

The Workers, United

A case for anarchist participation in mass unions

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21st July 2023

Trade unions have been part of the worker's struggle in Australia for longer than Australia has been a unified state. Post-invasion and colonisation, unions played a vital role in struggles for fair compensation, suffrage, workplace safety, and worker's rights, and this continued after federation and into the 20th century. While not explicitly socialist organisations, the role of unions as vectors for worker's self-empowerment and self-determination is undeniable. Even though this work often falls far from the revolutionary tree, the growth that is required of the working masses in order to win against the forces of state and capital is central to the building of revolutionary capacity. The current form of mass unionism in Australia is not conducive to this process, and therefore it should be the role of specific Anarchist groups to participate in mass union struggles on the level of the rank-and-file, and to provide a 'leadership of ideas' and action that can challenge the status quo and be proven in the real world via horizontal and democratic organisation, rather than engaging with (or becoming) the bureaucratic elite of the trade union system (Kerr 2014) or settling for fractured individualist strategies. By looking at historical examples of specific Anarchist organisations from Bulgaria and Uruguay we can develop an understanding of how such groups function within mass organisations such as unions, and what work they were able to accomplish in that context. Key lessons can be drawn from these experiences, which have the potential to aid the work the Australian Anarchists must do.

In 2023, Australian trade unions have become inextricably linked to the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and entirely entangled within the state. This is partly the result of a process that, begun by Labor in the 1980's and continued with bipartisan support since, linked trade unions with the state and judicial systems in order to mute and eventually crush their power in the labour market. In the following decades Liberal governments (especially those led by John Howard) have enthusiastically used this dynamic to further attack and undermine organised labour. Subsequent to the 1983 federal elections, and in the midst of an economic crisis, the new ALP government implemented a social contract that it had co-signed with the ACTU which, among other things, halted wage growth by indexing it to inflation, and agreed "in principle" to protect the living standards of workers by the enhancement of the social wage. Simultaneously, the Labor party introduced a raft of neoliberal policies that included financial deregulation and the floating of the Australian Dollar (Humphreys & Cahill 2016, p. 10). This was the true context of their deal with the unions: small concessions in order to clear the path for neoliberal reforms.

The Accord, as a consequence of its nature as a control mechanism for the government against organised labour, also 'institutionalised the trade union leadership within the apparatuses of the state', linking them existentially to the success of the ALP (Humphreys & Cahill 2016, p. 18). Over time, an 'informal Accord' between the unions and the ALP (which describes the support given to the ALP by trade unions in order to ensure "their" government remained in office at the cost of significant political compromises from the unions) developed, and the pipeline of careerists flowing from the union bureaucracy into the ALP became an established norm (Humphreys & Cahill 2016, p. 17). The Accord was a statement of intent from the ALP and the union leadership, and their collusion signalled the consent of the union bureaucracy to the neoliberal project that Labor was seeking to embark on. This severely weakened industrial solidarity, deepened the wage divide, and isolated unions from one another at a time when workers were increasingly feeling the effects of their exposure to an unstable global market. The result would be massive setbacks for workers over the years to come (Humphreys & Cahill 2016, p. 19).

Far from being radical bodies of massed worker's power, Australian unions today often fail to adequately represent their rank-and-file members, and provide very few avenues for the workers

themselves to call the shots due to the inherent hierarchy embedded within their bureaucracy. Former Australian Workers Union (AWU) national secretary and subsequent leader of the ALP Bill Shorten was well known for negotiating deals that suited bosses more than the workers he was paid to represent during his time at the union (Solidarity 2015). The AWU itself is known for ‘signing cut-price agreements that undercut awards and industry standards in return for membership coverage’, and is often the favoured union for employers who are looking at minimising the conditions negotiated by more radical unions such as the Construction Forestry Mining Engineering Union (CFMEU) and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) (Bramble 2018).

Unions such as the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees’ Association (SDA) are widely known for their terrible track record negotiating dodgy deals that benefited employers over workers and for promoting socially and economically conservative stances (RAFFWU 2023). For example, the SDA took no action against employers 7-Eleven despite their well-known and documented exploitation of international students (Bramble 2018).

In addition to this, industrial relations law in Australia today – built on the foundation laid by the Accords signed in the 80’s – is actively hostile towards union bureaucracies that back their members, exemplified in the frequent occasions that the CFMEU has been fined millions of dollars for ‘unauthorised strikes’ and other direct action (Davidson 2015). In comparison, negligence on the part of companies and bosses is barely punished, even when it results in multiple deaths, as in the case of the Grocon wall collapse in Carlton that killed three people, costing the company a mere \$250,000 (ABC News 2014).

A hostile industrial relations landscape finds many willing accomplices within union hierarchies, which further undermines the work of the rank-and-file who actually stand in pickets and conduct direct action. During an enterprise bargaining campaign at Sydney University, the National Tertiary Education Union state leadership decided to settle quickly with university management, despite a successful campaign up until that point. This included a one-day strike that completely shut down the university. As a result, some of the key claims that workers were fighting for were abandoned (Bramble 2018).

The Carlton and United Breweries (CUB) dispute in 2016 highlighted solidarity issues when, despite commendable actions such as the nationwide boycott of CUB drinks, and unions conducting rallies at the gates of the brewery demanding the reinstatement of sacked workers and their demands met, United Voice workers scabbed at the Abbotsford brewery and the Yatala brewery in Brisbane, reducing the impact of good union work and stretching out the dispute for months (Bramble 2018). Not only are Australian mass unions no longer radical enough to win consistently, but they no longer seem willing to risk support action, even within their own industries. It is obvious from these examples that there is both a significant institutional and ideological separation between the rank-and-file members of unions and the hierarchical bureaucracies that are meant to represent them, as well as an entirely hostile legal framework designed to limit and contain the ability of workers to come together and fight collectively.

This is not just an Australian phenomenon. At almost the same time as the Accords were being brought in by the ALP, the Great Miners Strike of 1984 was occurring in the UK. The strike was defeated, but not due to a lack of support from rank and file union members. In fact, support for the striking miners was widespread in unionised workforces. There was an estimated one million workers who directly supported the miners in various ways during the strike, but this support was never translated into effective solidarity in the form of industrial action (Anarchist Worker’s Group 2013). Due to the hierarchical nature of the unions, control of the fight was

never handed over to the rank and file. Radical solidarity action was therefore never undertaken due to the entanglement of the UK trade unions within the state and legal systems, through both legislation and their ties to the British Labour Party. Eventually, isolated and lacking legal avenues for action, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leadership conceded defeat (Anarchist Worker's Union 2013).

Historical examples such as those outlined above are not isolated events. They are symptomatic of a wider context; mass unions have been significantly weakened by a lack of rank-and-file agency, and this has led not only to their defeat in specific industrial disputes but also to their rapid loss of membership, and therefore their power in the broader economy. Union members on picket lines will generally tend to be more radical in their demands of bosses in comparison to officials on the union payroll due to their proximity to the cause in question. The intermediary role of union officials between bosses and workers that exists in modern Australian industrial disputes naturally leads to a position somewhere between the two parties, which then leads to a more conservative viewpoint. There is, on the other hand, no guarantee that rank-and-file control alone will lead to a more active and confident mass union. To be able to govern themselves, and act in a coordinated and democratic manner, people must first be given the tools with which to do so via education and practical experience. It is therefore the task of Anarchists to create an environment within mass unions which is conducive to this process, otherwise the entire effort would be rendered pointless.

Below the macro level, the role of trade union official – meant to advocate on the behalf of workers in a given industry – is increasingly seen as a career, with many younger officials never having worked an ordinary job, let alone in the industry they are representing. They arrive, the ink on their Industrial Relations degrees barely dry, and immediately commence their upwards trajectory through the union bureaucracy (Kerr 2014). Even if they have the best of intentions, and even if they have the most radical stances on worker's rights, the conciliatory nature of their role and its complete embedding within legal and state structures leads officials to compromise on worker's demands when they come into conflict with those of their bosses (Kerr 2014). The workers themselves often have little say in this, no matter their industry, as they are not afforded the agency within the union structure to make decisions that might (and probably will) completely contradict the desires of the bosses they are fighting against. Trade union officials, however, don't simply sell out workers because they're traitors to the union movement. Replacing every union position with radical leftists of any kind would fail to yield significantly better results, as positions of agency within the unions are so linked to the status quo that there is little recourse for genuine work to be done, and the full-time, salaried, often unelected positions that union officials hold inevitably leave them out of touch with the day-to-day issues on the shopfloor (Anarchist Worker's Group 2013). The role of those in the mass union bureaucracy as it is today is not to further the cause of workers, but rather to mediate the best outcome available within the context of a capitalist economy and the legal framework of the state. All of this is in direct conflict with the heart and soul of mass worker's organisations, which are the embodiment of the recognition that workers and bosses have different interests; that what's good for bosses is not good for workers, and that actively organising around a shared cause is the key tipping the scales in favour of the workers (Kerr 2014).

Unionism, then, is a social process as much as it is an ideological perspective. When workers get involved in strikes and other direct action together they see for themselves the power of their collective strength, and through this many realise that within united workers there lies the

power to decide the fate of the world; how it should be run, and who should benefit from its material wealth (Kerr 2014). Only workers together, united and organised, are able to challenge the power of capital and the state. In this sense trade unions are still the most significant mass organisations the working class has created (Kerr 2014).

From a sociological perspective, there are specific reasons why replacing the current crop of union bureaucrats with the ‘right people’ won’t resolve the issues that exist within the unions as a whole. The hierarchical structure of unions, and their links with the state, create a kind of ‘poisoned chalice’ which replicates its own norms through time (both political and social) via their institutionalisation and the legitimisation that brings.

This is the same for many social relations that have been institutionalised, which legitimises social behaviour and structures through their connection to established norms and values. These institutionalised social relations then become part of the dominant culture. This culture is passed on through early socialisation with parents and close family, and cemented later by secondary socialisation in the wider world, forming a social framework that can be passed between generations. People are most often socialised to accept hierarchy, and when institutions cement that norm later in life as they are interacted with, it only entrenches existing arrangements as “the right way to do things”. Culture cannot change or adapt to need without social actors applying pressure to it, which requires people actively creating new social relations and weaving them into the fabric of the culture itself, replacing old patterns of behaviour and social relations. If old, institutionalised social relations aren’t challenged, but instead continued by a different grouping of people, they will be replicated for future generations.

It is the very structures of power that are the issue, simply changing who wields that power won’t change its effects (Kerr 2014). Socialist tendencies that advocate for ‘democratic centralism’ (a leadership/base hierarchy, where the base is consulted on decisions but only the leadership has the power to deliberate and execute actions) or similar but distinct concepts (Correa & da Silva 2017, p. 8) will end up replicating the same dynamics and norms as exist in capitalism through utilising them for their own ends. They will strengthen, legitimise and reproduce them for the next generation of unionists – just as conservative and careerist union officials do currently. Even the most libertarian socialist would end up disempowering their comrades by empowering themselves, in that they therefore prevent the process of a cultural change to direct democracy and socialism from occurring. This creates an important distinction between the value of reformist and revolutionary tactics, as it renders an “intermediary” period that utilises existing social structures pointless to the process of cultural change. Hierarchical structures within mass unions must be challenged and torn down by the workers themselves, and in their place directly democratic methods of organisation must be fostered. Mass unions must separate from the state and legal bureaucracy, and re-assert themselves in direct antagonism with the interests of state and capital. Beginning this process is the admittedly daunting task of Anarchists.

On their own, individual Anarchists are a drop in the ocean when it comes to mass unions. One Anarchist, disconnected from their comrades, cannot hope to accomplish the political work necessary to foster change within the movement (Correa & da Silva 2017, p. 6). Instead (and firstly), Anarchists must organise themselves into specific groupings, with a clear set of internal agreements for the conduct of members, and a political-ideological and strategic program on which all members agree. From this base Anarchists can conduct their political work as a unit, with a clear and detailed vision for what they wish to achieve and how they wish to achieve it (Correa & da Silva 2017, p. 4). With this clarity of purpose and politics, and united together

under a common program, Anarchists can then commence their political work from within the rank-and-file of the mass unions relevant to their industry, both as individual workers and as representatives of their Anarchist program. In this organised manner, Anarchists can combat advocates of reformism and authoritarianism, the erasure of class conflict, the taming of the movement, and disrupt the established hierarchies that divorce workers from their agency (Correa & da Silva 2017, p. 5).

An important part of this work is in propaganda and education, and so Anarchists must be capable of both defending their programmatic positions and teaching other unionists the practical elements of these positions and their theoretical underpinnings. Anarchists must then be able to show these positions in action during conflicts with the state and capital, and remain ready to foster voluntary, directly democratic organisation of the rank-and-file members within mass unions in order to win these conflicts (Correa & da Silva 2017, p. 6). This does not mean these specific Anarchist groups take on the role of a revolutionary vanguard, but instead that Anarchists prove their own politics “on the field of battle”, organising both internally and external to their group in a directly democratic manner. Decision making should always remain collective and federalist principles should be applied to both preserve and empower distinct groupings of interests within each political organisation in question (Correa 2010, p. 7).

The specific Anarchist group must be the base from which members conduct their political work, but it also must be recognised as the space least conducive to mass struggle. A large grouping of people such as a trade union cannot operate in the same manner as a specific organisation of Anarchists (nor with the same level of political clarity), as the individual interests and experiences of members are so varied with scale. In much the same way, a group of Anarchists cannot claim to wholly represent an entire mass union due to their specificity of politics and ideology: both are different levels of organisation, fulfilling different objectives, in entirely different political spaces (Guttierez 2021).

Demanding absolute unity within mass organisations is therefore pointless, and so determining the level of ideological and tactical unity appropriate to the level of organisation in question is also central to the work of Anarchists within unions (Guttierez 2021). The goal should be to foster and build the inherent desire for equality and freedom that all people possess, and that exists in a distilled and powerful form within mass unions amongst the rank and file members. Through this, and in winning victories alongside other unionised workers, Anarchists then have an opportunity to show the power of direct action, and to prove that a directly democratic, Anarchist method of organisation is a possible solution to the current impotency of mass unions in Australia.

The choice, then, is not between authoritarian enforcement of socialist ideals or the gradual slide into reformism through leaving the current form of mass unionism intact, but instead how to aid fellow workers to conduct class struggle from within the rank-and-file. Through this workers realise their true enemies to be capital, the state, and all forms of domination and hierarchy. Through this they also realise their connection to other oppressed groups, acquire class consciousness, notice shared interests and common struggles, and ‘learn about political-philosophical issues’ (Correa 2010, p. 9), developing their revolutionary capacity collectively until they are ready to conduct the transition to a socialist mode of production themselves, on their own terms. If this work is not conducted thoroughly by Anarchists the probability of giving over mass movements to either reformism or authoritarian tendencies becomes a certainty.

Historical examples of specific Anarchist involvement in popular movements can help to shed light on the tactics and ideology that even comrades in contemporary times can learn from. The Federation of Anarchists Communists of Bulgaria (FAKB), for instance, was one organisation that practised a kind of organisational dualism (specific Anarchist groups operating within mass movements), and was operational between the 1920's and the 1940's (Correa 2010, p. 10).

Founded in 1919 at a conference that comprised 150 delegates, the FAKB was a leading force in 'urban and rural unionism, co-operatives, guerillas and youth organisation(s)'. They also helped to create and bolster organisations such as the Bulgarian Federation of Anarchist Students (BONSF), which was 'an Anarchist federation of artists, writers, intellectuals and engineers, and the Federation of Anarchist Youth (FAM), which had a presence in cities, towns and all the big schools' (Correa 2010, p. 11). Here the diverse nature of effective organisational tactics is exemplified, especially in the fact that Anarchist organising was occurring not only throughout mass unions, but in student and youth organisations, and both in rural areas and in the urban centres. This diversification fostered the further growth of the FAKB, which in turn attracted the attention of the fascist right. As in many other cases throughout history, once reactionary forces began to consider the growth of the FAKB as a threat to their own interests they responded with extreme violence. Between 1923 and 1931 over 30,000 workers were killed, and many FAKB militants either went into hiding or were assassinated. Those who remained in Bulgaria organised into "cheti" – combat detachments – and attempted to coordinate an uprising with the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) in 1923. Additional guerilla fighting occurred in 1925, conducted alongside the BKP and the Bulgarian Agrarian Union (BZS) (Correa 2010, p. 11).

This period of struggle was not the end of the FAKB, however, and between 1926 and 1927 the organisation adopted the proposals of the '*Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists*', which had just been published in 1926. This text, released by *Dielo Truda* ('The Workers Cause') – a libertarian communist publication published by exiled Russian and Ukrainian Anarchists Peter Arshinov and Nestor Makhno, amongst others – called for 'a programmatic and homogenous Anarchist organisation, founded on ideological unity, tactical unity..., collective responsibility and federalism', and is today considered one of the central texts in the development of Anarchist organisational tactics and methodology (Correa 2010, p. 11). Doubtless the FAKB would have been operating unofficially under very similar principles prior to the adoption of the '*Platform*', but in taking it on as central to its own ideology and tactics the FAKB positioned itself as a specific Anarchist group, with the aim of intervening in the wider class conflict as such.

In 1930 there was significant Anarchist work done in the founding of the Vlassovden Confederation, which one year on from forming boasted 130 branches, and was considered the third largest force on the Bulgarian left, after the BZS and the BKP. The Confederation was organised around demands for 'the reduction of direct and indirect taxation, the breaking-up of agrarian cartels, free medical care for peasants, insurance and pensions for agricultural workers, and community autonomy'. "Vlassdovan syndicalism" – which the Confederation originated and spread – became the driver of a massive growth in Anarchist organising and publication throughout Bulgaria (Correa 2010, pp 11–12). This represents a significant milestone in the transition from Anarchist groupings operating as small units within larger mass movements, towards unified and organised mass movements that themselves have a strong basis in Anarchism. This could be characterised as a "next step" in the process of revolution, after initial Anarchist involvement in established mass movements. This stage of political development cannot be reached without "preparing the ground" in the first place through successful organising, the

political education and development of workers, and winning ground from within mass unions.

During the Second World War, Anarchist guerillas also allied with the Patriotic Front during the insurrection of September 1944 against Nazi occupation.

Eventually the Red Army replaced the Germans in occupying Bulgaria and an alliance between the right and the left (the “red-orange-brown alliance”) was formed to crush the Anarchists. Workers were forced to join a single state-sanctioned union, and in 1945 the 90 delegates present at an FAKB congress in Sofia were arrested. The FAKB newspaper, *Rabotnicheska Misl*, still managed to reach 60,000 copies in circulation per issue that year, but it was the beginning of the end. By the close of the 1940’s hundreds of FAKB militants had been executed, and roughly 1000 had been sent to concentration camps where starvation and torture were rampant (Correa 2010, p 12).

Despite the eventual death of the FAKB and many of its members, its history still holds tactical, ideological and methodological importance in the context of Anarchist organisation, especially when such organisation is within mass unions.

Firstly, working class organisations operated in conjunction with one another and without hierarchy over one another. Their most important forms (for the FAKB) were ‘Anarchist communist ideological organisations’ (specific Anarchist groups) ‘worker syndicates; agricultural worker syndicates; co-operatives; and cultural and special-interest organisations, for instance for youth and women’ (Correa 2010, p. 12). These organisations varied from mass groupings such as the syndicates – which the specific Anarchist groups could be one element of – to small organisations which had a narrower focus and appeal (cultural organisations) – which specific Anarchist groups helped develop and no doubt shared membership with.

Secondly, each helped support the other, and in turn created a holistic network of causes from the specific to society-wide, broadening the influence of Anarchism and proving its relevance throughout all levels of social organisation. This meant that the FAKB survived and grew for two decades despite the open hostility of the status quo and other ideological groups, only eventually succumbing to the reactionary purges of authoritarian communists and the “red-orange-brown” alliance. Had they been successful in resisting these attacks, the FAKB may very well have also succeeded in fulfilling their vision of organisational dualism with the support of workers in both mass movements and specific interest groups.

There would have been (and was, to a certain extent), as outlined in the *Platform of the Federation of Anarcho-Communists in Bulgaria*, a specific Anarchist organisation and a mass worker’s movement which operated in tandem with one another, both in the city and in the countryside. The mass movement would have been made up of worker’s unions and cooperatives allied through shared struggle, and would have acted as the broad base on which revolutionary capacity could be built. The role of the specific Anarchist organisation would be to develop and spread Anarchist politics, to study the nature of class conflict in the region, to facilitate the creation of groups of workers on the basis of occupational and social relevance, and to participate in or directly plan and carry out any revolutionary activity that might arise from their work (Correa 2010, p. 12). This vision is shared today not only with many Anarchist groups who also espouse organisational dualism or ‘Platformism’, but also with groups committed to ‘Especifismo’ (initially developed by the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU)), which emphasises not just tactical unity but strategic unity, and who broaden the field of their work from radical mass movements and unions to other social causes and groupings (Usufruct Collective 2021, pp. 10–11). This hy-

bridisation of approaches is important, as it was also a key element in the success and longevity of the FAKB.

One other historical example of a specific Anarchist organisation participating within mass worker's organisations is the Federación Anarquista Uruguaya, or FAU. Set up in 1956 by a mixed group of workers, students and trade unionists, the FAU is an Especifist organisation that seeks to gain influence within the working masses of the Uruguayan population, in the specific national context of Uruguay. In addition to this, they also have regular contact and a working relationship with their comrades in the Gaucha Anarchist Federation (FAG) in Brazil, and Auca (Rebel) in Argentina on issues of common interest (Sharkey 2009). This recognition of the specific interests of their fellow workers within Uruguay, as well as the recognition of broader shared interests with workers throughout South America is an important separation. Internationalist sentiments must be balanced with direct responses to material conditions in the geographical areas that specific Anarchist groups conduct their work, or any project risks becoming irrelevant to the very people Anarchists seek to fight alongside. This parallels the case of homogeneous politics in mass movements outlined earlier; specific need and perspective cannot be accounted for at scale. Anarchists must respond to both, of course, but never at the cost of the local struggle.

The process of joining the FAU is an interesting case in integrating education and the development of an individual's revolutionary capacity into the responsibilities of prospective members. Those keen to join up must first progress through a number of stages, aimed at providing a political education. This includes readings and discussions on the organisation, 'its operating style, its aims, activities and methodology', and only once completed can prospective members be accepted into the FAU. There is then a further one year delay before full membership is gained. This is a result of a variety of factors: the FAU have a militant understanding of organisation, and see a concrete need for unity within that organisation for it to function effectively. In addition to this, experiences of repression during the 1960s and 1970s have influenced the development of graduated entry conditions for new members. Once members have been integrated into the group, they then must opt for their preferred area/location of political work; neighbourhood, firm, union, or university (Sharkey 2009). This recognises that important work for Anarchists lies outside of their specific groups and in the community they reside in, even when a great deal of time and effort has been spent on constructing the group itself. The specific Anarchist group is simply the "launch-pad" for the real work that must be done in society at large.

The FAU today is active within the PIT-CNT; an Uruguayan labour federation which boasts 90% of the country's union membership (Sharkey 2009). Though largely a reformist federation strongly influenced by the Communist Party, the PIT-CNT still encompasses more radical unions. The FAU is active within this dynamic alongside other non-aligned leftists, doing the political and organising work aligned with their program in a 'self-managerial, rank-and-file' manner, and always pushing to maintain their influence within the mass worker's organisations (Sharkey 2009). The organisation also participates in – and has worked to set up – many community radio projects with a focus on local social issues. Through this, the FAU can reach large numbers of people in specific areas. FAU activists also participate in 'swap-shop and mutual aid networks, sponsor ateneos or social clubs with canteen facilities, clothing banks for the poor, and which host educational or cultural support activities'. The aim is not to gain new recruits directly through these endeavours, but rather to slowly foster a base of support within the community. Their headquarters, which also houses a small printing co-op, contains a small two-room library and

archive for important material relevant to the FAU, which is all that remains of their massive collection previously destroyed during the dictatorship (Sharkey 2009).

The common elements between these two historical examples are these: both the FAKB and the FAU expanded their scope of activity beyond simply their own membership, beyond even the mass union organisations of their countries, and into society at large via social programs, involvement in social groupings, and in movements not directly tied to organised labour. This, however, never reduced their focus on mass unions as a central nexus for revolutionary potential.

Secondly, both groups emphasised the need for political-ideological, tactical and strategic unity within their organisations in order to function effectively. They saw a lack of this organisation as something that was capable of undermining their work, and which had historical precedent for doing so in the context of other Anarchist causes. Thirdly, both groups placed emphasis on supporting rank-and-file, democratic organisation within mass unions as a method for effectively engaging in class struggles in line with Anarchist principles. Mass unions were integral to fighting capitalism, but hierarchy and bureaucracy was not.

Lastly, it is arguable that both the FAKB and the FAU are hugely significant in the historical context of their respective mass labour movements. Both organisations achieved their successes as a specified part of those mass labour movements, rather than as larger synthesist organisations or loosely affiliated individual activists. Anarchism is often accused of being utopian and ineffectual, and yet with thorough organisation, unity and a coherent program both the FAKB and the FAU were able to become important forces within mass unions and the wider labour movement, and were able to create an environment for truly radical and effective action by mass unions. If we, as Anarchists, truly believe in our ideals and wish to see them carried out, then we must follow this path as well. There is both a need within our mass unions today for specific Anarchist intervention, and there are historical examples of this intervention which we can learn from in order to succeed in our goals.

Australian mass unions no longer represent their rank-and-file members as they should. They are both hamstrung by the current state of Industrial Relations law and by their collusion with the ALP, which has utterly divorced union leadership and bureaucracy from the ability (and will) to organise or even sanction radical direct action. Considering the current cost of living crisis, rampant casualisation, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that continues to kill and injure workers, impending global conflict, and the accelerating effects of global warming, the window of opportunity for organised labour to regain its power and affect positive change is closing. Australian Anarchists have an opportunity to learn from history and implement strategies and programs adapted for our own societal context that have been proven under the most extreme pressures of reaction and adversity. In a century where organised Anarchism is resurgent, and mass unions are more relevant than ever, Australian Anarchists must organise or we risk giving over initiative to reaction and reformism at a time when we can afford neither.

The current state of mass unions in this country should be a central concern for all workers. Large areas of the manufacturing industry have been depleted of unionised labour, signified in the rapid loss of members from the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), down from 200,000 members in 1995 to only 80,000 as of 2018. Union coverage in coal mining halved in the same time, which was also true of the utilities and construction industries. These industries, traditionally bastions of union power, act as a “canary in the coalmine” (pardon the pun), signifying the overall health of the movement. As union memberships have declined real wages have also fallen steadily, and the labour share of national income reached the lowest it has been

since 1964 (Bramble 2018). As of August 2022, 21% of workers nationally do not have minimum guaranteed hours, rising from 20% in 2016. 2.7 million workers do not have access to paid leave, equivalent to 23% of all employees nationally. Additionally, the economy is rapidly becoming casualised, with 2.7 million people being employed casually, rising from 2.4 million workers just a year earlier in 2021 (ABS 2022). There is a clear relationship between active, strong unions and the worker's share of national income. 'When workers strike they push up the wages share, and when they don't, their share goes backwards' (Bramble 2018).

Many of the most significant concessions to organised labour in this country have come about because of strike actions by unionised workers. The shortening of working hours by the New South Wales state government, along with the extension of paid recreation leave from one week to four, came about due to strikes during the 1940s and 1960s (Bramble 2018). The advent of the Builders Labourers Federation in the 1960s, and their use of snap strikes, "guerilla action" to sabotage the work of scabs' and large public marches to the offices of employers, courts and government departments brought about massively improved conditions for BLF members. This then gave them the experience and the confidence to fight intersectional battles such as Aboriginal land rights and anti-Vietnam War campaigns. At the same time, the BLF also handed down green bans on developments, aiming to stop the erasure of working class housing in inner Sydney (Bramble 2018).

When unions are combative and active within the community, it strengthens their relevance to a wider section of people than when they are passive and conservative. Through direct action such as strikes mass unions are able to prove their power not just to bosses, but to workers whom they seek to win over. This results in a rapid rise in membership, and strengthens the position of organised labour (Bramble 2018). Anarchists must work to maintain the combativity of mass unions, otherwise the organising and political work that is done within that context will be for nothing. Mass unions lose their effectiveness without a strong numerical presence within their industry, and so extensive efforts must be made to successfully argue for radical courses of direct action. This is the most effective way to grow union presence within an industry, and therefore is central to the long-term success of the mass union movement. Strikes and other direct action strategies are the most effective tactics that workers can use to fight for themselves, and they are almost universally responsible for the most significant gains organised labour has achieved. Unions who avoid using these weapons render themselves irrelevant to the cause of workers.

There are organised and specific Anarchist groups throughout this country who are already capable of (and are) beginning the work of empowering their union comrades. A concerted effort must now be made to continue, and to build on the successes that have already come from specific Anarchist involvement in mass union struggle. This is a process that will take time, and so we must engage in it now and with conviction. We must organise and develop our specific Anarchist groups and prepare ourselves to respond to the material conditions of our workplaces, towns and cities. We must then leave the "safety" of our explicitly Anarchist comrades, and take our ideas out into society. 1.4 million Australians are union members as of 2022, which is 12.5% of the total workforce. This is a fraction of membership numbers prior to the Accords, which peaked around 52%, but it is still a massively significant portion of workers (ABS 2022). In mass unions, therefore, lies the most powerful weapon that workers still have at their disposal to use against capital and the state.

The only force that can truly challenge and overthrow the status quo and implement true socialism is the working class united through common struggle (Gutierrez 2021). The process can-

not be artificially accelerated by authoritarian means, or by compromise on means and politics in order to gain concessions. The entire hierarchical structure of mass unions must be challenged and dismantled from within in order to empower workers to engage in class conflict without the shackles placed on them by officials and law. This work should be central to Anarchist programmes throughout Australia, for within Anarchist Communism lies the key to unlock the revolutionary potential of mass unions. In the course of struggle mass unions have the ability to transform from bureaucratic, reformist organisations no longer capable of winning true victories for workers to emblems of the power of workers united for a common cause. As the revolutionary capacity of the working class develops, Anarchists must always be willing to prove their politics on the front lines of conflict, alongside their union comrades.

If we hold any conviction in our beliefs we must be willing to undertake this work, for ‘ideological contestation against the bureaucracy must not be left until the eve of the revolution’ (Anarchist Worker’s Group 2013). If we leave this work to others, the largest groupings of labour power on the face of the earth will be left under the ideological hegemony of statist and reformist officials.

If we truly believe in our politics, and in the promise of the future, then we must begin this work now.

Article by Levi H.

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The Workers, United
A case for anarchist participation in mass unions
21st July 2023

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