

Laurie Carmichael Essay

**Empowering a New Generation of Social Justice Activists:
the Legacy of Laurie Carmichael**

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I was born a year into the Hawke Labor government, in 1984. The Hawke and Keating Labor years were witness to some of the most distinct changes to Australia's industrial and social institutions. Importantly, the era was defined by what the union movement achieved and what followed it.

Australia's labour organisations achieved some of the largest gains for working Australians in the 1980s – Medicare, superannuation, family benefits and more. It was a period that positioned organised labour as a force shaping industrial transformation. Workers gained a major voice in social reform processes, with this putting Australia on track to become a more equal and socially democratic country – in many ways, comparable to those social democracies in Nordic Europe.

But what followed this period in the mid-1990s was more than a decade of the conservative Howard government. The industrial bargaining that had institutionalised workers' power in the post-war years was eroded and replaced with a system by which businesses would claim nearly all the power for setting employment, wages, and workplace conditions. And because I was born in 1984, I grew up in an Australian political economy of neoliberalism – an embedding of market-fundamentalist principles in public and private institutions, with policy responses of government guided by the increasing individualisation of responsibility to the detriment of collectively held values in Australian society.

I believe that largely because of this shallow, individualistic and commodifying change in Australia's work and cultural institutions, it took time for me to understand that things were different before I was born, and that Australia could have taken a different path. I only came to understand the damaging impact of the Howard government as an undergraduate student when the presence of student unions on campuses in the early 2000s was dramatically curtailed by federal changes to student funding models. The

Coalition simply could not have young, idealistic students pursuing activist education in rich environments for critical thinking and debating political economy. So, the Howard government saw to it that education became more of a commodity than a privilege. This politically enclosed the institutions in which young Australian thinkers could interpret history in analyses of the present and fight to change the nation's material development. As a young student mostly lacking a critical political education, it got me thinking: what do conservatives have against unions? But by my postgraduate years, the barricades surrounding a lecture theatre that announced the pending arrival of then-Prime Minister Abbott's on campus helped to crystallise the political convictions I had already developed over my student years. This spoke in the clearest possible terms that elite powers are forever fearful of collective power, particularly when political and economic education becomes a key to building solidarity. And the collective benefit of such power is what unions fight for.

In my subsequent doctoral studies, I came to learn far more deeply that, as I grew up in safe, childhood ignorance, the Howard government was overseeing Australia's regression on all measures of a civilised country. In the 1980s, negotiations with business and government saw unions relinquish some industrial power in exchange for gains that benefited all Australians. But the Howard government sought to diminish the power of unions and the role of Australia's social welfare system in a zero-sum approach to policy that benefited only the wealthy and their ability to exert greater control over Australian workers.

On the surface, perceptions were of an Australia profiting enormously during the 1990s and early 2000s. But the reality was of high value export commodities at the expense of manufacturing industrial capabilities that would eventually see the end of Australia making cars. Enormous tax benefits were handed to the wealthiest Australians and visions of nation-building abandoned by the Howard government. Australia turned its back on refugees fleeing wars in which Australia participated willingly but yet took no responsibility for the people whose lives these conflicts destroyed.

Ultimately, I came to learn that the social, political, and economic vandalism of the Howard government's policies was analogous to the erosion of trade union power over the same period. In the 1990s and 2000s, trade union membership plummeted and so too did the living standards for many Australians, delineating more clearly than before the 'haves' and 'have nots' in society.

The problems nurtured by the Howard government in this period have been deepened in the eight years of Coalition government since 2013. Its policies have ensured that Australians experience negligible wages growth, good jobs in valuable industries have disappeared, austerity policies have shredded or starved our public services and we continue to export fossil fuels despite its damage to the environment and a sustainable industrial future. Our politicians focus on debt and deficit instead of considering

perspectives that view a prosperous society as one that invests in forward-looking nation-building projects, restoring public services and pursuing industrial innovation through access to education and skills development. A prosperous society plans for the care and inclusion of all citizens at work, in the community and in the values that our institutions embody. In Australia's history it has most often been unions that build proposals for such prosperous societies.

As a casual, precariously employed person throughout my student years, the union's role in a society built on worker prosperity became personal. It was on the warehouse floor where I first faced down an employer with all the power, but in doing so I was not alone: I stood with fellow workers and comrades, backed by our union. And together we won.

In more recent years, my personal experience of participation in the union movement has coalesced with the symbolic figures that help to describe its essence. Exploring the legacy of Laurie Carmichael is how I have come to understand what unions have done for Australians, and how Carmichael's values hold meaning for all workers. A study of Carmichael's life and values uncovers guiding principles by which the Australian trade union movement could actively shape a social contract for the 21st century.

I was barely old enough to comprehend politics by the time Carmichael's career in the movement ended. But as an Australian with progressive values and as a long-time union member now working as a union-backed policy researcher, nothing is clearer to me than the importance of understanding and embracing Carmichael's values to chart our way beyond the abyss into which our current government leads us wilfully and destructively.

In writing about Carmichael, I have endeavoured to describe his life and ideas with accuracy, but there are many ways these could be interpreted. For that reason, historical facts have been rolled into my own reflections on how his legacy might resonate amongst progressive Australians striving for a future where prosperity is achieved by the collective, and for all.

Early Life and Influences

Born in Victoria in 1925, Carmichael was raised in working-class Coburg in Melbourne's northern suburbs, the son of an iron moulder and member of a family no stranger to the difficulties of the Great Depression. Carmichael only completed his apprenticeship as a fitter and turner after deferring to join the RAAF in wartime. Carmichael not only saw enlistment as a solemn responsibility to Australia, but understood that the fascism consuming Europe and the Pacific meant dutiful service in the defence of democracy could not be ignored. This was to be a formative experience for Carmichael – embedded as a core principle of his humanist worldview, when at the age of 18 he joined the Communist Party of Australia, of which he was an active member until its dissolution in 1993.

After serving in the RAAF, Carmichael returned to his apprenticeship and in 1943, joined the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), becoming a shop steward at the Williamstown Naval Dockyard in 1949. Soon after, in 1951, while continuing to work there, he joined the Melbourne District executive committee of the AEU and in 1958, became full-time secretary. By 1969, Carmichael's growing profile had seen him elected as the AEU's assistant national secretary before he carried on this role from 1972 – 1984 when it merged with the Metal Workers Union to become the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union (AMWU).

It could be said of Carmichael – in official union positions and honorary public policy roles alike – that he was a trade union member above all, dedicating his powers of persuasion, negotiation, communication, and education to influence his labour comrades, journalists, parliamentarians, and employers in ways that led to great gains for working Australians. His effectiveness as a trade union official is what led political rival, Billy McMahon, then-Federal Minister for Labor, to describe Carmichael as “notorious... one of the most evil men in the trade union movement in Victoria”.¹

This was an indictment neither fair nor accurate, as Carmichael dedicated his union life to fighting for justice. As a key organiser and orator during the campaign against Australian military intervention in Vietnam, he addressed the thousands protesting Australia's involvement in the conflict and was arrested for taking a stand against the government's willingness to send young Australian men to fight an unjust, imperialistic war. In the famous Moratorium of 1970, Carmichael, and Jim Cairns (later Treasurer in the Whitlam government) were the only speakers.

During the Metal Workers Union strike action at Ford Motor Company, Carmichael not only led union demands made to Ford, but listened to workers on the shop floor so that the perspectives of all influenced the negotiations. Such humility endeared him to even those workers that disagreed most militantly with his ideas and tactics. Within ten years of his election as secretary of the AEU, he had led the first computerisation of a union in Australia. Carmichael's knowledge of skills and technology revealed the foresight informing his attitude towards the future of work as something that could be shaped for maximum positive impact on workers.

These achievements were not to be the end, nor the peak, of Carmichael's journey in the union movement. Before long, his duties led him to an even higher calling in the service of working Australians. As a product of a lifetime trade union education, the wealth of knowledge and experience Carmichael had developed in his early career were to provide valuable perspectives in the roles that have left the greatest impact on Australia.

¹ Billy McMahon quoted in 'The "Notorious Man" – Laurie Carmichael's methods' (article from a Melbourne Correspondent) in *The Bulletin*, 24 October 1964. p. 16

Carmichael, The Accord and *Australia Reconstructed*

For three years from 1984, Carmichael served as national research officer for the AMWU, taking on this role just a year after The Prices and Incomes Accord (The Accord) was introduced by the Hawke Labor government. From his perspective in the labour movement, Carmichael already believed this important industrial relations reform was needed. From 1981, in his leadership capacity within the Metal Workers Union, he had vocalised support for an Accord process, inspired by his first-hand knowledge of the Nordic Scandinavian social democracies, which had moulded his belief in the importance of wage concessions from the union translating to social wage gains that would improve all workers' lives.

The support Carmichael gave to The Accord process was set against a background of global turbulence and rapid transformations to the world system that left national political processes at the mercy of global economic forces. As such, he was determined that unions must play a role far beyond just fighting for better wages. Indeed, later versions of The Accord led to Carmichael leveling criticism at the Labor government for abandoning its commitment to addressing economic problems by tying them to social solutions.

Processes of industrial deregulation and trade liberalisation instead concentrated control over industry policy amongst employers and corporations, diminishing hopes that Australia would achieve a semblance of industrial democracy in its economic development, particularly so following the impact of the Howard government's punitive workplace reforms. Despite these perceived setbacks, Carmichael would henceforth continue to advocate for bargaining processes that increased workers' quality of life in step with industrial transformation. Thus, it was to efforts to produce a decisively more democratic restructuring of industrial policy and a way to restore the original intent of The Accord that Carmichael focused his energies.

In 1987, Bill Kelty firmly backed Carmichael's election to the role of assistant secretary at the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). That year also saw the publication of *Australia Reconstructed*, the ACTU and Trade Development Council (TDC) response to the political-economic change and restructuring taking place during the 1980s which saw the nation's liberalising economy absorbed rapidly into global economic flows. Having already developed close relationships with the Swedish Metal Workers' Union in the 1970s, *Australia Reconstructed* gave Carmichael a unique platform from which to communicate the policy responses of the Swedish union movement and national government, as well as the social response of German unions, to economic challenges. This became an inspiring political vision for the ACTU to pressure the federal government to embrace in the name of protecting workers and communities from the worst impacts of a globalising world.

As a vision of constructive political-economic reform and industrial restructuring, *Australia Reconstructed* pushed for government to set rules that would award workers a fair stake in the benefits of increased productivity that the Hawke government promised would flow to all Australians. It was the view of the ACTU and TDC that only by unions and the state having an increased role in economic planning – as was the case in Sweden, Norway, Austria, and West Germany – could this vision of prosperity be achieved. The report showed that not only did these nations effectively combat high unemployment and inflation in their economies through a consensus approach, but that the UK's Thatcherite experience of restructuring was not one that had, or could, deliver such results.

It was Carmichael's particular belief in the social-democratic planning systems of Scandinavia that represented the high road, and his contribution to *Australia Reconstructed* was to push for measures that would guarantee fair shares of corporate profits from increased economic productivity would flow to workers in ways including shorter working hours, industrial democracy, and industry superannuation funds. Yet, another important element of *Australia Reconstructed* was concern over Australia's continued reliance on commodity exports at the expense of value-adding processes that would strengthen manufacturing. Carmichael had long held such concerns and believed with optimism that an Australian version of the Scandinavian model could help the nation change track.

The major policies outlined in *Australia Reconstructed* were aimed at enhancing workers' voice in industry's response to economic reforms. It proposed a form of industrial bargaining capable of cultivating worker solidarity that stretched from the shop floors of automotive factories to high school classrooms, the public sector and growing services industries. It sought to unite workers in ways that valued all forms of work and united them as the custodians of Australia's future. It was never implemented, but it remains a beacon to guide us towards an Australia that is prepared for the challenges of the 21st century.

Carmichael's Relevance Today

Today, we still need a roadmap to achieve the future Carmichael envisioned. The defining campaigns in which he had a significant impact stand out as pinnacles of the unionist's career. Their inability to gain traction were never failures of Carmichael nor of the union movement to demonstrate that there was always an alternative to the trickle-down economics that took hold over Australia's political economy and has continued to do so for nearly forty years.

Australia has entered the global era on a footing mostly hostile to Australian workers, which is why Carmichael's legacy holds such relevance to our current social, political, and economic situation. We need an inspirational figure from the trade union movement to remind Australians that in the wake of the events of 2020, charting a course to a fairer, more prosperous society is about putting workers before the super-profits of businesses

and their supporters in the media and government. A truly democratic society that begins in the workplace is something Carmichael spent his whole life striving to place front-and-centre of the policy agenda.

But it was beyond work where he sought the greatest impact. Carmichael believed that a modern industrial policy was one that was about much more than just workers' wages. He believed that it was about increasing workers' power in industrial and social democracy. For unions to intervene in matters important to all workers and all Australians meant tying employers' expectations for greater productivity to government guarantees of more meaningful government intervention. In this way, it was the workers themselves that would determine stronger workplace rights, better public services, social welfare, and communities knitted together.

Carmichael's legacy gives shape to the ideals that I and millions of other Australians hold dearly in the work we do and the reasons we do it. He believed that democracy in the workplace would mean workers influencing industrial developments by having their voices heard and their specialist knowledge and skills respected for the contribution they can make to economic growth. He knew this was crucial to guaranteeing a stronger society.

Carmichael understood the role of skills development in strengthening trades, with a robust vocational system being essential to workers maintaining pace with technological change – and shaping it. Carmichael championed vocational education in Australia as a critical means of training Australians for highly skilled prosperous careers in the trades. His passion for vocational education was driven by his belief that it created a pathway to prosperity for entire generations of Australians for whom a university education was often culturally, if not financially, denied them. He was rightly awarded an honorary doctorate for his services to education (and it was the only accolade he accepted outside of his trade union endorsements).

Carmichael's politics crossed international borders, where international solidarity amongst the world's workers was pivotal to what he saw as labour's duty to stand against war, violence, and fascism. This is how unions everywhere can today unite for global peace and a sustainable environmental future, recognising that globally, workers face the same struggles against uncaring corporations whose primary objective is profit maximisation, and that only democratic processes can fight inequality and climate change together.

The values to which Carmichael was dedicated are deeply relevant to Australians today. As a nation, we face the callous and corrupt rule of a Coalition government incapable of offering workers a vision that empowers them to participate in political, social and economic transformations that create quality jobs, a fairer society and a greener environmental future.

Carmichael's life was one of service to Australian workers. The values he held and the beliefs he demonstrated embodied ideas that all workers must hold close to their hearts when they next negotiate for better pay and conditions with increasingly powerful employers; when they next go to the ballot box to decide whether workers should have a bigger say in the economy or whether the investment banks, oligopolistic corporations and fossil fuel executives should decide what trickles down to the workers on a dying planet; and in choosing, in the workplace and in public life, whether this legacy might shape the union movement's decades-long effort to leave future generations a better Australia – the kind that Laurie Carmichael wanted for all.

With Carmichael's legacy here for us to learn from, there remains hope that Australia can find its way back to engaging with the ideas he professed. As he himself said, "no matter what it is that one might like to do, you have to take into account the concrete circumstances and that everything is historical".² This quote goes right to the core of what the trade union movement exists for – building upon the past struggles of workers, fighting for a better present against the forces that would deny them, and leaving the ongoing work to future unionists to build upon further.

Laurie Carmichael, Australian trade union leader, stood for values that we might look to for inspiration as we imagine a fairer society. As today the far-right movement once again grows with political strength around the world, many younger Australians are gravitating to the ideas of socialism. This can in part be understood as an intuitive reading of the global political economy: the wealth inequality that precedes the rise of fascism is a product of the capitalist economy. And many Australians – both young and old – know that stopping hatred in its tracks ends in the public sphere – in the institutions of democracy. But as Carmichael taught, democracy begins in the workplace.

This is what Carmichael believed, and his values are as relevant today as they were when he joined his union at 17 and thereafter stood against wars and violence; or when I first stood, with comrades, against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as a 20-year-old and joined my first union at 25. Not long after this, the union flags at rallies and protests were the first thing I would notice, although they had always been there. But now I knew what they stood for, and why I was proud to be part of the movement. Laurie Carmichael always knew the simple truth that I soon learned too. Equality, fairness, peace, and the power of workers to achieve together a world free of suffering and exploitation can overcome the political forces that stand against justice and these are values Australia needs most of all today.

² Quoted in Bowman, M., Grattan, M., 1989. *Reformers: Shaping Australian Society from the 60s to the 80s*. Collins Dove. p. 177