

Fair Go or Futility?

Lost Ideals, New Innocence

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In a recent presentation to the National Press Conference in Canberra, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Secretary, Sally McManus, railed against the iniquities and injustice of the Liberal/National conservative government. She rallied the workers of Australia with cries to restore the traditional belief “That all workers should get a fair go and we (should) all share the wealth we create.” (Speech transcript, March 2018, 1).

In the shadows of the impending catastrophe of World War 11, anarcho-syndicalist writer and activist, Rudolf Rocker, eloquently described the nature and history of modern libertarian radicalism, the humanity and courage of workers’ aspirations and organisations. He echoed the emerging realisation “that only ...by a complete transformation of all economic conditions and social institutions associated with them does...social justice become thinkable.” (*Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, 1938, 7).

McManus cites weighty referees as support for her demands: “It’s not just unions who consider this (unfair pay) to be a problem for Australia. The governor of the Reserve Bank-Phillip Lowe-is worried about our extraordinarily low wage growth.” We can probably assume that he is comfortable with his own wage packet.

She claims that a fairer distribution of wealth in Australia occurred in earlier decades because “the trade union movement insisted on rules that put fairness and equality first.”

In contrast, Rocker asserts “classes’ mere existence excludes in advance any thought of a genuine community” (Ibid, 2).

It is ironic that eighty years have witnessed such a sweep of historical drama reduced to an almost petulant demand for something hitherto assumed as inherent in liberated personhood. The fervour created by the heroic anarchists of Spain during the 1936-9 civil war/revolution adds a contemporary passion to Rocker’s narrative, but the lack of vision in modern trade union and reformist parliamentary party pronouncements is alarming, albeit predictable.

Australian workers have certainly helped society attain significant gains which McManus rightly highlights: “Equal pay for women in 1974, the 38 hours week in 1983, Medicare...1984.” (4). She perceives the oppression of “neo-liberal...failed trickle- down economics” the casualisation of labor, the assault on the minimum wage, increased concentration of power in fewer corporate hands since the Global Financial Crisis, the doubling in wealth of billionaires in the past decade.

She deplores the destructive impact of the Liberal/National coalition's Work Enterprise Bargaining system, massive corporate tax cuts, the prejudice in the "stacked" Fair Work Commission. The cost of utilities, urban housing, schooling and health care are rapidly outstripping meagre wage increases, already behind the cost of living.

However, Rucker would turn in his grave to read the supposed remedy to such wrongs: "It is outrageous that our PM doesn't know or doesn't care that working class families are struggling." (Speech transcript, 2018, 20). (Living in the luxury Sydney suburb of Point Piper in the palatial waterside mansion estimated at 50 million dollars AUS, then working in the rarefied air of detached Canberra with \$200 million in his bank account from his lawyer and investment banker days, perhaps he is a little out of touch!)

Mc Manus fumes as outrage turns to fury:

"The crisis is making Australian workers angry

Angry at the indifference of the Turnbull government

Angry at CEOs whose pay and bonuses soar while families struggle to pay the bills

Angry at corporations which have no regard for our jobs or living standards and only care for their short-term bottom line." (Transcript, 20-21)

She then wields the big stick to the cowered corporate and state powers and their subservient media, all by now shaking in their well-heeled shoes:

"And one thing is for sure. If conditions are allowed to get worse, working people will get angrier." (21)

Ardent and erudite activists of the Old (pre-World War 11) Left such as Murray Bookchin would be bemused, but not at all surprised. Bookchin and his peers watched in dismay even disbelief as the working class, bewildered and destroyed by the horror of international intra-class atrocity, saw and sought solace in the acceptance of improved living and working conditions and the perceived security of inter-class "solidarity".

The cosy integration of social democratic parties and trade unions in mainstream society was a feature of the second half of the 20th. Century in Western Europe and Australia. With the exception of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam war inspired New Left with its eclectic philosophical mix in the 60's and early 70's, social reform, gradualism and the politics of pragmatism have ruled the day. The early challenge of the Greens was quelled in similar manner. They have inherited the mantle of relatively polite protest and professional conscience.

Sally Mc Manus's outrage is certainly warranted, but the politico-philosophical flaws in her critique are gaping. Miniscule membership of unions in the traditional blue-collar strongholds –less than 10%– gives her argument far less clout. I haven't met too many radical professionals or managers in the white collar arena displaying any revolutionary fervour even if their union ranks are a more respectable 35 plus percent.

With a quiescent if not hostile media in attendance, Australia is fast assuming the title bestowed on the United States by a frustrated Bookchin as "the most culturally illiterate nation in the Western world". McManus's attack would be seen as the limit of political engagement and even provocative by the powerful Murdoch press (*The Australian, Brisbane Courier Mail...*) with its 65% of national and metropolitan circulation. The influential *Sydney Morning Herald* is also a supporter of conservative economic and political stances.

It is sad and sobering, even downright alarming, that we discern greater intelligence, vision and courage in the writings of yesteryear. The depredations of World War 1 and the Depression are not scars present generations bear, so a sense of moderation as virtue in some guise is un-

derstandable. Not all people of the wealthy nations are consumed by the worship of products and rampant materialism. Nonetheless, the lessons of the past were hard won and awareness of radical history is crucial to any future conversation.

Rocker evocatively describes the sweep of class conflict throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. As McManus petulantly demands a “fair go” from the wealthy capitalist Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, she is forgetting that “the state will be indispensable to the possessing minority for the protection of its privileges” (Rocker, 8), that “the cleavage of society into castes, ranks and classes is an essential condition of its (the state’s) existence.” (9) What we are perceiving is the shedding of the emperor’s new clothes. Amelioration and compromise has been the comfortable and “civilised” norm for decades but now we are aghast at the obscenity of naked exploitation.

The very passion and eloquence of Rocker’s vision contrasts vividly with the intellectual and analytical paucity of Mc Manus’s measured rage.

Rocker condemns the upheaval caused to the emerging industrial proletariat by a “system for which man is nothing and dead possessions everything” and decries the alienation of the newly impoverished from the countryside: “Socially uprooted he had become just a component of a great mass of shipwrecked human beings, who had all been smitten by the same fate” (16).

In contrast, McManus fumes: “We also demand our government stops negotiating free trade agreements that sell out local jobs...This is the selling of our sovereignty to suit the greed of a few. This MUST stop.” The bemusing, almost petulant comment: “It seems the more wealth goes to business, the more business refuses to share” (28-29) Naughty capitalism!

Sally Mc Manus is regarded as a vigorous advocate for workers’ rights, but in “asking” for a \$50 a week increase in the minimum wage while immediately acknowledging that “this will not lift people out of poverty” she perpetuates the acceptance of indignity and injustice. In stating “Companies have to deliver for their shareholders. This is their imperative, their reason for existence,” she may be pragmatically urging the importance of industrial law support in wage negotiations, but this is dancing with the enemy. In conceding that enterprise bargaining is failing and industrial awards are becoming “hollowed out”, she demands restoration of the integrity of the latter to “ensure business can compete fairly and those employers who have agreements with their workforces are not unfairly undercut by those who do not.” Competition, class-collaboration, the very essence of the social disease are exhorted as the solutions (Mc Manus, 30-32).

One of the most contentious discussions among the liberal-left, let alone those with more radical aspirations, involves the illusion and deception that surround the notions of GDP and economic growth. Mc Manus assumes this as a given, crucial to the workers’ receiving a fairer share of the pie. She bemoans the “restrictive (and) excessively regulated” enterprise bargaining which is “smothering wage growth” and the growth of the economy. She states: “Our bargaining system must allow people to negotiate with...whoever has the power to set the price of labour.” (33)

In contrast, we read Rocker’s citation of Bakunin 150 years ago in applauding the proposed Chambers of Labour initiated by the Belgian Internationalists. He applauds the opportunity for workers to engage in “this practical and vital study of social science in their trade sections...and chambers” in confirming their conviction of “the serious, final complete liberation” in overthrowing capitalism. He envisions a “great academy...studying economic science bearing in themselves...the new social order to replace the bourgeois world.”

Rudolf Rocker's condemnation of the Marxist betrayal and the rise of socialism in authoritarian or electoral mode resonates in the contemporary political and industrial arenas. There are eerie echoes as he mourns "that intellectual stagnation and moral degeneration of the socialist movement which we can observe today in most countries." (*Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, 32).

Mc Manus is certainly accurate in discerning the growing and unaccountable power exerted by multinationals in free trade agreements (primarily investor- rights agreements as Chomsky observes in *Who Rules the World*, 2016, 159) as the traditional conciliation and arbitration process is undermined by the euphemistically titled Work Choices, the whole panorama of enterprise bargaining and casualisation. She is perceptive in depicting a culture where "the very few tools workers have to fight for fairness have been stolen or excessively, relentlessly, curtailed, restricted and regulated" (Transcript, 35) However, the inevitable contrast painted – "We are holding a toothpick, while employers have jackhammers"—surely illustrates the fundamental impotence of workers' organisations holding hands with the forces of capital reinforced by the compliant state. Compromise is the precursor to capitulation. It may be in the tradition of post- war social democracy, but exhorting governments to support workers in order to "balance out the power of big business" is becoming a futile cry in this apocalyptic era.

Rudolf Rocker might have cautioned and countered her with certain incisive insights:

Participation in parliamentary politics has affected the

Socialist movement like an insidious poison...

It inoculat(ed) people with the ruinous delusion

That salvation always comes from above (33)

Is it possible that the methods of social change, such as various forms of strikes and boycotts, of the late 19th and early 20th century, even at times the early post 1945 era, are viable today? Fines and legal strictures have tempered the passion of already vulnerable workers. The threat of being sued is a real fear to the many people already one crisis and a few weeks from the ruin of insolvency.

A contemporary depiction of this situation is illustrated in an article in the business section of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) [7/9/18]. With titles revelatory of the mild liberal tone of the public broadcaster ("How Bolshie are Australian workers in an era of stagnant wage growth?" and "All Quiet on the Workplace Front"—one archaic and the other perverse), journalist Steven Letts describes the enormous disparity as worker passivity and fear replace a strident if reformist stance from decades past : 48 disputes in the past quarter with 12,500 days "lost", 164 disputes with 110,000 days of strikes in the last financial year compared sharply with late September 1992 which witnessed 669,000 days "lost", the September quarter 1985 saw the most strikes at 581. The 2018 June quarter revealed 14,600 workers had engaged in some industrial action, in contrast to one million 'out on the grass' in any given quarter between June 1991 and September 1993 (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Even more stark is the 97% decline in industrial disputes since the activist 1970's (The Australian Institute). Academic, Jim Stanford, highlights "the incredibly far-reaching restrictions" on industrial action exercised through the seductively titled Fair Work Commission and other regulatory bodies. He states: "Strikes have become almost non-existent."

There is good intent in the leader of the ACTU's exhortations to all those "who believe in a fair go (to) get on board and join us." There is naivete in the subsequent roll call: "political parties, employers, businesses big and small, community and religious organisations, retirees, students."

(35) Sally Mc Manus's peroration urging union membership- "when Australians work together, they are mighty and unbreakable"-is fanciful unless those unions are dedicated to the sweeping renewal and transformation of their very nature within the vision of "the great goal of social liberation" depicted by Rocker.

Recently we saw the toppling of Australia's Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, seen as a moderate in the ruling Liberal/National coalition in a coup by conservative populist, Peter Dutton. Ironically, Turnbull had appointed Dutton, a former policeman, as the first head of the newly created and all-powerful, Minister for Home Affairs. Dutton is an ardent, even ruthless, opponent of refugee resettlement in Australia and a personification of the growing reaction to change stoked by right-wing parties such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation and the Katter Party creation of North Queensland grazier, Bob Katter, the mantle since shared with his son. (The virulently anti-Moslem "Final Solution" speech of Katter Party politician, Fraser Anning, drew recent public and even political condemnation. Sadly, the sentiments, if not the terminology, appeal to many Australians.) Dutton is also the canny owner of four investment properties and the beneficiary of a family trust owning two childcare premises valued at \$2 AUS.

A day later we saw the customary political machinations elect a 'compromise' candidate, Scott Morrison as the new Prime Minister. This is the perfect private operator and political hardhead. The man condemned by the UN for the ruthless "turning back the boats" in the 2013 Operation Sovereign Borders. Three hundred boats of desperate refugees reduced to one. Indigenous Australians would have yearned for such a policy 250 years ago. The shadows of the "White Australia Policy" continue to tarnish the culture and politics of the 21st century.

Morrison had been appointed Minister for Social Security in 2014, then the magnanimous Treasurer who this year denied an increase in the paltry jobseeker's Newstart programme. His own wealth is a mere \$20 million in contrast to his predecessor's riches, but a vast chasm lies between his life experience and that of those on the social margins. He possesses a perfect business CV with previous roles including National Manager of Policy and Research at the Property Council of Australia and General Manager of the Tourism Council of Australia.

Even with this slight setback to the more extreme forces, with an election looming, Morrison embraces such politicians within his new cabinet. This in essence is Australia following Trump, Le Pen and Farage, not a future auspicious for the emergence of radical aspirations within workplace or community. It may be that the harsh lessons of limited vision and class-collaboration have come to fruition in still more emphatic guise.

As Sally McManus vows to redouble efforts to replace the Coalition government with the modestly liberal/left Labor Party in the coming election, condemning Morrison "as the architect of the trickle-down economics" and a "ruthless operator", it is possible to see a future where her battle cry of "Change the Rules" reveals a society with less casualisation, increased wages and restored penalty rates. To see fundamental transformation in the lives of ordinary Australians within a capitalist, corporate nation is to invite delusion.

The marriage between unions and the Labor Party is still strong. Indeed, the two have been affiliated since the birth of the overarching Trade Union body (ACTU) in 1927. However, any attempt to derive comfort from such a connection would be doomed. This is a party whose leader, Bill Shorten, a lawyer and former union organiser, is married to the corporate affairs specialist daughter of Australia's former Governor-General (the Queen's representative in Australia). His first wife, Deborah Beale, is the daughter of affluent Toorak, Melbourne business royalty in the

person of former Liberal politician, Julian Beale. Shorten's political patron is billionaire, Richard Pratt.

This evokes comparison with Britain's late beloved leftie, Tony Benn, with his aristocratic background (admittedly disavowed but now assumed by his son!) and marriage to American wealth, yet "hard left" establishment embraced, politics.

One could discern paradox between his humane concern for the toiling masses and the four storey rambling Regency home in exclusive Holland Park (now the preserve of entertainment elite like Elton John, Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page and Robbie Williams with their even more exotic private mansions) and the country home estate, Stansgate Abbey Farm in Essex.

For those disillusioned with Shorten's, well, shortcomings, to discern a viable alternative in his main rival, Anthony Albanese of the Labor Left faction, would be an exercise fraught with disappointment following his recent urging of "a closer relationship with business and a call for Labor to attract workers beyond the union movement." When your traditional blue-collar base is so small, probably an appealing pragmatic thought! Still, a touch disquieting to hear a Labor man of the Left proclaim, "Our job is not to sow discord." (Tara Ravens, Australian Associated Press, 'Albo's brilliant play for PM', news.com.au, Politics, June 30, 2018) Ravens describes the ungainly and unedifying dance between the two PM aspirants (in the likely event of a Labor victory in 2019), as "pro-business pragmatist" Shorten appears in the guise of "popular revolutionary" and Albanese moves from "Labor Left" stalwart to "sensible center". The pre-World War 1 Wobbly proponents of the One Big Union would be turning in their graves.

Rocker's observation of 1938 is eerily prescient for today:

"Anarcho-Syndicalism has to carry on a difficult struggle against reaction as well as against the conservative elements in the present labour movement (62)"

Unfortunately, indeed tragically, "the great and successful future" its adherents foresaw coming to fruition in Spain and throughout the world was not to be realised. Nonetheless, the practical vision of such movements is crucial in transcending a world that today is swiftly rushing towards a new Armageddon, simply yet profoundly expressed in sentiments such as these:

"The consciousness of personal responsibility...(and) capacity for sympathy with others in which all social ethics, all ideas of social justice, have their origin, develop best in freedom." (Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, 6).

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