

**THE STRATEGY  
AND  
TACTICS OF THE  
MUA DISPUTE**

**AN ANSWER TO  
“WAR ON THE WATERFRONT”**

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# Foreword

In 1998 the nation witnessed a vicious protracted attack on the Maritime Union of Australia. (An amalgamation of the old Seamen's and Wharfies' Unions — the SUA and WWF).

The Coalition government acquiescing to the wishes of its global and domestic corporate masters finally pushed through the draconian Workplace Relations legislation in January 1997. After a period of inducement and entreaties by Workplace Relations minister Reith a compliant employer, Corrigan, put his hand up to lead this assault. This employer was enticed by the new anti-union laws and a war chest of funds available for the exercise.

The Maritime Union and its leadership had the task of blunting, then turning this assault. They had to develop strategies and tactics that would side step the main blows aimed at us. Our task was to survive intact as an integral force able to continue the union's role of representing those that make it their union and defending the maritime workers' interests in the ongoing conflict. I do not propose to enter into the intricate details of the dispute as the author of this reply has in my opinion adequately handled these. There are always those who can criticise and philosophise about the workers' struggles and who always seem to raise the stakes so high that they make the workers' objectives unobtainable.

I must mention however, that in all past industrial struggles that I have participated in, there were always those forces who wished to influence

and decide the running and outcome of the given dispute. The views of those forces within were expected and were accepted or rejected democratically and majority views became our leadership's strategy as our own futures were at stake. The views of those forces without were ones to be rigidly analysed. We were always aware and careful of the need to never allow the deliberation of disputes to fall outside the control of those in the industry. Whether the intentions of those outside were well meaning or not the objectives can never be wholly compatible.

This does not in any way refer to those forces that mobilised in support and in solidarity with our union and gave freely of their support without interfering in our internal affairs or in the conduct of the dispute.

This struggle was no different to others and produced the same scenario with outside forces latching on and trying their utmost to influence our battle, to abide by their strategies and their tactics. On many occasions these forces were rebuffed and censured but as always they never give up. Part of the class struggle that workers must be acutely aware of is to avoid and steer clear of the pitfalls. This occasion has seen the efforts of these forces increase and continue knowing that the MUA is still under attack, that union elections are coming up and that they have been given some encouragement by a few naive or misguided members who have fallen under their pseudo-militant spell.

Such minimal success has inspired a Brisbane group to go into print and to circulate their own interpretation of the Patrick dispute criticising the way it was waged, how our leadership failed, and to announce how they could have done it better and what successes we would have gained had we done it their way.

Before reading the Defend Our Unions Committee booklet "War on the Waterfront" I had dismissed this group's presence and efforts as the usual ravings of those that suffer the malady endemic to extreme left forces isolated from any given dispute, of infantile impatience.

Now after absorbing their audacious interference into our future and reading the script of David Matter's analytical reply, I fully endorse the author's analysis and commend it as imperative reading for all workers entering the conflicts ahead.

We must realise all the more that such of this ilk and persuasion (the Brisbane Defend Our Unions Committee) are apt to see possibilities in every developing dispute as being the one to lead to the fulfillment of all their dreams and even ambitions. They are most inclined to envisage a revolutionary situation where there is no such indication and to pretend that there is one as they did in the Patrick dispute. They saw the very welcome demonstration of 80,000 supporters in Melbourne as evidence of a potential revolutionary situation. It did look inspiring for TV viewers but would only be anywhere near reality if ten times that number of media watchers had joined the conflict on the streets.

They refuse to recognise the explicit role of trade unions and their limits and, in the case of the MUA, wish it to become a vehicle to realise their further ambitions. The objective of this outside group's booklet is to influence those few unionists who may read it to believe that in such a conflict victory will come if the membership dumps their leaders and then run the conflict themselves, from their various geographical aspects, with the advice from others on these rank and file committees, to control the direction and resolution of a dispute. Such advice is no more than an attempt to separate the membership from their elected leaders and, in essence, behead all trade union action of any guided direction. One must ask why we bother to nominate and elect union officials if their trust and ability to lead us is to be so usurped.

Their cardinal criticism and cause of frustration is that we did not escalate the dispute to an all out stoppage on all wharves but used the tried and trusted strategies of SUA and WWF vintage, preventing Reith who also hoped for an escalation, from using even harsher laws from his armoury against us.

We maximised the pressure on the main antagonist with the minimum of sacrifice. We did not spread the dispute to other industries, or allow the development of a national ACTU led stoppage and so have the action turned into a conduit to take on the Workplace Relations Act.

In doing so we did not provide a vehicle for Reith to launch an all out offensive against the workers of this country by attacking their trade unions with the full powers of the Workplace Relations Act and other draconian legislation.

The group's other lament is that we did not pave the grounds for the overthrow of the Coalition Government and, for that matter, the overthrow of capitalism. Sorry about that, but we had a more important agenda — our survival.

Even if some within our own ranks have held diverse opinions as to the running of the dispute, all have accepted that peak control with no intention to promote divisions and give any support to a split within our ranks which would advantage our opponents. The objectives of the Brisbane Defend Our Unions Committee would have created the opposite effect and done damage to the union, exactly what our subscription to unity prevented.

It is in this spirit that I endorse this answer and commend it to all workers in the struggles ahead.

*Max Wood*

*Life Member of the MUA, ex-Seaman and Wharfie and a member of the Maritime Unions Socialist Activities Association. Brisbane.*

# Introduction

**“War on the Waterfront” is a pamphlet written by Tom Bramble and published (October 1998) by a Brisbane committee calling itself the “Defend Our Unions Committee”. The pamphlet offers an analysis of the waterfront dispute between the Federal Government, Patrick Stevedores and the Maritime Union of Australia. The committee is listed as comprising Jane Amos, Carolyn Bate, Tom Bramble, Carole Ferrier, Mick Fulton, Allan Gardiner, Lachlan Hurse, Murray Kane, Shirley Moran, Georgina Murray, Bernie Neville, Dan O’Neill, Billie Perrier, Phil Perrier, Jeff Rickertt, Martin Thomas, Peter Thomas and Melissa White.**

To the best knowledge of the author of this reply, Tom Bramble, Carole Ferrier, Dan O’Neill and Melissa White are employed as academics at the University of Queensland. Bernie Neville came into prominence as a shop floor delegate during the SEQEB dispute and Mick Fulton was a rank and file member of the Maritime Union. Lachlan Hurse has a long standing association with an anarcho-syndicalist organisation organised around Left Press. Carole Ferrier and Melissa White are members of an organisation organised along Trotskyist lines called Socialist Action which was a split from the International Socialist Organisation.

It is important to reply to this pamphlet as it raises a number of very OLD misconceptions held by some in the working class movement but presents them as NEW formulations to deal with the problems of workers in struggle and specifically the MUA. As Tom Bramble is the author of the pamphlet I will reply to him in the first person and will simply refer to

the page number from which quotes are taken so that the reader can easily check their authenticity.

# Howard's agenda

Tom Bramble outlines the agenda of the Howard Government —

- To take on and smash the MUA and then to use this as a springboard to move on to break unionism in the coal mines, the building industry, and the meatworks;
- To introduce non-union labour onto the wharves;
- To use the dispute as a showcase for the Government's anti-union laws to intimidate other unions; and
- To win electoral support on a ticket of "union-busting".

The Government had a further aim — to draw in other unions such as the Transport Workers' Union, the Public Transport Union, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Council of Trade Unions so that they could also be pursued by the secondary boycott provisions of the Trade Practices Act and the punitive clauses of Reith's Workplace Relations Act.

All these far-reaching aims were part of the strategy of the Government leading up to the dismissal of the 2,000 waterside workers from Patrick Stevedores.

Tom Bramble says that "In every one of these aims, the Government failed ... All the wharfies walked back through the gates on being reinstated by the courts." (p 3)

One would think that such a result would have been an occasion for praise but, instead, the union leadership, the leadership of other unions, the ACTU and the ALP come in for unremitting denunciation.

To quote the author:

“MUA and ACTU leaders refused to build on the spontaneous rank and file mobilisation.” (p 26)

“In all ports .... the MUA decided to allow scabs to enter Patrick’s premises to carry out their work.” (p 27)

“The MUA and ACTU leaderships [were] characterised by reliance on the courts, deference to the ALP, and a top-down bureaucratic approach to the entire campaign.” (p 27)

“ ... the basic orientation of the MUA and ACTU leaderships was reinstatement of the Patrick workforce through the courts as a precursor to the leadership resuming its traditional role as a party to industrial negotiations with Corrigan & Co.” (p 27)

“The officials’ acquiescence to pro-business agendas is underpinned by their social position within the labour movement. The primary role of full-time trade union leaders has always been to negotiate with employers over the terms of workers’ exploitation rather than to oppose capitalist labour relations.

“So long as officials work within this system (as all of them do), workers’ wages and jobs have to be balanced against the demands of profit for the enterprise.” (p 44)

“This was a victory won by workers, not by union leaders.” (p 64)

There are any number of other similar statements which are derogatory of the leadership of the MUA and the ACTU. I will come back to this question later.

# Government aim to “get” the MUA

**The Government had attempted to “get” the MUA during the Hunter Valley coal dispute. It was hopeful that it could break the coalminer’s picket line and get coal to the wharves and from that position use the secondary boycott legislation against the Maritime Union. On that occasion the actions of engine driver members of the Public Transport Union prevented this from occurring.**

The Government had earlier sought to provoke action by the MUA by sacking the union workforce and introducing non-union labour in Cairns. On that occasion the Government’s plans were upset by the support given to the Maritime Union by the International Transport Federation. Likewise the attempts to procure the training of a non-union, scab workforce in Dubai was defeated with the support of the International Transport Federation.

It is necessary to recall how the dispute with Patrick Stevedores unfolded if we are to test out the accuracy of the charges levelled against the MUA leadership.

The Government in a conspiracy with Chris Corrigan and others had thoroughly prepared their actions over a period of at least a year. Labour hire companies without assets had been set up. The Patrick assets were vested in the company which did not employ any labour. So-called “security” forces were recruited and prepared. The Workplace Relations Act and the secondary boycott clauses of the Trade Practices Act had been legislated as the sledge-hammer to knock out the union financially. A propaganda campaign was undertaken principally by Peter Reith and Corrigan alleging that waterfront labour was inefficient, that the container handling rate was well below “world’s best practice”, that wharfies were receiving excessive pay. This propaganda worked effectively in the early stages of the dispute. A number of workers were convinced that waterside workers deserved what they were getting.

An immediate aim of the Government's strategy was to provoke an all out waterfront dispute, the Government having approached a number of employers to support this strategy. A distinguishing feature of Reith's role as Minister for Industrial Relations is his pro-active and militant promotion of anti-union policies and deliberate planning to weaken and destroy unions on behalf of employers.

The Government did not hide its intention to take on and destroy the Maritime Union. There are "secondary boycott provisions" in the Workplace Relations Act to address trade union solidarity actions — solidarity being a major strength of the trade union movement. There are also "Primary Boycott Provisions" aimed specifically at the MUA. The Act says: "A person must not, in concert with another person ... prevent or hinder a third person more members or officers of a union engage in conduct in concert it is presumed that the union has engaged in that conduct in concert with them."

The tactics of the MUA, which were supported by other unions, avoided the Government laid trap — a trap that the authors of "War on the Waterfront" would have had the MUA and other unions walk into.

The Government would have also estimated that the wharfies would not be able to remain unemployed for long although the Patrick employees were effectively without a job at all.

The lock-out and replacement of all union labour at Patrick by scabs was estimated by the Government as sufficient to bring about a general waterfront stoppage.

The dispute first emerged with the lockout of the workers on Swanson Dock in Melbourne and the leasing of a dock at East Swanson to use in training a scab workforce for Patrick. A scab stevedoring company had been set up by the National Farmers' Federation. The dispute was spread nationally with the simultaneous dismissal of all Patrick employees.

However the response of the union and the union movement was to set up pickets first at the Melbourne docks and then at all other Patrick docks after the dismissal of the Patrick employees.

The union then decided and got the agreement of the workers to keep P&O working and to try to push shipments through P&O as a means of bringing pressure on Patrick Stevedores and the Government. This was a defensive strategy and entirely appropriate in the circumstances. The fight was on to get the locked-out workers returned to their jobs and the scabs removed from the waterfront.

The union leaders countered the propaganda of the Government showing that the Government and Corrigan had conspired to sack the Patrick workers and to rob them of their entitlements. The union movement made effective use of the fact that Patrick was using balaclava hooded “security” men with dogs. In the propaganda campaign the Union’s arguments began to come out on top. This was a political victory for the union and should not be underestimated.

But how to overcome the lockout? In this case it was possible to show that Patrick, in locking out its entire workforce had discriminated against MUA members simply because they were members of a union. It became possible to use a clause of Reith’s own Workplace Relations Act which rules out such discrimination.

This became a matter for the courts which repeatedly ruled in favour of the MUA on this issue. This resort to the courts did not mean that the MUA leadership was subordinating itself to legalities as is argued by Tom Bramble. Throughout the dispute its main element remained the maintenance of the picket lines which repeatedly turned back attempts to break through with container-carrying vehicles and trains.

The legal subterfuge of the establishment of labour hire companies also had to be overcome and required tactics which required Patrick workers, following their return to work, to work for no wages to keep the phony

company afloat until they could be eliminated from the scene — which was what happened.

It was a serious mistake on the part of the Government and Patrick to use guard dogs and security agents to dismiss the Patrick workers. It was the Maritime Union's successful propaganda campaign that played an important role in winning public support and turning the struggle around.

Tom Bramble dismisses the tactics used by the MUA leadership which were understood and supported by the Union's membership during the dispute. He underestimates the consequences of a successful attack on the MUA and other unions using the secondary and primary boycott provisions and is, therefore, dismissive of the key aspect of the MUA's strategy and tactics.

In outlining the MUA dispute, Tom Bramble writes of the struggle as if it were confined to Australia. The actions taken by the International Transport Federation and the Government's moves against the ITF and its members are virtually ignored. The author writes: "This pamphlet looks at ... the mass struggle by Australian wharfies and their supporters ..." (p 4).

There is a basic mistake in this formulation and is indicative of other errors to come. Bramble talks about the "mass struggle" as though it were the only aspect of the dispute because he wishes to deny the role of union leaders and the use of other valid forms of struggle.

## **Bramble's alternative**

**Tom Bramble and his colleagues are extremely reluctant to concede that the dispute was a victory for the trade union movement. He therefore attempts to create a different version of events and puts forward an "alternative strategy". His claim is that if his strategy**

**had been followed there would have been a different outcome. There certainly would have been a different outcome — not a victory of any kind, but a most severe defeat for the MUA and the whole trade union movement.**

Bramble's alternative strategy calls for: (p 47-48)

- Shutting down all the key Australian ports by pulling out P&O workers when the Patrick workers were sacked;
- Utilising the offers of industrial support from labour councils and building for state-wide, if not national, stoppages of all unions, in this way openly defying the secondary boycotts provision of the Trades Practices Act;
- Activating the energy of rank and file wharfies by forming dispute committees, comprising elected union members answerable to mass meetings of members, plus representatives of other unions taking action in support of the MUA;
- Placing the handling of the dispute in the hands of the dispute committees;
- Forming committees to handle food, welfare and family relief, fundraising, entertainment and propaganda;
- Ensuring members were kept informed of progress by daily bulletins published by the propaganda committees;
- Organising a large-scale programme of workplace tours by wharfies to put their case to workers in other industries and to offset the effect of hostile media;
- Raising the demand that stevedoring is a socially necessary industry, that its control by the private sector is incompatible with safe and reasonable working conditions, and that it should therefore be placed under public ownership;

- Pushing for the updating of the waterfront industry award to reflect pay rates existing under current enterprise agreements;
- In the event of wharfies being reinstated with no pay pending a final settlement, seeking as much as possible to maintain the backlog of containers on the wharves to keep the pressure on Patrick and the Government.”

These propositions deserve some serious examination.

The first objective of this strategy is to shut down all key Australian ports by pulling out P&O workers when the Patrick workers were locked out.

This is exactly what the Howard Government had expected and planned for in their conspiracy preparations together with Corrigan, the NFF and others! In effect, Bramble would have the MUA do just what the Government wanted!

It must be emphasised that the Patrick workers were not on strike -- they were locked out -- and this was a most important element of the successful challenge to Corrigan’s action, both in the public mind and in the courts. Rather than making use of this tactical advantage, Tom Bramble would cancel it out by pulling the rest of the workforce out on strike.

The opportunity is also given to the Government to immediately take secondary boycott action against the union and against the individual P&O workers as the legislation can be used against individuals as well as organisations. In the early stages of the dispute the public support for the MUA was only beginning to gather.

It was the Maritime Union’s strategy to isolate Patrick from the other main waterfront employer (P&O) if possible and to deal with the dispute as a lockout of Patrick workers thus containing the dispute to Patrick Stevedores.

If the Maritime Union had pulled out P&O workers the task of getting a return to work for the striking P&O workers as well as the locked out Patrick workers would have been much more complicated and difficult.

An industrial dispute may be started by leading workers out the gate. The harder part is WINNING a dispute and, in a case of workers who have been sacked, getting them re-employed and securing their entitlements.

Tom Bramble does not talk about how all members of the union (not just the Patrick workers) would have been sustained while they were all out the gate. He does not talk about the duration of such a general waterfront stoppage. Would he have also extended it to seamen as well? They are also members of the MUA.

Massive stand-downs would have taken place in other industries. Those workers expressing solidarity during the dispute with Patrick would have been dragged into the dispute themselves in one way or another either as a result of stand downs or solidarity actions. How then would they have been able to contribute the millions of dollars that they did to the MUA's financial appeal? Nor could their continued support of the MUA be presumed. Such "little" considerations do not seem to occur to the "Save Our Unions Committee". Maybe, by sitting on a mountain-top of intellectual superiority, they think that they are of no consequence.

Bramble and his friends can ignore such considerations because they have an entirely different agenda which does not regard getting the locked-out workers back through the gate as an important objective. He poses a number of oppositional questions to his "strategy". "Was it feasible, and why would it have been superior to the strategy that was followed?", he asks. These questions are designed to hide the mistakes of his strategy.

What does Bramble mean by "feasible". Does he mean that the workers would have engaged in an all out stoppage. He answers "yes" to this question. There is no doubt that if called out the P&O workers would

have responded. They knew that their conditions would be next. This, however, is using a truth to hide a lie.

The problem for Bramble and his colleagues is that they have only one response for all situations — all out industrial stoppages and preferably a “general strike”. There is no consideration of strategy and tactics other than this approach. He does not give any consideration to the overall political, economic and social situation in Australia and the world, the position of the working class and its preparedness for action, the level and experience of the leadership of the labour movement, etc. He does not consider the strengths and weaknesses of the Government and the corporations, or the current strengths and weaknesses of the trade union movement.

## **Solidarity actions**

**Bramble talks of the solidarity of workers during the Weipa dispute, an action called on and coordinated by the ACTU. He then points to the workers who walked off their jobs to attend or defend the picket lines in Sydney, Fremantle, Melbourne and Brisbane, and the demonstration by 80,000 Victorian workers on May 6 and claims that this shows the support that could have been mobilised if the call had gone out to defend the wharfies.**

The fact is that the call had gone out and this was precisely why workers were responding to the calls from their leaders to support the wharfies. This support did not materialise from thin air, “spontaneously”, as Mr Bramble seems to think but was organised, led and coordinated by real people who actually constitute the trade union movement and its leadership.

## **Spontaneous?**

**Mr Bramble writes: “Reith and Corrigan acted against the MUA on the assumption that they could quickly isolate the union. Along with virtually everyone else, they were staggered by the level of**

**almost spontaneous mobilisation ...” (p 49). The significant word here is “spontaneous” as this allows him to ignore the fact that union leaders were actually leading and organising this movement. Of course, if an action is “spontaneous” then there has been no part played by leaders.**

It is necessary to make the point that the trade union movement is made up of its membership, various levels of job organisation, the state and national leaderships of individual unions, the ACTU and its branch organisations, as well as the international organisations of the trade union movement. Within the movement there are different levels of class and political consciousness. There are different political affiliations. The task of all genuine working class activists is to strengthen the trade union movement but this is not done by attempting constantly to oppose the membership to the leadership of unions irrespective of their proven capabilities and commitment as Bramble does throughout his pamphlet. The working class is also made up of the great majority who do not belong to any union — a regrettable fact, but a reality.

The alleged “spontaneous” development of the MUA dispute immediately causes Mr Bramble to recall the 1969 actions against the penal clauses of the then existing industrial legislation. He brings up the penal clauses dispute to back up his calls for a general stoppage today. “Key to the victory in the penal powers dispute was the use of direct action and a blanket refusal to abide by the law.” (p 50) Tom could be forgiven for confusing the two disputes because he only sees the class struggle when it represents itself in the form of strike struggles and what he regards as spontaneous outbursts by workers.

If only Mr Bramble had been around before the widespread actions of 1969 he would simply have got the unions to refuse to pay the fines right from the beginning. The Government would have jailed a union leader or two and then there would have been one of those spontaneous outburst type things that workers do so well if leaders would only get out of their way.

The reality is different. There were years of struggle against the penalties being imposed on a number of trade unions at the time and much propaganda exposing this obnoxious legislation. It was this long preparation and the resentments that built up that created a situation in which the jailing of Clarrie O'Shea acted as a catalyst and led to widespread stoppages by many trade unions.

If the strategy of bringing out the P&O workers escalated the counteractions of the employers Mr Bramble would say, "well and good" so that the second part of his strategy for "state wide (if not national) stoppages of all unions" (p 47) would come into play.

Needless to say, he again does not ask or answer questions such as the duration of such stoppages. He does not seem to understand that workers do not live on air alone and that during the maritime dispute an enormous amount of effort was required to provide a basic subsistence to the 2000 workers (a relatively small number) locked out and then, during the period following their return but working for no pay.

## **Role of present leaders**

**It was the leadership of the present officials of the Maritime Union of Australia that got the mass picketing of Patrick facilities underway. It was far from being a spontaneous action.**

The leadership sought and received the solidarity of other unions and the Australian Council of Trade Unions and were always on hand to help organise the mass community pickets. It was the MUA's leaders who established and maintained the support of the International Transport Federation. It was the MUA leaders who worked out the tactics of the dispute, instructed the legal team and carried out other actions that led to the point where, to use Tom Bramble's own words, "a gathering employer offensive against unionism was stopped in its tracks. The scab company

PCS was crushed and chased off the waterfront. The MUA retained almost 100% control over waterfront labour.” (p 3)

## **Dispute Committees**

**Of course, none of this would have brought success if the Union’s membership had not both participated in and supported what was being done, but to deny the role of leadership is to disregard reality.**

The third and fourth point of the proposed alternative strategy makes a call to activate “the energy of rank and file wharfies by forming dispute committees, comprising elected union members answerable to mass meetings of members, plus representatives of other unions taking action in support of the MUA” while the dispute would be placed “in the hands of the dispute committees.” (p 47)

It is immediately apparent that this proposal completely excludes union officials. Taken to its extreme this proposal amounts to a virtual dismissal of all elected union officials during the dispute. The officials of the MUA have been elected in the very democratic practices of that union. Furthermore, they have all “come up through the ranks”, having worked in one capacity or another on the waterfront as wharfies, tally clerks or seamen.

Mr Bramble proposes dispute committees — plural. Perhaps one in each state, who knows? It is entirely likely that such committees would make contradictory decisions about the aims of the dispute and its settlement resulting in confusion and the quick unravelling of the dispute. Who would decide the instructions to be given to the union’s legal advocates? Who would conduct discussions with the International Transport Federation? Would these committees set up their own financial structures now that the union officials and presumably the existing union facilities have been relegated too? Who is to co-ordinate these committees in view of the fact that the existing federal officers of the union and the ACTU have been condemned and relegated?

The idea that the representatives of other unions be on the dispute committees is another aspect of the proposal. As nearly all unions took action in one way or another in support of the MUA they would all be entitled, presumably, to a place on the dispute committees. Would such representatives have been one or another of the elected officials of these unions or are they also to be excluded because they are leaders of their respective unions? Would they have a vote on the timing and terms of settlement?

The MUA through the democratic processes of its national council and mass meetings was entitled to run the dispute with Patrick and no other union would challenge this right.

Mr Bramble claims that his scheme is democratic as against the bureaucratic union structures. The only result, however, would be to sow confusion among the workers and to fragment the union and to split the union membership from the leadership which is one of Mr Brambles main aims. By fragmenting the union under different dispute committees he, in effect, denies the right of the membership to take part in the dispute nationally and to direct their national leadership in an effective manner.

(The Union was faced with one employer, one Government and one Federal law and the best way to defeat the unity of the employer and Government is to oppose them with the unity of the trade union movement).

The separation of elected union officials from members by developing this anarchistic concept of unions run without leaders is a good means of making unions defenceless against the boss's attacks. This is not democracy but anarchy run wild. The only actions possible would be spontaneous and would lack the necessary planning and coordination for success.

Tom Bramble is aware that in the normal conduct of disputes the waterside section of the Maritime Union of Australia had a tradition of forming rank and file committees organising campaigns, stimulating rank and file activity and undertaking various tasks. The seamen's section also had a long tradition of ship delegates and the involvement of the membership in campaigns.

He attempts to exploit the differences in tradition between the seamen and the waterside workers sections of the MUA. It may take some time for the methods of leadership and the structure of rank and file committees to be worked out in the amalgamated union — the Maritime Union. However, in principle, both former structures are the same and these membership organisations continue to function.

There was extensive organisation of active union members during the dispute. The daily organisation of pickets, the conduct of propaganda, the contact with other unions, etc, did not occur through some alleged leadership “dictatorship” but as a result of the work of full-time officials, union delegates and individual union members. An interesting development was the formation of a well-organised mobile phone “tree” for the rapid mobilisation of forces to the pickets. This shows how modern technology can assist workers in a dispute.

The development of local support and the development of all the facets of a campaign certainly can be assisted by the involvement of local committees as well as the local leadership of the union and this did happen during the MUA dispute.

## **Union Democracy**

**The pamphlet attacks the union's national leadership headed by John Coombs for "the lack of internal democracy" and for exercising a "virtually dictatorial grip" over the union. (p 34).**

The dispute was, in fact, carefully lead with tactics employed which were designed to improve the chances of winning. Facing the reality of a carefully planned and prepared onslaught the disciplined manner and organisation of the dispute in which a centralised leadership was exercised was necessary. It should be noted that this dispute was a political dispute with the Howard Government leading the battle.

Let us look at what was actually achieved by this alleged "dictatorship" of leadership.

- The involvement of all union members in mass pickets and the involvement of other unions and members of the community in the pickets.
- The organisation of food, welfare and family relief and the provision of entertainment and propaganda.
- Effective use of the mass media which kept the focus of the dispute on the unfair lockout of the Patrick workers and the conspiracy between the Government and Patrick.
- The careful conduct of the pickets using tactics which prevented mass media publicity being diverted to side issues such as the behaviour of pickets.
- Successful use of the courts.
- The mobilisation of mass international solidarity support.
- The reinstatement of all the locked out workers.
- Preservation of union coverage on the waterfront.

- The payment of members' entitlements when at one stage this was in doubt because the "shell labour-hire companies" did not have any assets.

In a dispute where events change daily some weakness in being able to bring information quickly to all members of the union before it appears on TV or the Internet is a problem. The best way to overcome this situation is for the trade union movement to make full use of TV and Internet opportunities as well as using the more traditional but much slower methods of communication such as leaflets and meetings which still have a role to play. It has to be remembered that others in a dispute — in this case the employers and the Government — also have the opportunity to use TV and the Internet — and they did so. It appears that Mr Bramble and his committee are living in the horse-and-buggy days when it comes to communications.

There are other aspects to disputes conducted under the Howard Government's industrial legislation. Information brought out in the union's name can be used against the union in the industrial or civil courts. Some Unions have already had the experience of notices innocently put out by delegates to build actions have been used in legal actions against the union for damages or to subvert the dispute.

Another change is the much more widespread use of civil courts during industrial disputes. In the MUA dispute almost all the court actions took place in the civil courts and not the Industrial Commission which was virtually relegated. The change means that unions and members may be more readily fined or even jailed.

To help protect MUA officials and organisers of the pickets during the struggle other unions adopted a policy of "shielding" the Maritime Union and undertaking various organisational tasks when it became clear that the Government and employers would attempt to pick off MUA leaders who were prominent on the picket lines. This prevented the Government strategy from being realised. But, Tom Bramble makes no mention of the

primary and secondary boycott provisions of the Workplace Relations Act which also makes assault on a picket line a criminal offense.

## Using the army

**Anticipating some questioning of his strategy and that the Government and employers are not without their own resources Tom Bramble speculates on whether, in the circumstance of a complete waterfront shutdown, the Government might bring in the army to shift goods?**

This was done in the 1949 coal strike and again during the Air Pilots' strike by Bob Hawke.

Why does Tom Bramble start talking about the army being bought in? At the stage of the dispute that he is talking about the employers already had scabs on the waterfront. Is it because he plans for a long drawn out stoppage with one escalation after another?

We need not worry, however, because Tom assures us that the army would not be used (p 52) or if they were, they would soon be kicked off the waterfront by the employers because "waterfront work is now highly skilled and cannot be easily picked up by the inexperienced." He ignores the fact that army personnel today are familiar with heavy vehicles and are trained in the use of computers, etc. Mr Bramble claims that there would be a "high rate of damage by incompetent military handling of goods and containers" and that this would bring "howls of protest by employers." Once again the reality is that, had the dispute reached that level, employers would have been willing to carry considerable losses and damages to win the dispute in the interests of their class.

## The Government's problem

**Tom claims that the problem the Government faced was that containers could not be brought into and taken off the waterfront (other than in Brisbane). This is simply not true. The problem the Government faced was that containers were being redirected through P&O run terminals. The Government was denied the opportunity to argue the need to break the community pickets with any conviction because most importers and exporters simply used another stevedoring company and were not being unduly inconvenienced. This situation pressured the company leading the assault on the MUA. Employers were effectively boycotting Patrick, thereby isolating that company and the Government. Obviously the authors of the pamphlet see this as a weakness and not a strength.**

Tom Bramble poses the question: “Had the waterfront been closed off and mass pickets mobilised”, (as though they had not been), “wouldn’t Patrick have been liquidated and the entire workforce dismissed?” (p 52)

Pursuing the objective of endless escalation, he claims that “Such a move would then have required an occupation of Patrick facilities by MUA members and their supporters.” (p 52)

What a fantasy world Tom Bramble lives in! First, an all-out waterfront stoppage of unspecified duration, then state-wide if not national general stoppages, the possible use of the army and now the liquidation of the company leading to the occupation of the Patrick facilities. (And why not the occupation of P&O facilities as well, seeing that the P&O workers would also have been out on strike from the beginning of the dispute if Tom Bramble’s plan had been followed?)

Unfortunately for Tom and his merry band the workers involved in this struggle were interested in more earthly considerations such as getting their jobs back and preserving their union. They had entitlements such as superannuation, annual leave and for those who did leave the industry a decent pay out to support them and their families. All of these would have been jeopardised by Tom Bramble’s tactics.

He claims: “Finally, closure of Patrick would not have meant the destruction of the MUA workforce even if the occupation had collapsed. Even during the dispute, Sealand, American-owned and already operating in Adelaide, made enquiries about setting up in Brisbane. This demonstrates the fact that there is simply no way that one company, P&O, can handle the volume of goods leaving and entering Australia, and by definition the work cannot be sent overseas. The new employer would then have been faced by a determined and militant union which would have ensured that conditions were not undercut. AND IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THE WORKFORCE WOULD HAVE BEEN ANY SMALLER THAN THAT WHICH HAS ENDED UP ON THE PAYROLL OF PATRICK FIVE MONTHS AFTER REINSTATEMENT.” (p 53) (Emphasis added).

## Fairy tales

**Fairy tales are for children but Tom Bramble’s alternative strategy is a nightmare. He speculates that the occupation might collapse! This, in itself, would represent a severe setback once it had been undertaken. But, a new employer would have moved in — an American stevedoring company — which it seems would be less likely to exploit its workforce. Now we are assured that “it would be unlikely that the workforce would have been any smaller than that which has ended up on the payroll of Patrick”. Has this reduced workforce now become acceptable because it would be employed by this assumed “benevolent” American company?**

If this imaginary scheme were to have occurred those who were not re-employed would remain sacked without even a redundancy payment as all their entitlements would have disappeared with the liquidated company. The union movement would be weaker not stronger after the collapse of the occupation and the hopeless confusion that the dispute would now be in. The employers, whether new or old, would be dictating the conditions to the workers.

It passes belief to imagine that some new benevolent stevedoring company is going to give union members their jobs back at union rates.

Would this new employer take over the responsibility for millions of dollars worth of entitlements due to the workers not re-employed and earned while in the employ of another company?

But Mr Bramble seems to have forgotten another aspect. The dispute as run by him would have had the P&O workers on strike as well. During this occupation of Patrick facilities (now collapsed) what has happened to them? Are they still on strike, have they been replaced with scab labour, have they returned to work, has P&O been liquidated and occupied too? What about the members of other unions also brought out in a general strike?

Building castles in the air and fantasies on land both have the same advantage. One does not have to provide any blueprint or answer the innumerable questions and problems that face every worker and trade union leader who has the responsibility of taking part in or leading a real life struggle. These are indeed fairy tales of the Hansel and Gretel type where unfortunately the witch gets to eat the children.

## **Brisbane port**

**This chapter of Tom Bramble's pamphlet is headed: "Lead in the saddlebags". He is referring to the Union's leadership once again. Mr Bramble and his supporters were present at a mass meeting of delegates at the Brisbane City Council Town Hall on April 16 (p 23) and at that meeting they urged that their agenda be adopted as the strategy for the struggle. They called for a 24 hour state-wide stoppage and sought to inject their programme of action into the struggle. They outline all this on pages 22 through to 27.**

Their strategy was rejected not just by the local MUA and ACTUQ leadership, but by the overwhelming majority of workers present. Mr

Bramble and friends would have done well to have listened to the worker who explained at the meeting the experience of British miners in their struggle to defend unionism from the attacks of Margaret Thatcher. The Miners' Union in Britain certainly waged an all out industrial struggle and the militancy of the workers and the miners' leadership could not be questioned but the outcome was the isolation of the Miners' Union and a significant defeat for workers in Britain.

The pamphlet records that "every speech by the MUA [at the Brisbane meeting] was greeted with stormy applause" which is hardly the response one should expect if the delegates present regarded the MUA leaders as "lead in the saddlebags".

In an attempt to belittle the struggle Tom Bramble attacks the Maritime Union in Brisbane and the ACTU Brisbane branch over the failure to prevent the movement of containers to Fishermen's Island. This is an attempt to blame all weaknesses on the union position. There is no mention of the role played by the National Party Government which moved through the Port Authority to force the Fishermen's Island picket back from the gates of Patrick to a point where it was more difficult to mount a picket. There is an underestimation of the National Party Government's determination to create conditions which would have enabled them to isolate the Maritime Union from the community.

There is also a factual mistake on page 25. An action organised by the Transport Workers' Union in solidarity with the Maritime Union is incorrectly credited as an ACTU Queensland Day of Action. From the point of view of the Transport Workers' Union over a thousand of their members marching in solidarity is certainly impressive from any unions' point of view. There is no mention of the many other solidarity actions carried out by individual unions. Tom Bramble is so intent on separating all union leaderships (to whom he ascribes all shortcomings) and the rank and file

membership of unions (to whom he ascribes godlike qualities of infallibility), that some errors of fact become of little consequence.

## **Using all tactics**

**The MUA dispute was won because there was excellent strategic and tactical leadership by the elected officials, there was confidence between the leadership and membership throughout the dispute, the tactics being pursued were supported by the membership, the membership was involved actively in the dispute and they were kept informed by many meetings on the picket line and by other means. The MUA appealed for the support of other trade unions and the ACTU and received it. Similarly, the support of overseas trade unions came in strongly in one of the best examples so far of international trade union solidarity.**

Finally, there was excellent and widespread support from many in the wider Australian community. Support was given by many Labor Party leaders and members as well as those of other parties of the working class. Excellent use was made of TV, particularly by John Coombs but by others as well.

In conducting a dispute, all possible methods of struggle have to be employed. It is ridiculous as Tom Bramble asserts that “ONLY militant and determined struggle can deliver results.” (p 66) (emphasis added). Of course, willingness to struggle is fundamental. But “only” means to the exclusion of all other forms of struggle whereas propaganda, use of the courts, gathering support from others, attempting to neutralise and split opponents, and many other factors have to be employed to advantage in the course of a dispute. One of these factors in the MUA dispute turned out to be the information given to MUA officials by some who had been employed by Patrick and the Government to train the Dubai strikebreakers.

The numerous and favourable court decisions were an important element in the success of the struggle. Furthermore, it was a case of using clauses

of Peter Reith's own Workplace Relations Act against him and the Government. It would have been criminal negligence for the union not to have taken advantage of the legal possibilities and their actions in this respect do not amount to "reliance on the courts" as asserted by Bramble. Once again the blind and idiotic prejudices of the authors of the pamphlet get in the way of any assessment of the real political, economic and legal situation surrounding this particular dispute at this particular time.

It has been during the period of enterprise bargaining, award restructuring and individual contracts that the concepts of unions being a third party or union leaders being unaccountable to the membership or of representing something other than the members' interests has been exploited by the employers to introduce individual contracts and worsen conditions. Certainly unresponsiveness by some officials to the needs of members has contributed to deunionisation in some industries and has assisted the bosses in their agenda. However, concepts which attempt to separate all leaders from the membership as a matter of principle assist the aims of employers to weaken and destroy the trade unions.

## Public Ownership

**One point of Mr Bramble's alternative strategy calls for the stevedoring industry to be publicly owned because it is a "socially necessary" industry and because private ownership is "incompatible with safe and reasonable working conditions".**

Many would agree with the objective of public ownership but this was not and could not have become a strategic aim in this dispute. It was certainly not "feasible" to achieve this objective in this period when both Liberal and Labor Governments are privatising existing public enterprises as fast as they can.

The suggestion that the Patrick facilities should have been "occupied" may sound very "advanced" but at this stage of the struggle by the working

class it could not have been sustained even if it had occurred. The immediate task of the labour movement is to reverse the rush to privatisation of the remaining publicly owned enterprises and services.

## **The political back-drop**

**To justify his extended aims, Tom Bramble claims that the Government and the employers “were on the ropes”. (p 4) But were they?**

Politically at the present moment the working class is far from united or effectively organised. At the time the maritime dispute was occurring a large section of workers, in Queensland in particular, were voting for a nascent fascist alternative in the Pauline Hanson phenomena and had recently rejected a Labor Party Government for its role in attacking workers.

The election of the Howard Liberal/National Coalition Government in 1996 represented a significant setback for workers politically. Some of those workers who were locked out by Patrick had probably voted for the Liberal/National Party Coalition in that election. As evidenced by the 1998 elections many workers are still not yet prepared to reject the Liberal/National Party Coalition in sufficient numbers to defeat that Government.

As already mentioned the trade union movement had been significantly weakened during the Accord period. The overall loss of trade union coverage from over 50 per cent of the workforce to less than 30 per cent does not signal a vibrant, resurgent labour movement. These may be unpleasant facts, but facts, none-the-less.

While talking of “rebuilding a fighting union movement” Mr Bramble continues his virulent attack on all union officials and writes: “As capitalism ages and the prospects for significant improvements in workers’ living standards become even more remote, the role of union officials is likely to become even more conservative.” (p 65).

And again:

“Sticking within a decaying system means that the union officials become industrial police officers who will defend their own role when under attack, but not the material conditions of union members.” (p66)

This nonsense limits workers’ activities solely within a spontaneous union movement and really amounts to a call to remove all existing trade union leaderships of whatever capacity or proven commitment.

It is necessary to learn from struggles such as the Maritime dispute and to improve the collective leadership of the workers rather than to lead witch-hunts against leaders who have proven their capacity. Furthermore, the struggle has to be considered on the realities of the 1990s and the emerging century not wedded to schematic representations of the past.

Once again confirming that his committee had an entirely different agenda, Tom Bramble writes: “had the union movement won a resounding victory by using all out industrial action, it would have created the circumstances in which not only would business have turned its back on the Coalition’s strategy of industrial confrontation, but would also have set the tone for an incoming Labor Government.” (p 33).

In the political arena, the committee sees no further than the return of a Labor Party Government which has been, perhaps, gingered up because of a large-scale industrial dispute. There is no recognition here of the need for a different type of Government to any that have been provided over the last one hundred years by the two-party system.

He does not recognise the need for a political alternative to the two-party system and, therefore, confines workers politically to the existing setup — either the Coalition or Labor!

Trade unions and their leaders have, throughout Australia's history, played a significant role in both the economic and political struggle against capitalism, for trade union rights and against the exploitation of capitalism as it affects working people.

There is a necessity now for workers and other progressive social forces and particularly the trade unions to help organise another Coalition which will bring together the sort of political forces which were seen in action on the community pickets. Such a force could take on the organisations of the bosses on a political level as well as in the industrial arena.

Tom Bramble attacks the Maritime Union Socialist Activities Association and the Communist Party of Australia as part of his broad brush attack on union leaders.

Both these organisations have been working together and are interested in building the highest level of unity and agreement possible both in the union movement and in the political arena.

On the political front, the CPA has advanced for a number of years the objective of building a Coalition of all left and progressive political forces in Australia to counter the present grip of the two party system.

Within the trade union movement this sort of unity was expressed in a number of unions during the 1950s and 60s in the form of "unity tickets" which combined communists and left Labor Party members. Union leaderships elected on this basis proved to be very successful in looking after the interests of workers and in unifying trade unions.

## **A "miserable deal"**

**On page 57 Tom Bramble calls the settlement of the dispute “A Miserable Deal”. There is obviously some disappointment, even anger, that some conditions and jobs have been lost but this anger should be directed against the employer and the Government for forcing this to occur. Job losses are occurring across the board and are being brought about mainly because of the sweeping technological changes. While new technology has created some new jobs it has destroyed millions of others. The primary purpose of technical changes in the hands of the capitalist class is to eliminate more and more jobs and by this means “cut costs”.**

Far-reaching job creation schemes are necessary including the demand for an overall reduction in working hours without loss of pay. The sharp increases in productivity full justify such a measure.

There is no doubt that while winning the main issues of this dispute the Maritime Union had to take a step backward in some other respects. All disputes have to be settled at some point and this often necessitates some form of compromise. The question is whether the compromise is one which enables the union to go forward in the future. To be able to go forward in the future it was essential that the unions existence should be preserved, that union’s right to act for its members be upheld and that the locked-out workers in this case, be returned to work.

The outcome of negotiations for an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement has to be set against the political and economic circumstances of the dispute as a whole and not ripped out of their context. It should not be forgotten that the meetings of workers held after Patrick workers returned to work voted almost unanimously to accept the agreement. It was only later that opposition was voiced. Although much is being said about the loss of jobs, the fact is that when the possibility of a redundancy pay-out became available more workers than were required put their names forward to leave the industry.

In peddling his fairy tales Mr Bramble is attempting to fool those who perhaps believe that “if only” some different tactics were followed or some supposedly more militant stand had been taken there could have been a vastly different outcome. “If only” the ACTU or the union leadership had done this or that we would still all have jobs, etc.

Tom Bramble, however, attempts to channel the disappointment not against the employers and the Government but against the leadership of the MUA and wants to use it to unseat that leadership thereby destabilising the Maritime Union during a difficult period in which the struggle around a number of these issues will continue.

He sights the willingness of the AWU as expressed by an organiser to stop the oil refineries during the course of the dispute. He sights a number of other militant actions of solidarity but all of these do not add up yet to a general preparedness of the working class and the trade union movement to meet the offensive of the bosses with one of their own.

This is not the first dispute settlement on the waterfront that has ended with the loss of jobs and work conditions. The task now is to find the way to continue to struggle around worthwhile objectives using tactics which will unite the greatest number of members and that includes the leadership. The MUA dispute was one battle in the never-ending class struggle. As any really politically conscious working class activist would say, "The Struggle Continues".

## **Only one method**

**Tom Bramble and his committee see only one method of struggle — all out industrial confrontation, mass stoppages of the whole trade union movement (general strike). They do not take any account of the need for the preparation of a trade union offensive. By not seriously analysing the existing economic and political situation they are unable to see any difference between a defensive situation and an offensive one.**

From time to time forces similar to those of the Bramble group appear in the radical left and are adherents of Trotskyism. They preach confrontation regardless of the position and strength of the different class forces involved, regardless of the level of preparation to struggle

and regardless of reality. They are quite prepared to use the working people as cannon-fodder to achieve their political agenda.

An attempt is being made by Mr Bramble and his committee to win popularity by raising a storm on the question of jobs and working conditions. But the alternative strategy already reprinted in full does not mention a single one of the demands he is now so keen to take up. It is all about unlimited strike action, state-wide and national stoppages, a general strike, the occupation of stevedoring facilities, nationalising the stevedoring industry, getting rid of the Workplace Relations Act and removing the Government. There is almost nothing in the whole document about the necessity for the Patrick workers to get their jobs back!

Now, for good measure, Mr Bramble's committee calls for the removal of the leadership of the MUA.

The strategies put forward by Tom Bramble and his group if they had been followed by the union movement would have led to the defeat of the maritime workers.

As things stand now the Government's main objectives have been defeated, an outcome that will encourage many other workers, trade union activists and trade union leaderships. Far from the outcome of this dispute and the deepening crisis of capitalism leading to a more conservative trade union leadership the reverse is more likely and that is already happening for anyone who has eyes with which to see. It will not happen overnight or automatically but the trend is already apparent.

## **The present situation facing the trade union movement**

**The present situation in Australia is not the same as that which existed at the time of the Clarrie O'Shea struggle in 1969. At that time the union movement had been building to a working class offensive against the penal legislation for a number of years — not for 12 months as Tom Bramble suggests.**

Many unions had communist and other left leaders. Some Labor Party forces within the union movement often worked in alliance with the communists which were a strong force. Obnoxious as the then existing anti-union legislation was, it pales into insignificance against the present Workplace Relations Act. The extreme political right-wing had not yet become entrenched in the leadership of the Liberal and National Parties today. A party such as that of Pauline Hanson did not exist.

At that time the Soviet Union and a number of Eastern European countries had socialist Governments which considerably restrained the capitalist class of the world. Cuba and China had become socialist countries and the people and Government of Vietnam were waging a successful fight against American invasion. The grip of the imperialist powers on their former colonies was being broken.

In the 1990s the position is considerably different. The working class has been in a defensive situation for the last decade and the necessary organisational and ideological preparations to enable an offensive struggle to occur have not yet been made. The MUA victory will help a new level of consciousness and preparation to be achieved.

For a variety of reasons, the communist movement has been weakened in a number of countries, including Australia. Capitalism has been reasserted in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe for the time being. The setbacks to socialism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe has enabled the capitalist ruling class around the world to launch an offensive against the working class and its trade unions in every country. Australia is no exception.

Tom Bramble quotes the Gdansk Shipyards in Poland as his one overseas example of a successful workers' action. It is well-known that Lech Walesa who led the so-called "Solidarity" movement in Poland was a pin-up hero for Trotskyists around the world. More recently they have fallen silent. Lech Walesa became the President of Poland and he proceeded to re-establish capitalism and take back the gains made by Polish workers during the socialist period. The Polish socialist system was overthrown.

The Gdansk Shipyards were mostly closed down and what remains has been privatised. Most of the Gdansk shipyard workers were thrown out of work. Lech Walesa's earlier flag-waving on behalf of the working people was shown to be mere rhetoric. A capitalist regime has been re-established in Poland. Is this the sort of "victory" that Tom Bramble and his group applaud?

The push for globalisation and the attacks on working conditions and the trade union movement needs to be seen on this general background. Millions more workers have been thrown out of work and impoverished by the capitalist offensive in all countries. Privatisation has been spreading at an alarming rate.

This is the context in which the maritime dispute took place — one in which capital and right-wing politics are in the ascendancy both politically and ideologically.

This state of affairs will not last however. The working class will be able to resume its offensive but it has to be worked for over a period of time.

Tom Bramble and his associates apply some of the tactics of another era (such as "one out all out") without any understanding of the actual political position that workers find themselves in today. The cause of the working people will not be helped by the disastrous tactics and political ideas put forward in "War On the Waterfront" and they should be rejected for what they are — a deception.

## A summary

**In struggling to achieve the reinstatement of Patrick workers and in defending their union, the Maritime Union and all those associated with it have added to working class experience some new forms and methods of struggle. The utilisation of mass community pickets, the legal processes and even the use of the capitalist mass media in a working class struggle show what can be done with the correct application of different forms of struggle. The level of unity achieved in this dispute was extremely high in comparison to other disputes. At the same time, the dispute revealed a number of the problems that exist within the working class movement at the present time.**

The use of international working class connections shows that there is a growing level of unity among international working class organisations against the offensive of capital. The International Transport Federation brought to life Marx's rallying call, "Workers of the World, Unite!". Transport workers everywhere identified a common foe and the fact that they found common cause is an important step forward for the international working class. The solidarity actions on the west coast of the United States, the railway workers of India, the workers of South Africa and the many other overseas unions which supported the Australian maritime workers have been recognised by Australian workers. The role of Thatcherism, Reaganism and other reactionary Governments has long been felt internationally by workers but few working class struggles have had such an international impact and significance as the MUA dispute.

Within Australia the successful struggle against union busting needed to and did get large-scale solidarity from other unions.

The beginnings of change were apparent at the last ACTU Congress held in Brisbane in 1997. At that Congress more positive positions were taken by the union movement on questions ranging from wages to conditions of employment including the type of employment. There is a need to use the MUA victory to further strengthen the trend towards the

adoption of better positions within the leading bodies of the union movement.

It has been a long time since such a successful trade union action has taken place and this can only strengthen the progressive sections of the working class movement.

On the negative side the dispute highlighted problems that occur when the trade union movement is not yet ready or able to go on the offensive or defend conditions relating to hours of work, etc. The amount of overtime worked in the maritime industry, on the wharves particularly, in the form of double-headers made the Maritime Union vulnerable during the dispute. Employer and Government propaganda made use of the excessive overtime to attack the union on the basis of members' pay. The reduction of take-home-pay when double-headers were cut out seems to have become a sensitive question in the aftermath of the dispute. The problem of hours of work and overtime and the recent lack of principle towards these questions in the union movement generally, forms the basis of problem extending across a whole range of industries. It would be simplistic to say that this can be easily solved. It is vital that the trade union movement addresses the issue of hours of work and the length and duration of the working week.

There are also problems associated with forms of employment and with enterprise bargaining agreements. However, it is fundamental that unions survive and find the answers to the offensive of the bosses and eventually win support for a counter-offensive by workers. a simple question as some pretend. However, it is an ever-present issue in all disputes and all organisations. Then there is the question of the participation of the workers which goes under the heading of union democracy. When to consult and how to stimulate membership involvement and decision making is not such

attention to the political needs of workers so that the capitalist system and its political structures are challenged is called for. The issues facing workers are not limited to the struggles to win better wages, conditions of work, safety, etc. The membership dispute leadership of unions takes to heart and make paramount the experiences of the maritime dispute. More issues were to be attended to.

The offensive of capitalism against the working class is global. In Australia the form of this offensive involved disarming workers and their unions through “partnership” strategies such as those contained in the Accord style of thinking. However, this strategy is not defeated by simply rejecting all compromises or limiting trade union tactics to the strike weapon alone.

The cooperation achieved between unions during the maritime dispute was a breath of fresh air. This from a position where employers have been able to pit unions against one-another for coverage in greenfield sites and during other restructuring steps. What seems like a simple concept — that workers and their unions should co-operate to improve conditions and to defend their organisations from the employers — has often not occurred in practice. This simple and basic concept of unionism was reasserted during the maritime dispute. This was to be seen from the ACTU down through all unions and to the membership as well. It was this, plus the international solidarity that put the MUA in a winning position.

We hope that this pamphlet helps to put the MUA dispute in perspective and concretises some of the lessons of the dispute. Further, that it advances an understanding of the valuable ideological issues that will be a topic of discussion for a long while to come and will mark an advance in the thinking of working class fighters.





