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**The Centenary of the ALP and the TLC
in Western Australia,
1899-1999**

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Cover: The delegates at the 1899 Trades and Labor Congress, Coolgardie. (Courtesy Battye Library and the ALP)

Back Cover: Delegates at the 1999 ALP State Congress, Fremantle (Courtesy ALP)

INTRODUCTION

A Century of Labor: The ALP and the TLC in Western Australia 1899-1999

Bobbie Oliver¹

On the afternoon of 11 April 1899, 28 men met at Pearce's Hall, Coolgardie, on the Western Australian Goldfields, to open the colony's first Trade Union and Labour Congress. Their meeting occurred at the end of a decade of political and social upheaval which had seen Western Australia achieve self government and be changed from a small, rural colony of less than 50,000 people, to a destination for thousands hoping to cash in on the gold boom. In a period of economic depression, immigrants from the eastern states, New Zealand, and other countries, poured into Western Australia. Many were young, single men who had some experience of industrial and political activity in the Labor movement, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) having been formed in Queensland and other eastern colonies in 1891. Western Australia had no branch of the ALP, so the Trades Union Congress, at which the Coastal and Goldfields Trades and Labor Councils united in their efforts to achieve political and industrial reform, is rightly regarded as the commencement of a united Labor movement in this State.² From 1907 until 1963, the political and industrial wings of the Labor movement in Western Australia formed two parts of the same organisation: the Australian Labor Federation until 1919, and then the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

This *Papers in Labor History* is one of a number of publications and activities during 1999 to celebrate the achievements of the Labor movement over the past one

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hundred years. As with any edited collection that is dependent upon a call for papers, there is a certain amount of serendipity in this issue. Although there may be some disparity in the papers gathered here, each examines a significant aspect of the Western Australian Labor movement, and together they nicely span the hundred years, with the first commencing in 1912 and the last discussing events in the late 1990s.

Ian Monk's paper on the Perth Trades Hall, traces the history of the building which was the centre of Labor activity in Perth for most of the century. Trades Halls were important focal points for local Labor communities, providing accommodation for conferences, meeting rooms and offices for unions. Kalgoorlie's Trades Hall was completed in 1900 and celebrates its centenary next year. Fremantle had its Trades Hall by 1903, but Perth had to wait until 1911 before Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher laid the foundation stone of the building.³ But, as Monk shows, once the Trades Hall was built, it was the home of the State Executive of the ALP, as well as the Metropolitan District Council, numerous unions and the Labor Women's Organisation. The original building, extended and renovated, served until Curtin House was opened in 1975.

Labor history is a history of struggle and reform. Most of the papers in this issue discuss struggles, victories and defeats. A major difficulty for every Labor Government in Western Australia during this century has been its inability to get reform bills past a hostile Upper House. In the first quarter century, Labor was in government for only six years: 1904-05 and 1911-16. As Simon Ward observes, however, Labor held office for 26 of the 35 years from 1924 until 1959. Ward's paper shows that, like all other Labor administrations before and after it, the Hawke Government was continually frustrated by its inability to pass Bills through a conservative-dominated Legislative Council. Hawke's 'hardy annuals', as Ward terms the Bills with which the government persisted year after year, reflect Labor's attempts to widen the Upper House franchise and to bring about

² B. Oliver, *'Unity is Strength'. A history of the organised Labor movement in Western Australia*, (a centenary history of the ALP and the Trades and Labor Council in WA), forthcoming 2000.

³ William Somerville, 'An Economic History of Western Australia with Special Referenceto Trade Unions and the Influence of the Industrial Court of Arbitration', J.S. Batty Library of Western Australian History [hereafter BL], Accession no. 451A, vol. II, pp. 460-463.

significant industrial reform. The focus of Ward's paper, the Unfair Trading and Profit Control Act, was highly controversial, and, he argues, was a major factor in Labor's election defeat in 1959. The ALP was to remain out of office for most of the next 25 years. One of the Burke Government's first acts after gaining office in 1983 was to begin the legislative process of making the Upper House more democratic.⁴ A *Joint Submission to the Royal Commission into Parliamentary Deadlocks from the Australian Labor Party (WA Branch) and the State Parliamentary Labor Party (WA Branch)*, in 1983 found that in the past 30 years, the Legislative Council had rejected 41 Labor bills during nine years of ALP administration and only one Bill during 21 years of Coalition administration. In 20 months of the Burke administration, five Bills had been rejected. The submission pointed out that Western Australia (like Tasmania, but unlike the other States) had no provision in the Constitution for Parliamentary deadlocks.⁵ It was only after the ALP lost government that the legislation reforming the Upper House bore fruit.. Ward's paper reveals the power of the non-Labor parties in Western Australia – a power which even at the end of the century has been checked only by the loss of their majority in the Upper House after the 1996 State election – but the balance of power has gone not to the ALP but to independents and minority parties who may be wooed by either side.

Other struggles involved achieving Award wages for workers. John Joseph Jones' paper not only discusses the workings of the Arbitration Court – and important element of Australian labour relations, which has so often been neglected in academic studies of the Labor movement – but also reminds us that 'workers' come from a wide variety of jobs and circumstances. The workers in Jones' paper – female teachers in independent schools – created history in 1961 by achieving an Award before their male counterparts. The Award established pay rates and teaching conditions comparable to those achieved by the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia. Female unionists, however, had to wait until 1969 for the first granting of equal pay.

⁵ *Joint Submission to the Royal Commission into Parliamentary Deadlocks from the Australian Labor Party (WA Branch) and the State Parliamentary Labor Party (WA Branch)*, p. 22.

An entirely different group of workers was affected when, just over 30 years later, the WAGR Midland Workshops were closed by the conservative government of Richard Court. Carmel Gosper's paper discusses and questions the rationale given by the Government for closing the State's oldest and largest industrial workshops. She shows the impact of the closure on the community of Midland, and how this act preceded a package of industrial and public service 'reforms' enacted by the Court conservative coalition government. Further reforms, known as the 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' Waves, and the union movement's response, in particular the Workers' Embassy and Solidarity Park, have been the subject of *Papers in Labour History* numbers 20 and 21.

Following the Court Government's aggressive reshaping of industrial legislation, the Howard Federal Government, elected in 1996, also commenced an agenda of industrial reform. As Bill Anderson shows, in 1998, the Howard Government attempted to drive the Maritime Union of Australia from the waterfront. For students of Labor history in the twentieth century, it was as though the wheel had turned full circle from the freedom of contract battles of the 1890s to Patrick Stevedores' attempts in the 1990s – with Federal Government support – to ban unions from the maritime industries. This paper, together with another paper on waterfront reform by Shona Zulsdorf, were joint winners of the 1998 Paddy Troy Essay prize, sponsored annually by the MUA (Western Australia) in honour of maritime worker and unionist, Paddy Troy.

Both Gosper's and Anderson's paper show that unions are under considerable attack at the close of the century, and that a strong, united Labor movement is needed as much as ever to protect the rights of workers.

This issue, therefore, celebrates some of the achievements of Labor during the century, but shows, too, that major industrial struggles and legislation revoking reforms are not a thing of the past. Presently the number of union members in this State stands at

about 23 per cent of the work force.⁶ The Party membership is now much broader than the unionised workforce, and by no means all unionists belong to the Party. The ALP and the TLC are two separate and independent bodies, yet their stated aims of protecting and empowering disadvantaged members of society are the same as they were a century ago. In March 1999, John Kobelke MLA, Labor Spokesperson for Labour Relations, Employment and Training, reminded the ALP and the Trades and Labor Council that they shared 'common ground' and urged the two bodies to 'continue to develop policies and practices to be relevant and effective in the next century'.⁷ He was invoking the sentiment, if not the actual words, of the motto of Western Australia's combined Labor movement for over 60 years, 'Unity is Strength'. In the adverse industrial climate at the end of the twentieth century, many workers are discovering the truth of these words.

⁶ This figure is slightly below the national average. The Hon. Robert McMullan, Federal Member for Fraser (ACT) in an interview with the author, 16 June 1999.

⁷ John Kobelke, 'Into the new century with solidarity', *Trades and Labor Council Directory 1999*, p. 42.