[EXTRACTS]

The Seamen's Union of Australia

1872-1972

A History

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Early in 1970 I was introduced to the Seamen's Union by Ken Buckley, Senior Lecturer in Economic History at Sydney University, with the view to writing the Centenary History of that Union. Soon afterwards I was commissioned by the Union to embark upon the task.

During the process of research and writing I was engaged in part-time school teaching, university post-graduate work, and left-wing campus activities. In the course of the latter two of my comrades suffered, one via expulsion and the other by being deprived of his job as a tutor.

My activities eventually led to a prolonged Court case, a trial by jury in Sydney Quarter Sessions, courtesy of the then New South Wales Chief Secretary Mr. Willis (a vigorous anti-student protector of public morality).

I mention these because they affected the writing of this history. At all times my on-going personal development and the process of research and writing were as one, the one influencing the other and vice versa. So this history is not a detached one. For example, harassment of seamen by police during the 1950's became more than just a historical fact when one night my wife and I were confronted by plainclothes detectives with their feet in the doorway at 10 p.m., just when we were about to go to bed. They threatened to put me in the cells if I didn't give them certain information relating to my imminent Court case.

Again, the history of the Seamen's Union (S.U.A.) is the history of a struggle against capitalism, a conscious political socialist struggle for much of the time because of the close links involving the Union, seamen and communism. In this struggle I am not uncommitted, my socialist consciousness owing a great deal to the Vietnam imperialist war and the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people.

There were other points of contact between myself and the Union that did not make for detachment. In a very real way the project of writing the Union’s history became for me a total educational experience.
As a university graduate, so many of my experiences before 1970 had largely been campus orientated. As part of the so called “new left” I was imbued with an unintentional arrogance which caused me to write and speak of the working class and unionism without having very much contact at all with workers themselves or their unions.

We thrived on endless debate, discussion and articles on socialist tactics and theory. We produced little more than intense internecine warfare among different ideological groups, a tendency to solve complex problems of power politics on papers, with the result, of course, that we didn’t even see the monolithic face of capitalism let alone shake its foundations.

In the late 1960’s at the height of the Australian student revolt when the idea of a student-worker alliance hit us after the success of the student-worker uprising in Paris, 1968, I recall the attitude held by myself and my compatriots as we fleetingly met with various union officials and addressed stopwork and lunchtime meetings of rank and file unionists. It was that we, the students, were the catalysts of social change and also the embodiment of wisdom.

I have no doubt that this elitist attitude derived from the elitist institution we found refuge in, the university — with us in many ways being the monks of the twentieth century.

The university is a not so anachronistic medieval survival in an age where educational inequality blatantly exists, an inequality based on class lines, where higher education is accessible only to the chosen few and is not regarded as the right of all.

Working for the Union I moved freely among seamen and the leaders they elected. I met a variety of men and was exposed to a variety of experiences.

Some things stand out, like drinking tea in the mess room of the Iron Monarch (now sold to Asian interests for scrap), chatting with some of the seamen about the novels of George Johnston, browsing through their library (which they proudly showed me) of some 500 volumes, the latest edition being the complete works of George Bernard Shaw.

Reading through Arbitration Court transcripts I became aware of cases where Elliott (whose formal education ceased at the age of fifteen) had argued the Union’s case and managed to outwit and defeat some of the ablest legal minds the system could produce — minds that had in cases (no pun intended) been educated by some of the great schools and universities of Australia and Britain.

Experiences like these helped to expose the elitist fallacies I’d held as an undergraduate student leftist. I realised that the working class produces its own leaders, its own counter to the uni-
versity produced mandarins of capitalism, and that education and culture are not solely the preserve of the ivory towers of academia as some Vice-Chancellors like to maintain.

* * *

There is a sad tendency for people on the Australian left to categorise themselves and their fellows into ideological groups. It does not end here for each group then snipes at, criticises, deceives, out-maneuuvres the other — all of which is passed off as “the dialectic”.

In essence this tendency is both wasteful and destructive. It successfully prevents any meaningful cross-fertilisation of ideas and experiences. It is as though we who are seeking to bring a leftwards change in society can afford to dismiss out of hand certain comrades travelling in the same direction when the history of major social change — revolutionary or otherwise — clearly indicates the contrary to be true (at least this is how I see it).

To a number of prominent leaders of the Seamen’s Union the term Stalinist has been applied, with E. V. Elliott being regarded as the greatest Stalinist amongst them.

Apart from believing the term to be totally devoid of meaning in the context of the Australian working class — having a meaning only within the mainstream of Russian history, its roots buried deeply in Tsarist soil — I also criticise those who use this term in an attempt to dismiss its recipients and in doing so to dismiss the richness of struggle, the wealth of human experience, the humanity that such people may embody (as though in this day and age where inhumanity abounds we can afford to turn a blind eye to that feeling for humanity which has always and will always be mankind’s foremost revolutionary incentive).

In passing I have mentioned the S.U.A. Federal Secretary E. V. Elliott, a man about whom many people have many views. I have met those who regard him as a father figure — an object of “reverence” — others who speak of him in tones mysterious. He is a man who elicits some sort of reaction, be it respect, love, fear or hatred. This is understandable given a career in office that has spanned over 30 years and a lifetime nearly as old as the century itself, a century that has embraced some of the most turbulent periods of Australia’s history.

Before meeting Elliott I had heard a great deal about him, especially sinister tales which I later found to be particularly in favour with certain journalists in the capitalist press during the 1950’s and the early 1960’s. Even people on the left perpetuated such stories, endowing the man with an awesome sinister legend, a sort of mixture of Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff and Edward G. Robinson, a legend which no doubt has been of
immense political value to the man about whom I write in an industry traditionally associated with hard, tough men.

Over the last couple of years I have come to know a different man, a man who tends to keep people at a distance until he feels he can trust them, a modest man (in fact infuriatingly so at times from the research point of view); a cultured, well read, much travelled person, knowledgeable in the ways of man; a person who tends to keep a great deal to himself, is abrupt at times (an abruptness which should not be interpreted as rudeness) and yet capable of great diplomacy. Above all he is a sensitive man and a person who, I believe, possesses real wisdom.

My purpose in making the above remarks is twofold. First, they reflect upon the links between myself and this history; from Elliott I have personally learned more about what it is to be both human and a socialist. Second, it gives me the opportunity to make clear that everything in my section of the book is a reflection upon my experience of researching the Union and in no way due to pressures of any kind exerted upon me from any quarter either inside or outside the Union.

* * *

I realised fairly early what it was I wanted to say about seamen and their Union. Briefly, it was that, just as seamen in the course of their working lives often have to face the elemental extremes of Nature, so too has their Union experienced in the course of time the extremes that Australian capitalism has had at its command.

To help me in this task I had unrestricted access to the Union’s archives (which have since been deposited with the Archives of the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra).

The archives of an ongoing industrial/political organisation such as the S.U.A. are peculiar in the following respects. For a start, there is the tendency for material no longer of relevance to current events and trends to be thrown out and destroyed.

Then there has been the history of the Union itself in which fires, police raids and faction fighting have taken a toll of records, accounting for their removal and/or destruction.

The legal profession has also contributed to the disruption of what might be termed the organic growth of the Union’s records. Transcripts and Union files generally have been broken up in the course of a legal case and simply never replaced or returned.

Then there is the fact that a great deal of historical evidence is of a type never accessible to the historian — memo notes consigned to a waste-paper basket, telephone calls, bar-room discussions. In a militant industrial organisation like the S.U.A., one that has often been in a virtual state of siege at various points
of time, much history has taken place without producing records of any kind.

The foregoing is not to suggest that the seamen of my subject are not instructed by the past, that they have no sense of history, no knowledge of the progress they have made and how this was achieved.

They do have this historical sense but in the main it is not a history preserved in documents or books. Rather it is a living oral history that seamen constantly talk about and remember.

In this oral history there may be and are mistakes regarding dates and specific details, perhaps even grave factual errors. But it lives in their minds, each person carrying his own version of what happened, how things occurred; a history remembered with bitterness, laughter, illuminated with jokes and items of human interest, often narrated with a lusty awareness of the possibilities of the English language.

This oral history enters the realm of myth and legend, rooted in reality but somehow transcending it.

It is this history, told by many men (both current and former seamen), that I have listened to, been influenced by, and also used as a source of material.

Finally, mention must be made of the Seamen’s Journal, a publication which today must rate among the best union publications in this country. My research of the Union’s history was considerably advanced by the files of this journal.

* * *

Many people, some unknown, have contributed and assisted me in the preparation of this history. I wish to thank all who have sent in old newspaper clippings, pamphlets, and generally led me to research material I would not otherwise have uncovered.

I express gratitude to those seamen who have with patience talked and discussed so many matters with me as I sought to make an imaginative entry into their profession.

While not attempting to list everyone who helped me in my task and hoping that my thanks will be taken as read by those not mentioned, I gratefully acknowledge help from the following people: W. Bird, K. (Della) Elliott, E. V. Elliott, P. Geraghty, H. Greenland, R. Lockwood, B. M. Nolan, A. Oliver, R. J. Webster, and my wife, Pam.

R.J.C.
Where the Giants Dwell

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath.

HERMAN MELVILLE.

Attacks upon the Union have been many and varied. In fact it would seem that just as seamen often face the raw wrath of the elements in the course of their sea-life so, too, has their Union been faced with attacks from many forces as powerful, metaphorically, as those of Nature.

But the Union is still there: the Federal Office, a modest brick corner building (formerly the Robert Burns Hotel) in Sydney's historic Sussex Street, the first floor balcony mounted symbolically with a brown-painted ship's wheel from an old Australian vessel. Linked to this national centre are the seven branches throughout the Commonwealth — and the handful of seamen who run these — and beyond them some five thousand others, predominantly Australian but properly described as a multi-national collection of men, who man the ships, tugs, pilot boats and oil rig tenders. It is a close-knit collective with its own objectives and programme, its own leaders (who lead within limits prescribed by the rank and file), its own rules, its own code of conduct, its own expectations of its members and humanity; more than just a political community, but a society within Society, that looks after its own, that protects, disciplines and defends itself; a democratic community in which its members have pride and to which there is loyalty; an intimate integrated community in which there is no distance between officials and the rank and file — regularly after stopwork meeting members and officials retire to the favourite local hotel where a much less formal meeting takes place.

The tragic death in a traffic accident of Barney Smith (Sydney Secretary since 1941) and his wife in August, 1967 movingly illustrates this "more than words" spirit of the S.U.A. That was a year public opinion had been once again vitriocially mobilised against the Union, this time for its successful boycott against the transport by merchant seamen of war goods to Vietnam. Their funeral was more than a tribute to a comrade and his partner but
Bernard (Barney) Smith, Sydney Branch Secretary 1.1.1941 until his untimely death on 4.8.1967.

Below: Secretary Smith addressing officials of public transport unions in solidarity with their struggle.
symbolic of the Union’s cohesiveness, a public demonstration of strength and “apartness”; the Seamen’s Journal commented — “as Henry Lawson would have said, ‘the Union was burying its dead’”.

On August 9 over one thousand people assembled at the S.U.A. Sussex Street office where hundreds of floral tributes were laid out. Later that afternoon the mourners moved off behind the hearses, solemnly marching, six abreast, led by officials of the Union, along the “Hungry Mile” — well known to waterfront battlers.

Following cremation their ashes were cast into the sea from the deck of a merchant ship during the course of a normal passage; many S.U.A. members choose thus to return to the sea.

* * *

It was surely in exasperation that one hopeful newspaper correspondent at the time of the first Boonaroo boycott in 1966 made the following forecast: “Soon automation could make the Seamen’s Union one of the most insignificant of all the maritime unions.”

If that time is coming it is surely a long way off, for currently the new technology not only changes the shape of ships and the type of work required of seamen, raising problems of demarcation and redundancy, it also changes the shape of shipping in general, creating new sorts of seamen, like those who tend the offshore oil rigs. Here the S.U.A. reaction has been to organise these new workers into its structure; so rather than decrease its numbers the S.U.A. has maintained a steady level over the last decade.

In themselves technological developments in the shipping industry are not bad, for it is a double-edged matter. It can be the aim of technology to make manpower redundant, creating as it does labour problems. Or it can be used to lessen the burden of the worker. The one is the aim of capitalist management, the other that of the Union.

Just which edge gets the ascendancy is to a great extent dependent upon the strength of the Union and the consciousness of its members.

Also it should be remembered that technology not only changes ship design and the type of work done by seamen, it also brings changes to the patterns of shipping and transportation, and the future will see tremendous expansionist development in trade with Asia. As old avenues close down, others open up.

Further, while few mariners (apart from a few acceptable notables like Cook, Bass, Flinders, a few naval war heroes, and scoundrels like Bully Hayes) figure prominently in the written history of this country, Australia — an island continent — is dependent upon the sea; it is a maritime nation and, as far as
industry is concerned, for bulk cargoes the sea will remain the cheapest road for a long time to come.

The conditions may change, the ships and their cargoes may change, even the sea may change — may be fouled by pollution and die. But if that happens then we, all of us, will perish, for just as the sea was the source of life it continues in a very real way to sustain our daily existence.

While there is the sea and vessels that move upon its surface and as long as men are required to crew these, there will be seamen.

Commenting on seamen, author Frank Hardy (for a short time a S.U.A. member) said that they are “wonderful, colourful and rebellious men, and people of real integrity”. I venture that their history will continue to be one of militancy, underlined by humour, daring, courage, coloured by the clandestine. And pervading all of this a broad humanity.

For what makes them different from other workers is not that they are unique as personality types go — for on ships one meets the same varieties of men one meets on shore, but that they work upon the sea, and it is the sea which exercises an undeniable influence upon their lives; it is the sea that makes them what they are. The only others who match them in this are the miners, those whose work takes them deep into the earth itself (although once parallels, as far as working conditions, style of life and quality of men are concerned, could be made between seamen and shearsers — those who in former times gave guts to the Australian Workers’ Union).

It has to do with the element in which they work, of being in a situation where no man, no science, no amount of technology, can be in control of all the variables, where danger and death are work hazards. It has to do with boredom and isolation — the isolation of captive time spent in the confines of a metal shell upon the sea and of time to turn inwards upon oneself; it has to do with the nature of the organisation of a ship, a hierarchy-bound institution which is not only the place of work but also provides sustenance and shelter, an institution which must have an effect upon the lives of those who comprise it, yet an institution which has been ignored by the sociologist. By way of challenge one researcher has questioned whether misbehaviour is actually “fertilised by the system of shipboard life itself”. 1

It has to do with the relationship between the law and the seaman, where sanction-wise a “basic inequality exists between

the seagoing and the land-based employee”. The Navigation Act 1912-1972 prescribes penalties varying from shipboard fines, deductions from wages, to court fines and imprisonment, a system of sanctions deriving from British maritime practice which in turn has remained largely unchanged in this respect since 1850 and embodies traditions going back at least as far as the 14th century, and which also reflects “an inter-marriage of disciplinary attitudes and methods” between the merchant and naval services.

It has to do with families and relationships fractured by departures; of people met and worked with — where workmates are also those with whom one must live for weeks and months on end and whom one must trust; of waterfronts around the coast and across the sea — the chance to meet others, to understand how they live.

It has to do with what is experienced when voyaging, where often are revealed the heights and degradations of humanity, the excesses, the varieties; the peculiar, the strange, the absurd, the tragedy and comedy. Not seen or experienced as the Ripley-like tourist collecting items for mounting in a photo album, but often unwillingly, by accident, by chance — encountered because this is the way of things.

It has to do with powerful shipping companies with traditions reaching back into a not often glorious nor respectable past and employers who constantly give cause for discontent, where the profit motive can still indecently supersede human considerations.

It has to do with the centuries-old view of seamen as vice-ridden, lawless, amorous drunkards who, to give them some due, are occasionally brave.

According to Dr. Samuel Johnson, given as he was to declaim a number of times upon the profession of a sailor, a subject he violently abhorred, when “men come to like a sea-life, they are not fit to live on land”. As far as he was concerned, he found it quite unaccountable that people should like being sailors. “I cannot account for that, any more than I can account for other strange perversions of the imagination.” Besides which the happiness men derived from being sailors was of particular kind: “They are happy as brutes are happy, with a piece of fresh meat — with the grossest sensuality.”

This learned gentleman had no doubts about it (and very little contact with seamen, apart from one visit to a warship — on which occasion he was upset by the swearing he heard — and his Negro servant who “joined” the Navy via a press gang); any man who had initiative enough to get himself thrown into

2. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
gaol would not be a sailor “for being in a ship is being in a gaol, with the chance of being drowned. A man in a gaol has more room, better food and commonly better company”.

Granted Johnson was basing his comments on eighteenth century sea-life, a miserable reality which makes a lie of romanticised tales of life before the mast. However, the good doctor’s abhorrence of sailors, his view of them as inhuman sensational brutes, his linking of them to the limitless “strange perversions of the imagination”, is not an isolated attitude but rather, it would appear, one that has transcended time and place and, leper-like, affixed itself to seamen generally whether merchant or naval. As the British Naval historian Professor Christopher Lloyd has stated, of “all sections of the community, seafaring men and agricultural labourers have been the most ignored and therefore the worst treated”.

Today this attitude towards seamen by society in general continues. Examples of ostracism, victimisation and contempt keep occurring even as we move towards the Twenty-first Century. Symptomatic of it was public comment by non-seamen at the time the aggregate wage decision was handed down in 1970. Surprise was expressed on two accounts: first, that seamen should be the highest paid blue collar workers in Australia and, second, that their earnings could exceed those of members of some white collar and professional work classifications, as if seamen did not deserve it.

In this general context a recent Federal Government publication is interesting. The following paragraph occurs in its foreword:

“The compelling call of the sea finds ready response in many young people, but often parents tend to counter the urge. Historically, few other trades or professions have been so thoroughly denigrated in story and hymn. Few have warranted special Missions devoted to their uplift. Nevertheless”, the author felt it necessary to point out, “as a class, seafarers are as worthy and reputable as people in any other calling.”

In accounting for the character of seamen one must not dismiss traditions apparent in the history of seamen generally, a history in which mutiny, insurgency, rebellion and revolution are no strangers. With Australian seamen in particular there is the history of the S.U.A., militant since flexing its muscles against its conservative leadership during the First World War and breaking free with the successful seamen’s strike of 1919.

Finally, there is the sea, the primeval sea that once was all, and the sky — and all their moods and combinations.

Seamen work where the giants still live; it is this which touches and colours their lives.