

The Crisis of Leadership Has Never Been so Blatant

When the Kennett government came to power the whole of the labour movement swore to fight and prevent the reaction he proposed, particularly his attacks on working conditions and social services.

Yet at this stage the main battle seems to be largely over. There are a few skirmishes being fought valiantly, but co-ordination, overall strategy, stated objective all seem to be lacking.

Why has this happened? What has gone wrong, we all witness the willingness that was there to fight. Has it been dissipated, or is it still waiting in the wings?

Trades Hall Council, ACTU and the Labour Party

Before the election of the Kennett government the Trades Hall went into exclusive 'get Joan re-elected' mode. There were obvious reasons why Trades Hall would want to see a labour victory, but how realistic was it, at that late stage. When determining strategies there is little point in pretending that the world around us is more favourable to us than it is.

It is, of course, equally unwise to estimate conditions as less favourable than they are - for unless we go for a victory we certainly won't have one. The trick is, to find the balance, that is, to make a realistic analysis of the situation and to develop strategies and tactics accordingly.

It was obvious to everyone that Labor could not win the last State elections, so to put all energy into defending labour in the elections was a waste of energy. Of course we would have no objection to calling for a Labour victory and even to organise some campaigning, the question is not that Trades Hall openly supported the victory of a Labour government, but the fact that it excluded any preparation for what was inevitably to come.

To put no energy into developing strategies to fight Kennett the moment he got elected, put the trade union movement from the very start. We were caught on the hop and it showed.

If we know a fight is coming haven't we the responsibility to prepare for it, not pretend we can deliver a miracle and stop the enemy from advancing.

If we can't prepare in terms of establishing tools and weapons to fight with, we can at least make battle cries and warn the enemy of our intention to fight.

The only union which took a strong stand before the election, against the proposals Kennett was making was the SPSF. Bill Deller was consistently making statements that public servants would not tolerate attacks on their working conditions, and would take strong action to defend themselves.

In contrast John Halfpenny and Trades Hall were promising to wait and see what happened, to try and reason with the Coalition if they were elected.

Not only were no strategies made for dealing with the advent of a Coalition government, but no warnings were given to the incoming government that they should take care or they would be the target of the ire of the organised working class. No, Trades Hall do not develop such tactics, they don't even use such language!

To focus all energy on an outcome which was not possible, and to do that at the extent of preparing for an outcome which was almost inevitable is shortsighted, unintelligent and lacking in resourcefulness to say the least.

Once the Kennett government were elected and safely ensconced in Spring Street it still took the union movement as a whole a long time to move. A meeting of affiliates was called on Thursday 22nd October.

That meeting which had been very badly publicised, was poorly attended. Most unions were represented by staff members, not elected leaderships. This meant that the meeting as a whole was nervous about making any decisions because those present were largely lacking authority. The other feature about that meeting was the evidence of ten years of Labour

governments and Accord industrial relations - the first two thirds of the meeting were taken up with delegates asking how to get the best deal for their members by applying the new legislation in the most advantageous way.

Sluggishly the meeting did come round to discussing action to fight the proposed bills.

And sluggishly it agreed to call a twenty-four hour strike for workers covered by state awards. There was, from the start, some lack of clarity about public sector workers not covered by state awards, and about whether or not, federal award workers were called on to support the strike.

The point here is that right from the very start the call to strike was unclear and unauthoritative, showing an inability to give leadership.

Halfpenny issued a press statement that night and Friday's papers were full of the announce

Saturday's papers carried front page stories that Trades Hall Vice-President, Bob Smith, had said he would not support this action, rather he wanted to negotiate with the government.

For the next six days saw the dividing of the union movement, the massive right-wing and state award covered Shop Distributive Union issued a statement that they would not support the action.

The situation was saved by a delegates meeting held in Dallas Brookes Hall which had been called some time previously. Halfpenny was afraid the meeting would be poorly attended but he needn't have worried, Dallas Brookes was overflowing with the largest and most militant union meeting seen in Victoria since the Medicare stoppages.

The meeting unanimously endorsed the call for a twenty-four hour stop work. In fact the meeting very early passed an

alternative and stronger motion put up by the International Socialists which called for all workers to stop work and also called for a series of strikes, not just a one day.

The high spirits of the meeting and the determination of the delegates present to put up a fight were undeniable. The meeting marched on Parliament House and held a lively rally.

Attendance at the November 10th rally was way beyond the expectations of everyone. The media called 100,000, and that must be confirmation that there were at least 200,000. The working class of Victoria had made their anger known, they were prepared to fight.

At the end of the rally trades hall officials had trouble getting the marchers to go home. The terror on the faces of trades hall officials was striking and a hint of what was to come.

Enter the ACTU

In response to the November 10th turn-out, the ACTU made strong militant statements about the need to fight Kennett and called an unprecedented joint ACTU/VTHC Executive meeting. The road was downhill from that point on.

The ACTU issued a call to the whole nation for a one day general strike in solidarity with Victorian workers and to show the Federal Liberals the fight they would face if they tried the same policies. This was to be held on November 30th. Victorian unions were urged to take action on different days. In Victoria and a further full twenty-four hour general strike was to be held on December 9th.

Halfpenny told unions that November 30th in Victoria was not for us to strike but rather to let other states show their support. His statement came too late for most unions who





had begun organising stopworks on that day. Whilst the statement was too late to stop the actions going ahead in most cases, it was not too late to undermine their success. So instead of the sort of unified action we saw on November 10th, November 30th was a range of dissipated separated actions which showed weakness rather than strength.

The undermining of November 30th was done with a promise that December 9th would be the next big day, that December 9th would also involve power workers and so the State would be brought to a standstill.

Unionists at first bought this as a consolation for receiving no support for the 30th. However before the November 30th even arrived John Halfpenny told a meeting of affiliates that he would prefer unions not to take action on the 9th December, rather leave it to the power unions.

Of course, we now know the power unions called off their strike. Christmas was on top of us and this was the next excuse. We were all asked to call off the industrial campaign over the Christmas period.

It is now February and the campaign has not started again. Why not?

The Contract Phobia

The position of Trades Hall is that unions should not enter into negotiations with the Kennett government. This sounds like a strong position of principle, but if we examine it, we find it lacks the ability or the will to win the fight against Kennett.

Assuming that to refuse to enter into any negotiations with the government is the correct position to take, this can only have benefit if unions are also fighting to preserve their rights to maintain the old industrial system, or to find some new way to make gains in their working conditions.

At the moment there is no co-ordinated fight as we have seen, and unions are being encouraged to move into the federal system instead of fighting.

To refuse to negotiate is a tactic which can work if we are in the position we want to be and it is the government who are wanting some favour from us. To advocate abstention is only useful when abstention can cause some pain to the opposition, that is when we have something to withhold.

In this current situation, the government is holding the cards.