fairer, social democratic Australia.

While some of the initiatives proposed in Australia Reconstructed foundered with the 1987 stock market crash, many of its initiatives survived. Most critically for the AMWU, Laurie helped to develop the new structure for skills, which is now the 14-level competency structure. Similar transformations took place in all industries, and a new vocational education and training system was developed to deal with it.

Laurie was passionate about training and skills. He always reflected upon his trade and the skills he developed as a fitter. But he also recognised that, if working people were to take advantage of the new technologies, they needed to be appropriately skilled, and paid accordingly.

Laurie won the position of Assistant Secretary at the ACTU, under Bill Kelty, in 1987. Apart from participating in the regular renegotiation of the Accord, Laurie oversaw the changes to Awards under the Structural Efficiency Principle of the Industrial Relations Commission. He also took a major role in the ACTU's "union rationalisation" process, which led to many union amalgamations in the late 80s and early 90s, and had responsibility for the Higher Education sector. During this period he was also awarded an honorary doctorate. Laurie was also appointed as Chair of the Employment Skills Formation Council by Paul Keating in 1991.

Laurie retired in 1993. Unfortunately, his wife Val had died in 1991. He eventually moved up to Tewantin, near Noosa. He married Joy in 1993. His interest in the affairs of politics and unions never wavered

though. With his deep and abiding love of opera, especially Mahler, accompanying his ruminations, he kept up to date with all of the developments in classical music until very recently.

Laurie was awarded the first ever Life Membership of the AMWU in 2008. And true to style, gave a rousing, ex tempore speech about the threats facing the labour movement. He identified the threat of the “gig” economy, of deskilling, of unions weakened by successive legislative attacks, and of the threat of an economy where workers were controlled by machines, rather than machines enhancing human endeavour.

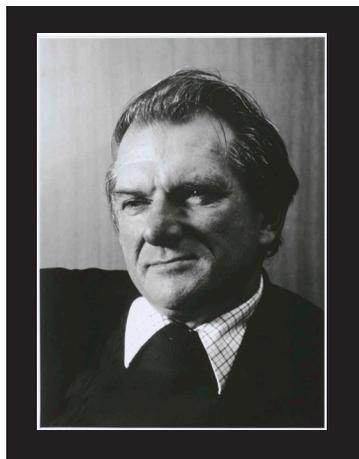
Laurie never lost his interest in the labour movement. The last time I saw him, despite his obvious frailty and difficulty speaking, he insisted that I send him my latest report on Industry 4.0.

It’s impossible in these few words to sum up a life lived so well, so passionately, and with so many aspects and causes to it. All that remains to be said is that the AMWU, the ACTU, the workers of Australia and the Australian people owe Laurie Carmichael a debt that can never be repaid.

Vale Laurie.

Andrew Dettmer
National President
AMWU

Laurie Carmichael



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