A ‘POTTED HISTORY’ OF THE SEAMEN’S UNION OF AUSTRALIA, 1872-1972:
ARTICLES FROM THE SEAMEN’S JOURNAL, 1972

by Rowan Cahill

In 1970 I was commissioned by the Seamen’s Union of Australia (SUA) to complete a
history of the union started in the late 1940s by historian Brian Fitzpatrick (1905-1965).
The commission required me to take up the story in the late 1930s and continue to the
(then) present, in time for the union’s centenary in 1972.

I did as required, however publication of the completed work was sidelined until 1981 by
circumstances including the union’s opposition to the Vietnam War, opposition that drew
immense political flak; a vindictive Royal Commission which targeted the union in a vain
quest for racketeering and standover; and the loss of the letterpress setting of the book in
a printery fire.

As a stopgap measure, a serialised potted history of the union was published during 1972,
appearing over nine months in The Seamen’s Journal, the widely read internal/official
journal of the SUA. Starting on the back page of the journal, and concluding in the body of
the journal wherever space permitted, these brief articles were snapshots of the union’s
history, written for the information of SUA members.

As scholarship the articles are of little value, the work of a very young historian/journalist
engaged in his first professional outing as historian. That said, they were well ahead of
their time (see for example the discussion of racism in the June 1972 article), a pioneering
and overlooked attempt to address the neglect maritime historian Frank Broeze later
pointed to regarding Australian history in his Island Nation: A History of Australians and
the Sea (Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1998). According to Broeze, in tellings of the
Australian story historians had traditionally neglected the sea as a major dimension of
that story, nor recognised the presence and contribution of maritime workers in/to the
making of Australia. In the 1990s, when Broeze was writing, this neglect of the maritime
dimension was still ongoing.

My articles from the 1972 Seamen’s Journal follow.........

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong

November 2014.
Part of the Union’s Centenary Celebrations will be publication of a history of the Union. This project has been in mind since the 1940’s when the work was originally commenced; unfortunately, there were a number of set-backs.

We are happy to be able to report that the final chapters are now being concluded and the full work will cover the Union’s history from inauguration in 1872 to 1971—in other words, the first 100 years.

The first section of the history was compiled by Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick during the 1940’s; this work was not published but held by the Union until it could be brought up-to-date with current developments.

Early in the 1960’s another historian, Mr. Roger Coates, became interested and started to work on the history; this project fell through due to other calls on his time.

Older members will recall Mr. Coates’ article in the October, 1962 “Seamen’s Journal” on the occasion of the Union’s 90th anniversary.

In this year of our Centenary, it is interesting to recall the opening sections of that article—although it may cause some arguments for we know South Australia claims the honour of being the State in which the Seamen’s Union was founded. Mr. Coates wrote:

"Although as early as 1825 there is a record of a dispute between Mr. Joseph Underwood, shipowner, and 22 seamen, the history of unionism among seamen in Australia dates from September, 1872. In that month the Seamen’s Union of Victoria was established."

"According to the ‘Argus’, September 23, 1872, a meeting was held at the New Britain Hotel, Sandridge (now Melbourne).

‘For the purpose of taking into consideration the present injurious system of employing sailors in conjunction with stevedores.’"

"It was decided —

“That on and after the 1st of October next, no sailors shall be employed by stevedores discharging or loading, either in the hold or on the deck.”"

"The next day, September 21, 1872, the Union was formed, the first secretary being W. D. Yon.”

According to some South Australians, the first meeting was held in Port Adelaide. In 1970 at the opening of our South Australian Branch Office, Federal Secretary Elliott commented:

"On a site where a refrigeration company building now stands — fifty yards from the new building — there was an old hotel; in this hotel in 1872 one of the first meetings of the Seamen’s Union was held."

Where was the first meeting held?

Unless someone can produce material to the contrary, we will have to rely on the historians who give this honour to Victoria.

For some time the Union again looked around for another trained academic to undertake the writing of the history. As reported to members at the time, in 1970 Mr. Rowan Cahill expressed interest and, subsequently, started work during the last half of 1970 in a part-time capacity; then he re-organised his working life to allow him to spend half his working time on the history; this he has been doing since the commencement of 1970 and is now on the concluding chapters.

Perhaps members who have not done research of any form will wonder at the time necessary to compile a history but any who have carried out research (no matter how small) will know the problems. As we warned members in 1962, compilation of a history is not a matter of some months’ preparation for it involves careful seeking and research of data, compilation and editing, often extending over years.

As soon as Mr. Cahill completes his section of the Union’s History, arrangements will be put in hand for publication.

The History will be published by the Union and be in one volume:

The first section, written by Brian Fitzpatrick, deals with the Union from its formation in 1872 to the 1930’s, taking in part of the 1935 Strike and its aftermath.

The second part, by Rowan Cahill, commences around the 1935 Strike period and will go through to 1971.

It is not anticipated the Union will be in a position to give further information on publication of the S.U.A. History until such time as definite steps are taken for its printing. The aim is to have it available during the main month of our Centenary Celebrations — September.

CENTENARY INSIGNIA

See page 17 for details

Printed for the Seamen’s Union of Australia, 280A Sussex Street, Sydney, by North Sydney Apollo Printing Pty. Ltd., 55 Holbom Parade, Artarmon, N.S.W.

Seamen’s Journal, January, 1972
S.U.A. History

During our Centenary Year each issue of the “Journal” will carry a condensed history of the S.U.A. by our historian Rowan Cahill.

The major work, the History of the S.U.A. by Brian Fitzpatrick and Rowan Cahill, will be published towards the end of 1972.

Beginnings...

Australians prefer to work ashore rather than go to sea; so the pundits claim. It may or may not be true but, like it or not, seamen—both naval and merchant—have intimate links with Australia, a relationship that permeates the history of this nation as salt does the sea (sometimes the unusual is cast up, like the fact that helping man the topmasts of Nelson's Victory at the Battle of Trafalgar was an Australian Aborigine).

Part of the story of Australia is the history of the Seamen's Union of Australia.

But first about ships and shipowners.

The establishment of the colony of New South Wales was actually hindered by the East India Company in an attempt to protect its trade and shipping monopoly which embraced an area covering the whole Pacific and Indian Oceans. However, in the days of corruption and enterprise under the infamous Rum Corps thugs—those who helped create the first ruling class we could call our own—this began to change. Small scale boat building developed to cater for the expanding settlement; a number of these boats were under Rum Corps control and invariably engaged in smuggling and an extensive range of brutal criminal activities.

Shipbuilding developed. In 1804 there were at least five schooners and seventeen sloops, built in Sydney and by the Hawkesbury River, trading between Bass Strait, Newcastle and Sydney. The whaler King George, launched the following year (1805), was the largest built to that time in the colony—185 tons with a crew of 23.

By 1813 an amalgam of forces, including colonial merchants and American shipping interests, had succeeded in breaking the East India Company's monopoly hold on Australia.

Pastoral expansion in the 1830's stimulated colonial shipping. In March 1831 the first steamboat was used in Australian waters.

Then during the 'fifties large shipping companies like Huddart-Parker and William Howard Smith had their origin.

This decade also witnessed regular communication by steamships between Britain and Sydney. P. & O. began to carry British mail to Australia via Singapore.

By 1851 some 5,000 vessels catered for Australia's needs; ten years later this number had doubled while the aggregate tonnage (one million in 1851) increased three or four times.

Typical Australian whaler of the 1830 era.

In this environment of shipping expansion (and general economic growth) the first major transport union in Australia was organised.

As mentioned in the January “Journal”, the Seamen's Union was born in Melbourne on September 21, 1872; it was called the Seamen's Union of Victoria. About a dozen men were involved in this event and a seaman, W. D. Yon, became the Union's first secretary.

This was not the first time in which Australian seamen had shown signs of working class political activity. For example; In 1829 during a strike by typesetters employed on W. C. Wentworth's journal “The Australian” the crew of a Sydney whaler refused to sign ship's articles in solidarity.

After a lax period in which men had to become convinced that organisation was beneficial for them, the Union extended its activities.

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Printed for the Seamen's Union of Australia, 280A Sussex Street, Sydney, by North Sydney Apollo Printing Pty. Ltd., 56 Hotham Parade, Artarmon, N.S.W.

Seamen's Journal, February, 1972
Beginnings...

On December 14, 1874 Sydney seamen formed a union and within two years had joined with the Victorian Union in an informal "Federated Seamen's Union of Australasia". Thus seamen were among the first workers to form national trade union organization in Australia; similar action had been taken by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (later the Amalgamated Engineering Union) and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (which merged into the Building Workers Industrial Union in the 1940's) and unionists in other callings.

As a result of their forming the Sydney Branch of the S.U., seamen in that port secured an immediate wage increase of £1.0.0 per month.

Three years later a series of meetings in the Duke of Wellington Hotel, Port Adelaide, produced in April 1877 the Port Adelaide Branch of the Seamen's Union. Initially the organisation had 66 members—45 seamen, 15 firemen, 4 engine-drivers, 1 publican and 1 boilermaker.

The Queensland Branch came into existence in either 1885 or 1886; prior to this it had operated as part of the Sydney Branch. After the 1890 Strike, Queensland returned to the Sydney fold and functioned as an agency. It again took on branch status in 1900.

At the Third Intercolonial Trade Union Congress in 1885 the delegates from the Federated Seamen's Union of Australasia claimed more than one thousand members. By 1890 there were branches in all colonies.

THE F.S.U.A.'s sphere of influence was not merely confined to the Australian mainland for in 1880 George Sangster, president of the

Coastal steam packet WILLIAM THE FOURTH, built near Newcastle, 1831; wrecked Oyster Bank, Newcastle, July 2, 1839.

Victorian Branch (and later the Labour Member for Port Melbourne), was sent by the Union to organise seamen in New Zealand.

Apart from the fraternal working class desire to help brothers, the major reason for this move across the Tasman was the increased inter-trading between New Zealand and Australia which meant that F.S.U.A. members were being employed on non-unionised vessels, victim to the whims of New Zealand shipowners who did not have to contend with organised labour in their own country.

Sangster worked in an organisational capacity with seamen in Dunedin, Wellington and Auckland; he was able to leave behind him the Federated Seamen's Union of New Zealand.

To understand why seamen in Australia created the F.S.U.A. it is only necessary to consider the life of seamen at the time.

Subject to the British Merchant Shipping Acts that heralded in a new era of better conditions afloat—better, that is, in comparison to the slums and floating hells of the past—when introduced in the 1850's, seamen were still treated with contempt, arrogance, and hostility. Under the Acts a seaman could be imprisoned for desertion and on top of this lose all his wages.

In Australia seamen had no real political rights, being denied the right to vote because this required a period of residence ashore to establish bona fide.

Wages were on the whole inadequate, hours long, and the seaman was open to employer victimisation, especially as there were handy in Asia and the Islands (and for that matter in the colonies) potential pools of cheap labour to draw from.

But this was not all:

—Food was often inadequate, quarters foul and damp, accommodation extremely primitive;

—there was corruption in the method of engagement—seamen sometimes had to pay to get a job—whilst boarding house-owners in collusion with ships' masters often fleeced seamen of their wages;

—shanghaing continued and certain East Coast ports remained among the last strongholds of this practice.

Put these conditions into an environment of economic growth, add the fact that throughout the Australian colonies workers were beginning to organise themselves into trade unions and other similar industrial organisations; add, too, the nature of the seaman himself (as produced by his environment), a character—like the miner—marked by independence and mateship, and one begins to understand.

Rowan Cahill,
February 2, 1972.
The Union conducted a strike of such import it had a dynamic impact upon the colonial mind, an impact that thrust it almost immediately into the recorded history of the Australian colonies — so much so that within a few years it was an event being taught to school children.

1878 WAS the year the Australasian Steam Navigation Company (A.S.N.) tried to introduce 100 Chinese sailors and firemen—cheap labour (at less than half the wage paid to Australian seamen)—to work its vessels trading to northern Australian ports. This was an economic move by the A.S.N., designed to compete with rivals who managed on overseas runs to Asia to employ all Chinese crews.

Such a move on local routes was opposed by the Seamen’s Union and was, no doubt, a desperate step for the A.S.N.; the Company went into liquidation a few years later.

On November 18, 1878 the A.S.N. placed some Chinese seamen on board three of its steamers in Sydney. By the end of that day all Australian seamen had walked off these vessels and wharfies in the port were on strike in solidarity. Soon, seventeen A.S.N. vessels lay idle in Sydney.

The strike quickly spread to Queensland and Victoria; in these colonies solidarity action by wharfies accompanied walk-offs by seamen. In Newcastle coal-miners refused to raise coal for any firm supplying the A.S.N. Company.

To discourage Australian volunteers coming to the aid of the strike-bound vessels, the Union established a group of vigilantes to prevent (“by moral persuasion”) men from offering their services. The Union warned its striking members not to commit any violence against the Company and offered to help the police arrest any seaman who violated the law in this respect.

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The First Intercolonial Strike

Race Relations in Australia at this time were sharp and naked.

The strike touched a sympathetic nerve in the vertebral column of a country that had hunted, murdered and corrupted the Aborigines; feared, hated and rioted against Chinese immigrants; tolerated the brutality of “blackbirding” and the activities of “slavers” like the notorious child raper Captain Bully Hayes.

All social classes flocked financially and morally to the Union’s standard.

On Saturday, December 7, a large anti-Chinese meeting in Sydney in support of the strike ended in violence when a mob of some 2,000 citizens surged down George Street to the Chinatown at its lower end, bashing Chinese and attempting arson at various points.

When strike supporters met to harass strikebreakers at Circular Quay that same day, they were beaten by foot police and mounted troopers.

The A.S.N. had disturbed a hornet’s nest and found itself opposed by a united citizenry, not just organised labour.

The company backed down.

On January 2, 1879, the strike ended with a victory to the Union, which secured an undertaking from the A.S.N. that it (the Company) would not employ cheap foreign labour in competition to Australian seamen.

Such was the victory from the Union’s point of view that when George Sangster went to help organise New Zealand seamen in 1880 his message to them was clear and simple—through unionism Australian seamen had been able to defeat an attempt to introduce cheap labour. The strike, as he saw it, was the most compelling argument for and justification of trade unionism.

From the employers’ viewpoint it was obvious that Organised Labour had arrived and in the year of the strike eighteen ships were combined to form the Steamer Owners’ Association.

For the record book, the 1878 Maritime Strike was the first intercolonial industrial dispute in Australia.

The next major strike involving the Seamen’s Union was the legendary and disastrous Maritime Strike of 1890. But militancy is not something turned on and off like a tap. It runs deep, especially in seamen, and in the years between the two strikes the union did not rest on its laurels.

During the decade 1880-1890 the following were amongst Union highlights:

1885: The maritime unions formed a committee (led by E. W. O’Sullivan, M.I.A., president of the Seamen’s Union) and compelled shipping companies to cease employing non-union coloured seamen in the intercolonial trade.

1886: Early in January after Melbourne wharf labourers had been on strike for ten days in pursuit of increased pay and the 8-hour day, the Seamen’s Union refused to man vessels bringing strikebreakers to that port. We join in, the Union explained, because the struggle has “assumed a new phase, viz., Capital v. Labour”.

Later that year, at the Intercolonial Trades Union Congress on Conciliation & Arbitration, a motion was moved and carried to establish conciliation and arbitration boards to settle industrial disputes peacefully. Speaking for the Seamen’s Union of Victoria, Delegate J. A. Mann stated the motion; as far as he was concerned he would never “allow any question regarding seamen to be settled by people who did not understand the business”.

During this year the Union succeeded in defeating an attempt by the Shipowners’ Association to introduce a wage cut using “trade recession” as an excuse. The F.S.U.A., together with the Seamen’s Union of New Zealand (then affiliated to the former with branch status) stayed the employers’ hand by threatening direct action.

1887: The Adelaide Branch of the Seamen’s Union proposed an institution which would bring together maritime workers in a single body to fight employers and Capital.

By the end of that year the Maritime Labour Council existed in South Australia, bringing together seamen, stewards, cooks and shore workers associated with the industry—a total of 2,200 men.

As the eighties came to an end the lot of the seaman was still extremely poor.

Damp quarters meant that seamen were prey to tuberculosis and rheumatism. Poor food meant stomach troubles.

The life expectancy of the seaman was less than that of the average shore worker—in the eighties the average Australian male could expect to live 47 years.

Steamships were gradually replacing sail and bringing better pay and conditions but introducing sweat shops and the hell fires of the boiler room.

Windjammers were to take decades to die out altogether. As they passed into legend they took a human life and thrust upon the men who crewed them low wages, rotten conditions and, often, masters whose penchant for speed and records made Captain Ahab’s fixation on Moby Dick seem mild by comparison.

As for the men themselves: Perhaps they were yarning and drinking on the Sydney waterfront the day in 1890 when Robert Louis Stevenson (moving past the warehouses and along the narrow streets near the Quay, visiting the pubs) felt moved to write:

“...There’s material for a dozen buccaneering stories to be picked up round the old hotels of the Quay.”

Rowan Cahill,
February 23, 1972.

Seamen’s Journal, March, 1972

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S.U.A. History
1890 Maritime Strike

Confrontation . . . defeat

For capitalists the future of the Australian economy looked bleak as the 'eighties came to an end. Depression was on the way.

With an economy largely dependent upon British capital investment, the threat of these investors withdrawing their money in 1889 led to quick reactions by the colonial banks.

Loans were called up and pastoralists were foremost amongst those affected.

After 20 years of boom conditions (marked by rabid speculation in land), Australian employers faced an economic slump.

On the world market prices for Australian primary and secondary produce fell, whilst production could not increase enough to compensate.

For workers there was unemployment.

Foreclosures and bankruptcies were commonplace and between 1891 and 1892 many banks failed altogether (with liabilities of millions of pounds); others suspended operations to enable basic reconstruction. Some of those in trouble had merely been speculative companies assuming an air of respectability by masquerading as "banks."

In this context employers were no longer prepared to meet the demands of organised Labour, which in preceding years had made rapid gains at their expense.

Indicative of this resolve to stand and fight was the statement in July, 1890, by W. C. Willis, Chairman of the Steamship Owners' Association, days before any of the unions came out on strike:

"We are," he said, "determined to fight the seamen. All the owners throughout Australia have signed a bond to stand by one another, and do nothing unless all the members be taken."

"We are a combined and compact body, and I believe that never before has such an opportunity to test the respective strength of Labour and Capital arisen."

Employer strategy was simple. Given the developing economic crisis, the trade union concept of the closed shop had to be done away with and freedom of contract (the opiate of the employers) asserted. It was a battle only one side could win.

Instead of destroying the sickness in their own house, the capitalists turned upon the trade unions.

Thus was the disastrous Maritime Strike of 1890 conceived—a strike that many historians agree was one of the most crucial in the history of Australia.

A NUMBER of struggles combined to produce the 1890 Maritime Strike:

Its origins were in the sheep country, far from the sea, where the Amalgamated Shearers' Union (A.S.U.) was determined to make sure all sheep stations "shore union." The A.S.U. declared it would draw—

". . . a cordon of unionism around the Australian continent as will effectually prevent a bale of wool leaving unless shorn by union shearsers . . ."

As part of this cordon the Seamen's Union and other transport unions were lined up to black ban non-union wool, whilst in London dockers agreed not to unload "black" wool. By August, 1890, a total of 220 unions had agreed to stand by the A.S.U.

The Seamen's Union eagerly joined the "cordon"; at the same time it was demanding from the shipowners increased wages and the eight-hour day.

Pastoralists began to engage non-union labour.

United by the Employers' Association, employers sought a showdown with Labour. To provoke the unions, the employers turned their attention to the maritime industry; their target was the Mercantile Marine Officers' Association of Australia and New Zealand, formed in 1889 by 183 men.

At first the shipowners were unconcerned by the Officers' Association, but when (March, 1890) these ships' officers affiliated with the Melbourne Trades Hall, the owners raised their hackles and demanded that the officers end their Trades Hall

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For their part the officers offered to disaffiliate, so long as they were given wage increases. When the owners refused to negotiate, the Officers’ Association called out its members.

August, 1890, the Officers’ Association members walked off their ships.

Seamen followed in solidarity.

On the waterfront, the wharfies and coal lumpers struck.

On September 11, the A.S.U. called out sixteen thousand members in New South Wales in solidarity with the strikers.

The struggle was on.

The action by the A.S.U. had a negative effect upon the strikers. As the shearsers came out they broke their shearing contracts, and an important source of strike funds dried up.

Eight days later “black wool” came down to the Sydney waterfront with the first of the horse-drawn wagons personally driven by a leading member of the Employers’ Association and escorted by police and troopers. Violence ensued between strikers and non-union labour. Eighteen people were arrested.

With this provocative action a number of industrial struggles well and truly met — the issue of Officer affiliation with the Melbourne Trades Hall, the Seamen’s Union claim, and the A.S.U. battle to have all sheep stations use union shearers.

Coal miners were the next attacked, when they tried to black ban coal destined for the shipping industry. On the Barrier, B.H.P. took on the silver-lead miners. Miners were a logical target, for in slack periods they often worked as shearers.

A number of Labour co-ordinating and defence organisations were established in the various colonies.

Strike pay was given to 81,428 men. English unions sent £4,000. Local unions contributed £25,000. The local citizenry gave £4,500.

Naval ratings refused to act as strike breakers in Melbourne.

But the colonial governments and the employers had the monopoly on violence.

In New South Wales some 2,000 special police were sworn in. Soldiers and “specials” were sent to the coalfields. The Riot Act was read on the Sydney waterfront. Troopers charged workers.

Protected by the police and troopers, scabs flocked to the aid of the shipowners. Ships broke through the blockade. Violence between workers and the forces of law and order were frequent. The prisons bulged with strikers gaoled without any semblance of a fair trial.

In Melbourne troopers of the Mounted Rifles were ordered to kill as many strikers as possible, if there was any trouble during a public meeting on August 31.

The authorities’ immense resources of armed militia and police ... the abundant supply of scabs ... the deteriorating economic situation ... the superior organisation by the employers ... the exhaustion of union finances ... combined to defeat the strike, which had run its course by the end of the year.

Seamen returned to pre-strike conditions; the officers withdrew their Trades Hall affiliation.

Rowan Cahill,
April 14, 1972.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
Illustration from “The Bitter Fight,” by Joe Harris.

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Attacking unionists force scabs to make hasty retreat in rowing boats
(Melbourne, 1890).
S.U.A. History

Dynamite Desperadoes . . .

After the 1890 struggle confusion and disorganisation were rife throughout the maritime and waterfront unions; some disbanded entirely.

However, the Seamen’s Union hung onto the thread of unionism and managed to maintain a semblance of organisation.

Three years after the Maritime Strike the Union was back at the capitalist throat.

In June, 1893, the Australasian Steamship Owners’ Association (A.S.O.A.) decided to cut seamen’s monthly wages by £2, so that wages would stand at £5 for seamen and £7 for firemen.

This move came at a time of heightening economic crisis. The trade and industrial depression was worsening — unemployment ... retrenchment ... and dismissals for workers; insolencies amongst the capitalists.

By way of reply, the Union conducted a ballot amongst 600 members on 40 ships; these members decided they would refuse to work at the lowered rates.

On July 3, 1893, a meeting of 400 men in Sydney, the Seamen’s Union instructed members to refuse to work for the lowered rates.

Within two days 66 men from 5 vessels were under arrest in Sydney for “refusing to obey the lawful commands of the Master.” This number soon increased to 90. Three days later 152 seamen were in gaol. Prosecutions were launched under the coercive powers embodied in the Merchant Shipping Act. Fourteen days’ gaol was the fate of many.

Militant action had been taken in spite of the immediate past. Between 1890 and 1892 the prisons in the East Australian colonies contained many unionists — both leaders and rank and file. The swords, bayonets, rifles and hand-guns of “armed specials”, infantry men and police were not uncommon sights on the field of industrial struggle during this period.

The State and the employers had the monopoly on armed militias, police forces, courts, judges, police magistrates and “good old British Justice”.

Buoying the employers was a large pool of unemployed from which to draw — after their 1890 success they could well afford to be tough with the unions.

The Seamen’s Union was on its own. Other unions were too involved in messes of their own to help out in 1893.

Employer reaction came swiftly:

- In Melbourne a scab bureau was set up to recruit non-union labour at the new wage rates. Ships sailed with scab crews.
- Union funds were frozen.
- Police came out in force to prevent intimidation of scabs.

— When the employers failed to get scab crews they simply laid up their ships.
- The bosses could afford to wait; they had unionism on the run.

A DESPERATE situation produced desperate tactics: In Newcastle, the “sin bin” of the East Coast, an attempt was made to dynamite two non-union-cabled ships.

Going one step further was the action of Larry Petrie (a Scottish anarchist and an organiser-secretary for the General Labourers’ Union) who detonated a bomb on the scab crewed s.s. Aramac off Moreton Bay in solidarity with the seamen.

A price was put on the heads of the Newcastle saboteurs by the New South Wales Government and the A.S.O.A. — a reward of £750 for information leading to a conviction.

By July 15, nearly all vessels were moving with cut-rate crews. At this point Seamen’s Union members began to drift back to work. In Brisbane, Melbourne and Port Adelaide members held out defiantly until August, 1893.

But seamen were again beaten and they did not become involved in another major strike until 1917, twenty-four years later.

Perhaps it was the failure of strike action that motivated the Union to pledge itself to man William Lane’s ship Royal Tar on her voyage to Paraguay, South America, to set up a utopian socialist experiment in communal living (a New Australia away from the mess of the old). Lane set sail in August, 1893.

However, most of the Union’s members stayed in Australia, settled into new jobs ashore or their old sea-going jobs on reduced wages.

There was a chastened feeling amongst Australian workers, distinctly different from the militancy of a few years previous, a militancy expressed by Henry Lawson in a verse contribution to “The Worker” (May 16, 1891) which concluded:

So we must fly a rebel flag
As others did before us,
And we must sing a rebel song,
And join in rebel chorus.

We’ll make the tyrants feel the sting
Of those that we control the harbour;
They needn’t say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle.
The lesson driven home to workers by the experiences of the 1890's was not the futility of the strike weapon but the realisation that in order to combat the employers better unionism was required — and not only this but, also, the need for a separate political organisation for Labour, to combat capitalists and governments in parliament and to supplement the avenues of struggle available through trade unions.

In the years of comparative quiet after 1893 seamen fared badly in the face of the unity of the major Australian shipping companies, grouped as we have seen as the Australasian Steamship Owners' Association (known from 1909 onwards as the Commonwealth Steamship Owners' Association).

In 1904 a Commonwealth Royal Commission on Navigation was constituted and eventually found that shipboard conditions had remained unchanged in the last fifty years — wages were inadequate, forecastles were often damp; eating utensils for seamen were not regarded as necessities by shipowners, nor were bathroom facilities.

After the wage-cut of 1893, seamen's wages rose very slowly and only regained the 1889 levels of £7 and £9 a month in 1901.

Deck seamen worked 10 and 14 hours on alternate days, seven days a week at sea. In port they worked the 8-hour day.

Payment of wages was by law due only at the end of a voyage and not before, though there were exceptions to this rule.

The beginning of the new century brought with it the inauguration of the Australian Commonwealth. A few years later, in 1906, the Union officially formed a federal organisation, putting an end to the loose, informal federal structure that had existed since 1876.

All branches pooled their funds; Union government and property were put in the hands of an Executive Council; federal rules were adopted by plebiscite, and in September that year (1906) the organisation was registered with the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. From February, 1907, Sydney became host to the Union's head office; before this head office had been in Melbourne.

Early in 1909 the Union and the Shipowners' Association reached an agreement on rates of pay and conditions of work:
- Pay rates ranged from £10 a month for donkey-men down to £7 for A.B.'s;
- standardised overtime rates and hours of watches at sea were settled;
- the monthly payment of wages was instituted; and
- a manning committee composed of equal Union and Shipowner representation (three each) was established to settle manning disputes.

Amongst Union officials at this time two men can be singled out as historically important:
- General President of the Union was Senator R. S. Guthrie, Labour politician (elected to the Senate in 1902), a member of the Union since 1877, an official since 1881 (he started off as assistant secretary of the South Australian Branch) who became a sort of "father figure" to seamen.
- On the Union's Council was Thomas Walsh, a man who came to Australia as an immigrant from Ireland in the early 1890's, a long time activist in the Seamen's Union and its Newcastle agent by 1909.

These two men were of great importance in Union politics during the First World War, and the influence of Walsh continued to be a factor in the politics of the Seamen's Union right to the eve of the Second World War.

Rovnan Cahill, May 1, 1972.
S.U.A. History

Sons of Confucius

In last month’s “Journal” I took the history of the Union up to 1909.

In this article I temporarily abandon strict chronology in order to highlight an aspect of the Union’s history that many will be totally ignorant of. I refer to Racism.

One day whilst trading between Christmas Island and Australia the “chows” belted into the third officer.

When the matter subsequently came up in a Perth Court, spanners “two feet long, and other pieces of ironmongery, were produced as evidence against the sons of Confucius.” However, as the Kolya was leaving the next day for Christmas Island, the case was adjourned. But this was not the end of the journal article, for the author went on to comment:

“The owners are too mean to pay a white man’s wage, and to conform to a white man’s standard of living, preferring to register at foreign ports and employ cheap and unreliable coolie labour. When the half-savage helots get out of hand, as in the present case, their drivers fly to the law for help to drag them into submission.”

The report had no sympathy for owners who preferred to recruit their crews “from the filthy, plague-stricken cesspits of South-Eastern Asia” instead of “giving an Australian seaman a job at a white man’s wage . . .”

Two months later in the journal an article titled “Coolie Seamen” was published. It was of an instructional nature and specifically addressed to union members.

In November, 1916, two shiploads of Maltese immigrants arrived in Sydney. Rumour had it that these immigrants were to be placed on the Australian coast, perhaps on the government-owned ships, to take the place of seamen who had enlisted. (Before the end of 1915 over 1,000 F.S.U.A. members had enlisted.) Apparently there was reasonable ground for suspecting this to be the intention.

The anonymous correspondent saw this as an attempt by the employers to “again introduce the system of slavery and starvation that obtained only a few short years ago.” By introducing cheap foreign labour an assault would be made on hard-won conditions, and the employers would be trusted to hang onto any gains they made by such “whipping away” tactics. If this happened “then the work of the union begins all over again.” So the warning was issued that seamen were “to be on their guard against any infringement of their present privileges.”

Thus far it was a simple expression of economic fear. However, the article then went on to produce evidence of the possible effect cheap foreign labour could have upon the shipping industry. Rather than pointing to any lowering of working conditions, the author trotted out sheer bigotry in the form of an extensive quote from the Glasgow-based “Nautical Magazine” regarding the use of coolie seamen in the Caribbean.

Asiatic creeds “represent the worst characteristics of a seaman anywhere. Vicious, crafty and treacherous — cruel, cowardly and hostile to the Christian and his doctrines — they, by their very presence, arouse the hostility of the whites working with them.” The article went on to portray the “Asiatics” as a source of insult, crime, murder, insubordination and evil.

Apparently for the Australian “Seamen’s Journal” the logic of the argument did not matter; Maltese were just as bad as the dreaded Asiatics.

The lengths to which this racism could be taken is illustrated by an incident which occurred earlier in 1916. In this case F.S.U.A. members refused to take the Howard Smith steamer Pergérine out of Melbourne until three Greek firemen (who were also F.S.U.A. members) were discharged. The
Chapter III in

The “Iron Somersby” Story

Chapter III of Iron Somersby commenced with a telephone message early Thursday morning, June 1, asking the Union’s attitude to Iron Somersby engaging in the overseas trade for at least two voyages.

The cargo is iron ore, between Australia and Japan. Some of the maritime unions had outstanding disputes apart from the fundamental issue of the laying up of A.N.L. and other companies’ Australian-built bulk carriers and the two-crew leave system.

The question of Iron Somersby entering the overseas trade on normal wage and leave conditions was considered by the S.U.A. officials telephonically.

Congress opinion

The unanimous consensus of opinion was, because of our Overseas Line Campaign, that the Union should man Iron Somersby subject to a meeting with and agreement of the other maritime unions. Iron Somersby had to sail by June 6 to obtain the cargoes. A meeting was arranged for Monday, June 5. A full S.U.A. crew was engaged on that morning but did not sign articles until after the maritime unions had made the following decision:

“The seven maritime unions welcome the B.H.P.’s intention to engage an overseas trade with Iron Somersby manned by Australians in conformity with A.C.T.U. and maritime unions’ policy.”

“We draw attention to the vast quantities of Australian resources exported in bulk, including iron ore, pellets, bauxite, manganese, wheat, wood chip and the recently announced 8940 million Queensland coal contract, all in foreign-owned and manned vessels.

“In making our decision to man Iron Somersby we emphasize our agreement is to man the vessel in the overseas and not the coastal trade.”

“The Union views have been expressed publicly and before the Arbitration Commission of the need for Australian-built and manned vessels to be in full employment before allowing imported vessels to operate in coastal trades. We further reiterate our view that increased productivity must be accompanied by improved social, wage and leave conditions for seafarers.”

Iron Somersby sailed on June 6.

S.U.A. History (continued from back page)

Sons of Confucius

company obliged and the Union had to come up with their replacements. However, apart from the Greeks no other unionists were available, so while non-Union labour was engaged. Apparently for some it was better to sail with non-Unionists than fellow Unionists who happened to be Greek.

Let it be taken that there was a general racist attitude regarding all foreigners, it should be noted that at this time a great many of those employed in the Australian maritime industry generally were not Australian born and there was the popular belief that Australians as a people were reluctant to go to sea for employment.

Most Australian shipping companies were, in fact, controlled by overseas capital (mainly British) and tended to employ immigrants to such an extent that various companies became associated with national groups, for example, the Adelaide Steamship Company was known as the “Welsh Navy” and the Union Steamship Company had a high proportion of Scots in its employ. I advance the generalisation that seamen of Anglo-Saxon descent from Scandinavia and Western Europe (France, Holland, etc.) were accepted by Australian seamen, but people of different racial origins—from Central Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia—were not.

Within a few years of the events I have referred to above, this racist aspect of the Union had changed in favour of internationalism, even to the extent in 1922 of expressing support for a strike by Chinese seamen. But by then there had been other changes in the Union, including the toppling of the A.L.P.-dominated leadership and its replacement by a militant socialist faction with popular rank and file support.

It was as though, whilst the Union was led by A.L.P.-oriented men, it reflected the racism of that Party, the Party that supported the formulation of the White Australia Policy under the Barton Ministry (1901-1903). When these men were removed from office and replaced by militants with an understanding of internationalism, the racism went and the principle of internationalism took root and flourished.

So much so that, looking back over the years from the end of World War I to the present, one can observe a tradition of internationalism (often given militant expression) amongst Australian seamen that is unique in the world, and with this the uninterrupted maintenance of a militant socialist leadership.

Australian seamen have struggled to give real content to the principles of the French Revolution—Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood—not only amongst themselves and their white brothers, but amongst workers of many other nations, irrespective of race, colour and creed.

R. J. Cahill
June 14, 1972.
S.U.A. History
Off course... on course

The First World War swept Australia into its bloody bosom with jingoistic fervour.

The Seamen’s Union, which by the end of 1910 numbered over 7,000 members, was an eager and proud contributor to the mechanised carnage which derived from decades of imperialist rivalry between the great powers of Europe.

BEFORE the end of 1915 over 1,000 F.S.U.A. members had flocked to defend the Mother Country from the Kaiser’s lascivious desires.

Proud of this proof of sacrifice by its members was the Union’s conservative leadership, which frequently proclaimed in the Journal the patriotism of seamen.

Amongst the rank-and-file who stayed at home there was, however, increasing dissatisfaction with this leadership, in particular with General President Senator R. S. Guthrie—especially after he backed Prime Minister Hughes on the conscription issue in 1916.

Beneath this dissatisfaction was an ideological conflict. In 1907 the I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World) had come from Chicago to Australia. It advocated amongst other things militant class struggle via industrial action; the strike, as opposed to political action; and for workers to ignore the reformism of Labour politicians.

This ideology made headway in the Seamen’s Union. Tom Walsh, prominent in the events I am about to narrate (we met him in the May Journal), was influenced by I.W.W. syndicalism.

General President Guthrie was an ardent opponent of the I.W.W. He thought it was the scum of the Labour movement. He was also in favour of conscription.

SUCH sentiments were not in accord with other sections of the Union. In 1916, the F.S.U.A. council came out against conscription of life for military purposes by a 7-to-1 majority.

In New South Wales, where Walsh was active, rank-and-file members moved for a plebiscite on their attitude to Guthrie and his stand on conscription. A motion was also passed to subscribe money to I.W.W. members in jail for their anti-war activities.

**The Wrong Materials cannot build a Solid Structure**

This cartoon from the Australian Seamen’s Journal, July 1915, epitomises the industrial policy of the F.S.U.A. before Guthrie was thrown out of office.

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Printed for the Seamen’s Union of Australia, 289A Sussex Street, Sydney, by North Sydney-Apollo Printing Pty. Ltd., 55 Hotham Parade, Artarmon, N.S.W.

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Seamen’s Journal, July, 1972
Gaetsewe to Geraghty —

S. AFRICAN CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS THANKS SEAMEN'S UNION

John Gaetsewe, the representative of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, who was recently a guest of the Seamen's Union in Australia, has written the following letter to Pat Geraghty, Assistant Federal Secretary of the S.U.A.

Dear Brother,

Many thanks for all that you did for me, on behalf of our people. I have no words to convey all my gratitude to you, Pat, for the warm reception you gave me during my stay in Sydney. The Seamen's Union has really shown its sympathy towards our people. I have shown to my Committee here the presents which you gave me and they were very pleased. I have also told them about the last farewell reception which you organised and which was well attended and showed great interest not only in me as an individual but in the problems which are facing our people in South Africa. I hope that the contacts which we have made will be of great assistance to us in the future.

I am going to write to Mr. Dennis Price, drawing his attention to the fact that when he comes to this country he should try to contact me. I have also described to our people here the sympathy which you have shown towards the aborigines in your country, and the way in which you have treated their problems as your own problems, and the improvements which you have tried to achieve.

SEAMEN'S UNION JOINS COMBINED UNION DECLARATION ON ABORIGINE'S DAY, 1972:

The following advertisement was inserted in the "Australian" newspaper on Friday, July 14, as a joint declaration by 11 unions.

ON NATIONAL ABORIGINE'S DAY 1972

TRADE UNIONS DECLARE

"It is the natural right of the Aboriginal people of Australia to enjoy a social, industrial and legal equality with and as Australian citizens."

We believe in the united activity of all people, irrespective of colour, race, or creed in support of the legitimate aspirations of the Aboriginal people.

In particular we direct attention to the following points of trade union policy from the 1971 Australian Council of Trade Unions Congress decision.

* Repeal all offensive, discriminatory legislation
* Complete removal of all forms of wage discrimination
* Provide adequate all round educational facilities
* Provide suitable employment opportunities
* Properly house the Aborigine people
* Restore tribal land rights
* Recognise the Aboriginal people as distinct, viable national minorities entitled to special facilities for continued self-development.

TO ALL AUSTRALIANS WE SAY:—

CAMPAIGN ACTIVELY IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY

TO ACHIEVE THESE OBJECTIVES CHANGE THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AS A POSITIVE STEP

Building Workers' Industrial Union of Australia, N.S.W. Branch — R. CLANCY
Seamen's Union of Australia — E. V. ELIOTT
Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia, Sydney Branch — T. NELSON
Firemen and Dockers' Union — D. HENDRICKSON
Fire Brigades' Union — F. BRICE
Miscellaneous Workers' Union — K. BLACKWALL

Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union
Australian Railways' Union — R. TAYLOR
Marine Stewards & Pantrymen's Union — J. WILKINSON
Sheep and Woolgrowers' Union
Operative Painters & Decorators' Union — S. VAUGHAN

Had the Trade Unions in our country taken the same stand as your people in Australia, we would not now be facing the same difficulties which cause misery to our people in South Africa.

Please convey my greetings to Patrick Sweetensen, who spent so much of his time with me, and also to the other officials of your Union and the clerical workers who helped me so much in my work. Many thanks to you all.

I hope we shall continue to write to each other. I shall hope to write an article about my impressions in Australia.

With greetings to you all,
Yours fraternally,

John Gaetsewe,
Representative of SACTU,
Western Europe,
London Office.

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S.U.A. History

Off course...

On course

phasised the virtues of its "safe and moderate policy and not" (as expressed by its journal) "a revolutionary one by any means"; the virtues of arbitration as opposed to the bitterness of the strike tactic.

During the course of the First World War the F.S.U.A. was quite unique in that it was practically the only union that did not make any wage claims.

No sooner had Guthrie gone than seamen, against the counsel of the Union's leadership, became involved in the General Strike of 1917, which arose out of a dispute in the Government Tramway Workshops at Randwick, Sydney.

Early in 1918 Tom Walsh, known as "the Lenin of Australia", became Secretary of the N.S.W. Branch of the F.S.U.A. In 1919 he became General Secretary of the Union. In 1921 he was its President.

From 1919 onwards the Federal leadership of the Union was in the hands of men well versed in the need for class struggle and militant unionism.

R. J. Cahill.
July 14, 1972.

ALAGNA—FOR SALE:

The A.C.T.U. informs us the Government has advised permission has been granted to sell Alagna.
S.U.A. History

The spectre of Bolshevism

The years 1919-1925 were ones of virulent struggle in the history of the Union. They were also years in which the work situation afloat began to change.

Oil fuel started to replace coal and introduced as early as 1913 the fear that firemen and trimmers would become redundant; a fear that took years to materialise because coal persisted as the principal fuel whilst oil burning and diesel engines retained a novelty aspect, due perhaps to the incestuous relationship between Australian ship and coal owners.

By the time of the Second World War the Australian merchant fleet included many obsolete vessels (obsolete by world standards and well behind the technological developments of the twentieth century), death traps for the men who sailed them into the war zones that existed immediately outside the harbours of this country.

The 1920’s opened there was much industrial unrest as unions generally sought to defend and improve working conditions.

In April 1919, Seamen’s Federal Secretary Thomas Walsh initiated a strike for better shipboard conditions and higher wage rates. Combined with a coal strike in New South Wales, this raised the ire of the capitalist establishment.

Before the year was out, Walsh had been gaol for three months for “continued incitement to strike”. The shipowners also paid a price by granting a small pay rise to seamen and agreeing to improve crew accommodation.

The following year, in December 1920, seamen were again on strike, this time over the issue of “job control” — an early expression of workers’ control in this country.

Job Control expressed the Union’s resolve to enforce good conditions on board ship irrespective of what was stipulated in awards handed down by the Arbitration Court. Furthermore, it sought to take away from the shipowners the management right to recruit crews. In this respect it was a precaution against job erosion both through technological change and introduction of non-union labour.

This strike brought the Australian shipping industry to a virtual standstill, and led the newspaper barons to warn against the “Bolshevism” and “Sovietism” Walsh was introducing to the “virgin” Australian labour movement.

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Indeed Walsh was a communist, and he and his wife Adela (a daughter of the incredible Pankhurst family and editor of the “Seamen’s Journal”) took part in 1920 in the discussions out of which later emerged the Communist Party of Australia.

The 1920 strike went before the Arbitration Court early in 1921, after Walsh had become General President of the Union. The dispute was settled, out of which emerged the machinery by which disputes were determined by a committee consisting of equal Shipowner and Union representation.

For seamen, militancy paid off; during this time wage rises in the shipping industry were greater than in any other industry. By 1923 the Award rates for an A.B. stood at $16.8s, per month, a rise from the pitiful $11 (plus keep) of 1918.

Military did not go unchallenged. From the shipowners’ point of view seamen were being paid too much. Further, the Union’s policy of enforcing the high safety and accommodation standards prescribed by the Navigation Act ate into the profit margins of the coastal shipping owners and the Government-owned Commonwealth Shipping Line.

The Federal Government was getting fed-up with militant unionism generally, whilst the shipowners were tired of the industrial guerilla tactics seamen had been using against them continuously since the end of the Great War. In 1925 the crunch came.

The Government decided to sell the Commonwealth Line, which meant a loss of jobs for Australian seamen.

At the same time the effect of technological changes began to be felt. Land transport was developing and the 1913 fear of job erosion caused by oil-burning ships materialised.

Shipowners sought and gained in June the de-registration of the Union. With this the Seamen’s Award was cancelled and employers regained their ancient power to dictate terms of employment.

Seamen went on strike on July 14.

The next month Walsh and General Secretary Jacob Johnson offered support to striking British seamen in Australia who were protesting against wage cuts agreed to by their union in Great Britain.

This was the last straw.

Anti-Bolshevik feeling (as anti-communism was then called) ran high. “The Sydney Morning Herald” had already editorialised:

“In Italy the land was only saved from Red domination by the heroic remedy of Fascism.”

The Government brought out its big guns—

—The Navigation Act was amended to facilitate the employment of low wage crews on coastal trading ships;

—The Immigration Act was amended to enable the deportation of Seamen’s leaders, Thomas Walsh and Jacob Johnson.

Both of these men had been born in foreign lands (Ireland and Holland respectively) and were regarded as undesirable aliens. Walsh had been in Australia since 1893; Johnson since 1910.

Deportation proceedings went ahead. The New South Wales Labour State Government refused to co-operate with the Commonwealth. Special officers had to be enlisted by the Federal Government to do the dirty work, and in November 1925 the two Union leaders were imprisoned on the Navy’s Garden Island.

The legality of their deportation was challenged in the High Court, which delivered a verdict in favour of the unionists. Walsh and Johnson returned in triumph to the Mainland to be greeted by huge, admiring crowds.

However, anti-communism ran high.

In November 1925 the Federal Election had been won by the conservative Bruce-Page Government on the platform of anti-communism.

The Crimes Act was amended to take care of “malcontents” who dared to ripple the calm of Australian conservatism.

As for the 1925 strike, it ended with a compromise between seamen and shipowners. The Union agreed to abandon “job control” whilst the owners agreed to meet former Award terms of employment and pay wages fortnightly.

Workers on the wharves during the seamen’s strike of 1925.
After 1925 the Union's brilliant, comet-like trail across the face of Australian unionism faded.

Walsh became more moderate in his politics and fell out with Johnson. The former, who had led the Union into de-registration, now sought re-registration, a move opposed by the latter who felt the Union could achieve more outside the Arbitration System than within.

The rank and file split on the issue.

 Faction fighting became the bitter hallmark of the Union. Walsh moved politically to the right. He later flirted with fascism and became a publicist for Japanese imperialism in the Far East (a political transition that has never adequately been explained).

Johnson, however, was an advocate of class struggle. He was a member of the very marxist British Socialist Party.

Then in 1928, at a time when Johnson was serving a gaol sentence (imposed under the Crimes Act) for his industrial activities, Walsh was disqualified by Johnson's supporters from holding office in the Union.

Walsh had just been elected General Secretary by a majority of over 400 votes when this happened. Allegations were made that Walsh had misappropriated Union funds. He retaliated by claiming that the Union had been thoroughly white-anted by communism.

Undeterred, Walsh in March 1929 sought the registration of a rival seamen's union, the Australian Seamen's Union. The S.U.A. (then "The Federated Seamen's Union of Australasia") applied for re-registration at the same time. Both applications were knocked back.

For seamen things were grim. Problems caused by technological changes have already been mentioned.

On top of this was the Depression and with it, unemployment.

Union funds were at an all time low, as was Union membership. In 1926 over 8,000 members voted in the Seamen's Union elections; in 1929 there were only 2,231 members. Nearly two-thirds of men eligible to join the Union either refused or simply didn't bother.

Federal Secretary Johnson continued to seek re-registration after 1929. In 1930 this was secured and soon after he got a new award. This was a disappointing award for seamen as it not only restored the 1929 Agreement but included a 10% reduction in wages (a general deflationary attempt by the Federal Government applying to all workers).

By 1935 the Depression's extremes had receded; the 10% wage cut was restored.

Seamen began to demand the improvement of their conditions generally. For example, an unsuccessful attempt was made to have the disciplinary provisions removed from the Navigation Act.

Thomas Walsh in the early 1920's; he first took office as Newcastle Secretary in 1906.

Pressured by the membership and seeking to allay criticisms of his leadership, Johnson sought to vary the award in 1933. With the Union considerably weakened, shipowners sought a reversal of the trends of the early 'twenties.

In November 1935 the new Award was handed down. It came complete with cuts in overtime rates, the abolition of differential payments to seamen for certain stevedoring work, and a refusal to reduce the 56-hour week.

From the vantage point of many seamen, Johnson was seen as the chief pilot of the Award. Disquiet ran high in the Union.

Against the advice of Johnson and the Committee of Management, the men decided to go on strike against the Award. Their leader was Joseph Keenan who headed the seamen's section of the Militant Minority Movement, a communist "front" organisation.

Thus was born the disastrous 1935 Strike which, due to the intervention of an aggressive Federal Attorney General, nearly succeeded in totally destroying the Seamen's Union. I refer here, of course, to Robert Gordon Menzies, soon to distinguish himself as a tool of Japanese imperialism, an apostle for European fascism, and later Prime Minister of Australia — at which point Eddie Ward (Labor M.P.) accurately described him as "The pin-up boy of the change-of-life girls".

Rowan Cahill, August 14, 1972
S.U.A. History

Crucial years

1935-1945

The years 1935-1945 were amongst the most crucial in the history of the Seamen's Union of Australia.

They witnessed the near destruction of the Union (as a result of the 1935 Strike) and the painful process of rebuilding (which culminated during the Second World War). By the end of the war the S.U.A. stood united and strong, qualities that were more than tested in the ensuing years.

Last month I left readers on the eve of the 1935 Strike. I don't propose to deal here with the Strike in detail. For those interested I recommend the series of memoirs "Looking Backwards" by Thomas W. Cook ("Seamen's Journal," November, 1967, January and February, 1968) which, while containing a number of errors, vividly evoke the bitterness and turmoil of the period.

The 1935 Strike was against the unsatisfactory Award handed down in November that year by Dethridge, C. J. Launched in Sydney during December, the Strike spread to all ports in Australia and tied up some 112 ships. It ended on February 21, 1936. The cooks were the only maritime unionists to support the seamen during their struggle.

Soon after the Strike commenced the Federal Government (via Attorney-General Menzies) ordered seamen back to work.

Seamen refused and there followed an almost successful attempt to destroy the Seamen's Union as a viable industrial organisation.

This happened late in December, 1935, when the licensing provisions of the Transport Workers Act were invoked against seamen. This meant that only seamen with licences (at the cost of one shilling) could be employed in their profession. Further, under the provisions of the Act it became an offence punishable by heavy fines and imprisonment to engage in certain trade union activities (e.g. inducing seamen to refrain from offering for employment, or organising men to terminate employment in order to enforce demands on shipowners and/or masters).

On the strike bound vessels some 2,230 jobs were vacant. By April 3, 1936, the Government had issued 6,977 licences. Statistically this meant that more than three times as many men were licensed for employment as seamen than there was an actual need for.

In effect this meant that the Government had created a surplus of labour so that the maritime industry would no longer have to contend with the demands of the Seamen's Union for under the Transport Workers Act, as we have seen, certain trade union activities were curtailed. Not only this but Regulation 14 guaranteed employers free selection from amongst licensed seamen.

To facilitate this selection the shipowners opened their own pick-ups which came to be known as "Shipowners' Bureaux."

To cap it all there was a special system of discrimination embodied in the licensing procedure as it applied to seamen. First preference for employment was given to men who had been issued with licences before March, 1936, and who had been licensed for two months. As most S.U.A. members had not crossed the picket lines (and as the Strike ended late in February, 1936) this meant employment-wise that non-union seamen got preference over unionists.

This use of the Transport Workers Act (the "Dog Collar Act" as it was called) was a deliberate attempt to strait-jacket a militant industrial organisation.

Consequences of the Strike were many.

Leading strike activists were victimised by employers. Many F.S.U.A. members were unable to secure employment at sea. Hundreds sought jobs ashore; many became employees at Newcastle and Port Kembla steel works.

On board ship there was conflict, often violent —leading on at least one occasion to actual death—between Seamen's Union members, Union members who had scabbed (about 800 crossed picket lines) and non-union men who had volunteered to man the strike bound vessels.

More important was the emergence of another industrial organisation for seamen, the Australian Seamen's Federation (A.S.F.), granted Commonwealth registration in April, 1938.

Organised by a firm of chartered accountants its secretary had never been to sea. The A.S.F. attempted to organise the 1935 Strike volunteers. By September, 1939, over one-third of all employed seamen in Australia were volunteers.

The volunteers themselves were a mixed bunch but the greatest proportion of them appear to have been naval reservists.

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Crucial years—1935 . . . 1945

Politics within the Seamen’s Union were chaotic in the post-Strike years. Faction fighting continued. The membership was divided. There was tension between unemployed seamen and those with jobs. An indication of the chaos is evident in the following brief look at the position of Federal Secretary, 1935-1940:

—Jacob Johnson, recalled from office during the 1935 Strike.

—Joseph Keenan took over, but was refused recognition as General Secretary by the Committee of Management and the Johnson supporting branch officials in Melbourne and Brisbane.

—Johnson was re-elected at the end of 1936. However, the Federal Returning Officer refused to declare the ballot.

—Sydney Branch Secretary Chris Herbert stood in as General Secretary.

—Johnson opened up his own head office in Sydney and went on calling himself “General Secretary.”

—In July, 1937, W. J. Daley was elected to the position of General Secretary where he stayed until beaten for the job at the end of 1940 by E. V. Elliott.

☆ ☆ ☆

With two Seamen’s unions (The Federated Seamen’s Union of Australasia and the Australian Seamen’s Federation) in the maritime industry a dual power situation existed. This led to conflict out of which only one could emerge triumphant.

The F.S.U.A. set about to be the victor. Its object: To attain 100 per cent F.S.U.A. membership on all Australian shipping and get the A.S.F. deregistered.

This was the aim of the Union as the “thirties” came to an end, and only after faction fighting had been weeded out and stability and unity given a chance to develop. The election of Daley as General Secretary in 1937 and the defeat of Johnson-supporting branch officials in Melbourne and Brisbane were significant steps in this direction.

One of those who helped oust the Johnson faction was a fireman, E. V. Elliott, who in 1937 beat Bill Casey for the position of Queensland Secretary of the Union.

By mid 1938 the A.S.F. was finding it hard to build its membership; volunteers were not joining (in fact the F.S.U.A. welcomed volunteers into its ranks). There was a drift of men to the F.S.U.A.

To next page

CONDITIONS.

1. This permit may be revoked at any time by any authorized officer.

2. The holder of this permit shall not carry on board any ship to which this permit applies any bag or other similar article unless prior permission has been given by an authorized person.

3. He shall refrain from smoking whilst in the hold of any ship or in any place on board a ship where a notice prohibiting smoking is displayed.

4. He shall not act in any manner detrimental to the public safety or defence of the Commonwealth.

5. He shall refrain from discussing with any unauthorised person the nature of any ship to which this permit relates, or any ship berthed at an enclosed wharf, or of its cargo or passengers.

6. He shall return this permit to the proper officer at or before the time of its expiry or upon ceasing to follow the calling for which the permit is issued.

7. He shall on any enclosed wharf or any ship, when required by an authorized person, open for inspection any bag or article carried by him.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

NATIONAL SECURITY (GENERAL) REGULATION 7A.

PERMIT TO
Board Ships

Expires 31 May 1946

(Strictly not Transferable.)
From previous page

In 1934 the Union only had 3,588 members. In 1938 this stood at 4,600.

Indicative of Union growth was the record of the South Australian Branch: Before 1938 it could only manage to sign up 20 new members a year. In the three years following the Strike it signed up an average of 54 new members a year.

September, 1939, Australia entered the Second World War.

In my full length history I deal with the war years in detail; here I can only summarise the main developments. But I believe the war years to be amongst the most important ones for the S.U.A. In a very real sense they were responsible for the creation of the modern S.U.A. as we know it today.

The Union participated fully in the war effort. This did not mean that it abandoned its role as an organisation protecting the welfare of the members. Throughout the war the strike tactic was used when important Union principles were at stake.

But generally speaking the Australian war effort was considerably spurred by the formation of a Federal Labor Government in October, 1941 (which stayed in power until 1949).

Under the Labor Government the deregistration of the A.S.F. was secured (1942) and with this came the creation of a single Union pick-up.

The Union was also given a hand in the running of the maritime industry via the Maritime Industry Commission (M.I.C.), a body empowered to safeguard and improve the conditions of merchant seamen.

Gains secured during the war years were many but the most important were the war risk bonus and the 44-hour week.

Leading the S.U.A. throughout the war years was a group of remarkable trade union leaders (see below).

From previous page

The war was not without its toll.

A breakdown of casualties to Australian merchant seamen during the war shows that—
- 288 died following enemy action;
- 30 died from injuries;
- 37 died while prisoners of war;
- 3 were "lost at sea";
- 5 died of illness; and
- 8 died from causes unknown.

A total of 386 dead.

Putting it another way, one in eight Australian merchant seamen died as the result of wartime sea service.

There are no figures available concerning the number of wounded.

As the war came to an end the S.U.A. stood strong and united. On all ships there was 100 per cent Union coverage.

Seamen had suffered during the war. They looked forward to peace. Australian workers generally looked forward to a period of social reconstruction after the war, a "new social order" in which social justice would be a reality. The Labor Government was seen as a good omen for this reconstruction.

But it did not come.

Instead there was anti-socialism, anti-communism; troops were used as strike breakers; trade union leaders were imprisoned. This was the Cold War; it really stepped-up when the Liberal Party under R. G. Menzies came to power in the 1949 Federal Election.

In all of this seamen and their Union became a prime target. There was no peace.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>COUNTRY OF ORIGIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliot V. Elliott</td>
<td>General Secretary</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Bird</td>
<td>Queensland Branch Secretary, 1941</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barney Smith</td>
<td>Victorian Branch Secretary, 1943</td>
<td>England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg Franklin</td>
<td>Sydney Branch Secretary</td>
<td>Wales</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Newcastle Branch Secretary</td>
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<td></td>
<td>These men constituted the war-time Federal Executive.</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>All had been prominent in the 1935 Strike.</td>
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Seamen's Journal, September 21, 1972
S.U.A. History

The Cold War

My research has led me to regard the contemporary history of the Union (1945-1972) in two distinct stages. The first comprises the years between 1945 and 1958 (the period of the Cold War); the second is from 1958 onwards.

Older members will be familiar with the history they have made in this second period, and the "Seamen's Journal," which has been a monthly publication since 1955, is a fine record of those times.

While the Fitzpatrick/Cahill history of the Union looks at the period from 1958 onwards in detail, I do not propose to do so here. And so, with this article, which deals with the Cold War Period, I conclude my historical series (commenced in February, 1972) on the S.U.A.

The Cold War, of course, is still with us. But between the years 1945 and 1958 it was at its height.

During this period in Australia the S.U.A. was a prime target for antigean Cold War warriors whose main weapon was "anti-communism."

It is fair to say that from the end of the War to the end of 1958 the S.U.A. was in a virtual state of siege as a host of antagonistic forces launched attacks against it.

The magnitude of these attacks increased when the Union's old enemy from 1955, Robert Menzies, became Prime Minister at the head of a coalition of anti-socialist forces euphemistically called the Liberal Party.

Before looking at these attacks, which at times threatened the very existence of the Union as an industrial organisation, we need to realise why the S.U.A. was selected as a target.

☆ ☆ ☆

As the Second World War drew to a close and the Axis forces were rolled back to their homelands, there began to develop in this country an animosity towards S.U.A. members by Australians in general.

The cold-blooded crudity of it all was that the Merchant Marine had served its purpose and Australia no longer needed them for its survival.

Union claims for better working conditions met hostility from shipowners and the Labor Government.

Newspaper space was devoted by the press barons to denigrating the wartime courage and sacrifice by seamen and dismissing their economic claims.

Such attacks escalated when peace came in 1945.

Linked to this was the fact that the Communist Party of Australia (C.P.A.) had a large following in the Union while leading communists held prominent positions in the S.U.A. leadership.

In itself this was unimportant were it not for the Washington-led struggle to prevent the spread of communism in the world. This ideological crusade was a cover for the vast military/technological effort on the part of the United States to bring the economic and human resources of the under-developed nations under its domination and exploitation.

In this situation all communists became targets. In the nations breaking free from 19th century colonialism they were napaled, bombed, shot, gaoled and tortured. In the democracies they were subjected to imprisonment, special "outlaw legislations, police and security service intimidation, committees of investigation, employment victimisation, etc.

☆ ☆ ☆

In the immediate post-war period the Union chalked up a militant record.

In 1945 it joined with the Waterside Workers' Federation in the historic shipping boycott against the Dutch colonialists' attempt to re-impose Dutch control over the Netherlands East Indies, where nationalist republican forces were creating Indonesia.

There were many displays of inter-union solidarity.

- During the 1945 Steel Strike the S.U.A. joined the Federated Ironworkers' Association in its struggle against the Broken Hill Pty. Ltd. monopoly.
- A boycott of colliers was imposed during the 1949 Coal Strike.
- The Canadian ship Haligonian Duke was declared black and held in Australia for many months while the Canadian Seamen's Union struggled for better wages and conditions.
- Political struggles abounded. When general anti-union legislations were introduced by the State Governments of Queensland and Victoria in 1948, the S.U.A. initiated shipping boycotts of those States.

On top of this activity the Union was able to significantly improve the working conditions of Australian seamen—in regard to wages, shipboard conditions and hours of work.

Right-wing forces within the S.U.A. itself were, however, unhappy with the state of the Union and throughout the Cold War "Grouper" attacks against the leadership were both vicious and common.

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The Cold War

In 1950 the new Prime Minister, Menzies, tried to outlaw the C.P.A. via the Communist Party Dissolution Bill. This also provided for the removal from office of any trade unionist connected with the Communist Party.

S.U.A. Officials Elliott, Bird, Smith and Hurd were all named in Parliament as amongst those who would first "get the axe".

Seamen opposed the Bill and the Union joined with the Miners' Federation and the W.W.F. in contesting its validity before the High Court. The Unions won and the Bill was found to be unconstitutional.

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Internationally, the S.U.A. was in the forefront of political struggle against Western imperialism.

In 1948, 1949 and 1950 the Union's Annual General Meeting condemned British and American imperialism in the Middle East and Asia, and resolved to combat it with all means possible.

This led, in 1950, to the S.U.A. black ban on the transport of Korean war supplies by merchant shipping.

Some 7,000 tons of R.A.A.F. war supplies (for Malaya) were held up in Townsville in 1955 by seamen who delayed the sailing of the Government-owned freighter Tyalla.

Despite great opposition, the S.U.A. consistently maintained links with the World Federation of Trade Unions, an organisation in which E. V. Elliott became a prominent office holder. For its relationship with the W.F.T.U. the S.U.A. suffered suspension and threatened expulsion from the A.C.T.U.

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Throughout the Cold War the mass media projected a picture of the S.U.A. as "the bad boy" of the industrial family.

This image was not improved in 1951 when the Union industrially and financially supported the New Zealand Waterside Workers' Strike, an illegal action at the time. Police, armed with warrants issued under the Crimes Act, raided the Sydney branch and Federal offices—but no prosecutions followed.

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The last Cold War challenge to the Union came in 1958 with the Senate Select Committee investigation into "indemnity payments". "Indemnity payments" were payments made by shipowners to the maritime unions when ships were sold off the Australian coast and not manned by an Australian crew on the voyage to the port of delivery.

Objections to this system of payments, which had existed since 1946, were launched by a variety of right-wing forces in Australia (including the Democratic Labor Party, the journal "Newsweekly", "Daily Telegraph", Journalist Alan Reid).

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These forces sought an inquiry into the affairs of the maritime unions, in particular the S.U.A., where it was anticipated some incriminating "dirt" (at the time some filthy allegations against the Union's leadership were circulating around the country) would be found to "pin" on the militant leadership.

After this, prosecutions could be launched against these men in an effort to emasculate and cripple the Union as a political and industrial force to be reckoned with.

Such an inquiry was held, but it proved of very little value to its instigators.

The Senate Inquiry proved to be the last concentrated Cold War attack of any magnitude against the S.U.A.

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Freed from the threat these attacks had posed, the Union could now really concentrate its attack upon the shipowners, who were now faced with problems posed by revolutionary developments in rail, road and air transport and shipping technology.

With their own futures at stake the shipowners embarked upon a programme of fleet modernisation.

At this point their economic survival was, to a great extent, dependent upon the activities and attitude of the unions.

The shipowners' flanks were exposed. The S.U.A. was in a position to extract from them working conditions and wages that would make Australian seamen envious the world over.

And it did.

Rowan J. Cahill,
November 19, 1972.

Union History

The completed manuscript of A History of the Seamen's Union by Brian Fitzpatrick and Rowan Cahill is now in the printer's hands. It covers highlights of the Union's first 100 years—1872-1972.

Currently, the Union is awaiting approval from some publishers and/or authors to use certain illustrations proposed by historian Rowan Cahill.

It is anticipated the History will be launched during February, 1973, and be simultaneously available for purchase.

The January, 1973, Journal will carry an order form and give details re size, price, etc.

The Union takes this opportunity of placing on record its appreciation of the "potted history" written voluntarily by Rowan Cahill and published in the Journal throughout the Centenary Year. Verbal and written comments from members have been high in praise of the series, concluded in this issue.

Seamen's Journal, December, 1972