NINE STONE SIX WRINGER WET

Ted Bull retires—end of era on Melbourne Waterfront


‘My family was no different from many other working-class Catholic families. I was a son of the church, an altar boy, no less. I was only nine when dad died. He was 42, a whistler, a bit of a knock-about, and an excellent boxer.”

In 1929 all Street closed. The depression came to Australia. Young Ted was sent to the Province by a desperate mother. “The priests gave me a five-bob grocery order to feed mum and six kids. The effect of the depression left the children in the church was devastating. “I recall saying to him that, from this moment on, you’ve lost a good Catholic family. I was only nine years old then, but the memory is very clear.”

But saw his friends and their furniture thrown out into the city streets he had played in as a young boy. He saw the stones fly and the pincushions bend. He saw his neighbours on one side and the police on the other.

At the age of 17 he hit the road, mainly tramping the eastern states, trying his hand at cooking, pitching hay, milking, on the wheat and canning. “There was a saying among the unemployed who sought work from the coasties—'fifteen lops a day and keep—wring your own cows.'

Rounded from haystack to railway station this huge column of unemployed marched its slow way around Australia, kept on the move by the paid pushers of the system, the police and railway clerks.

“You’d be sitting in a goods wagon and a bloke would knock softly on the side: 'Any room there, mate?' 'Sorry', and then the railway clerk would jump in and give you a good helping.”

Some of the railway police became notorious. Everyone knew about Winger Moss of Gympie—'had only one arm but made up for it with a loaded piece of piping'. And of course there was ‘Buster’ the Bossard.

“The narks didn’t always get away with it—Buster got a few good innings—one a very good one.”

Hard times threw the unemployed together. “The blokes stuck like glue to a blanket in blues with the cops,” but although there was a common bond there was no common understanding.

“There were a lot of angry men and some deep thinkers among them. While we broke our backs hammering...
rocks to build Dudley Park Road for an extra dinner a day. It was an obvious case of making a road for the rich; but other blokes saw further than this and put up alternatives."

"I met this bloke Ross along the track. He was a couple of years older than me and had got a bit. He got onto the cause of the depression. For the first time I got past effects."

Back in Melbourne Ted’s commitments to communism grew. With the courage of his convictions he outspoken Bull "jumped the stump" at Smith Street, Collingwood every Friday night, and every time he came home with at least one eye black. "As you won ’em you wore ’em. It’s no use blaming like a bad rug."

After the war he worked in one hundred and one places and occupations. He drove a tipper for a while at Staverton Creek, but had to move on after a "misunderstanding" with the foreman. At Mooropna he excelled in the box stacker in the canners. He sailed out of this job when they tried to pit the workers against a new stacking machine. "What do they think a bloke is?"

Not just anyone could get a job carrying the book. The workers had their own competent methods for calling out the underdogs. You had to be nominated and seconded by members of the union, and then you went before the committee. The final stage was acceptance by the blokes.

At the next mass meeting of water-side workers you marched down the stage and you stood open to challenge. "Of course you had the right to stand up for yourself, but it was a good system then. Odds on if you’d been a proost, a copper or a stab, someone would remember."

When Ted joined the Waterfront conditions were "absolutely hard".

"If you didn’t keep your head down and your backside up, you’d be sent up the road. The foreman could sack you for just looking at him."

Being "sent up the road" also meant an appearance before the Chairman of the Australian Stevedoring Industry Board who was empowered to suspend wharfs for periods ranging from one day to life.

"There was no permanency then; it was a casual industry. Up to three thousand men would gather in what we called the compound. It was like a big concentration camp from where you’d be picked for work, if work was available."

"We had to fight for everything — protective clothing, gloves, overalls, dirt money, protection against obnoxious cargoes, walking time, short shifts, limits on weights."

"You only got threepence for handling ammunition, including deosinique, down at the Alma powder grounds."

"In 1939 we didn’t have canteens and we used to eat our meals sitting on the cargo which could include hides, kangaroo skins, or even poisonous substances. Many a lunch was lost to the draught horses that used to pull the barges."

There was even a Harbour Trust ban on rank-and-file meetings on the dock.

Regulation 27 of the Melbourne Harbour Trust Regulations provided: "Every person who shall commit any of the acts following shall be guilty of an offence that is to say... 36. Hold any meeting or address any assemblage within the Port without the consent of the Commissioners in writing."

It was against such a background that Ted Bull and other rank-and-file wharfies stood up and were counted. This soon led them into confrontation with the union officials and the Stevedoring Industry Board, behind whom stood the predominantly English shipowners.

"If you couldn’t talk, you couldn’t organise; and if you couldn’t organise, you’d be kept right down." It was that simple.

Ted began to hold cockpit meetings. "The union officials threatened to run me off the Waterfront." The response from the police was equally direct.

On the 25th of February, 1952, I was speaking at 9 Victoria Dock, standing on some cargo, addressing about
200 men. A policeman came along and ordered me off the cargo. He asked me if I had permission to work, to which I replied: "No, I don't need permission." He then said: "Well, get down from that cargo or I'll charge you with wilful damage to cargo." I got down and spoke in the shed itself, right in the foot of the cargo. He then said I was speaking on Harbour Trust property without permission and that I could not speak in the shed.

"I wanted to make a stand there, but the men advised me to jump onto the roadway from the shed. They gathered round the door and indicated that they wouldn't return to work until I'd had my say.

"I followed their advice and the policeman ordered me to accompany him to the police station. I asked him for the charge, to which he replied: "There's no charge." I refused to give him my name, address and bureau number because he had not charged me. He kept asking and I kept refusing.

"Finally, we walked from 9 Victoria Dock to 6 Victoria Dock where the police stations and cells used to be inside the dock yard. As soon as we left for the station the men at 9, 10 and 14 Victoria Dock stopped work and resolved not to return to work until I was back on the job. Tom McColm came to the station to make sure the police didn't get into me. He was told to leave, or he'd be locked up too.

"Inside, they sat me down and asked for your name and address. This time I changed my tack. I said: "Look, you don't want my name and address. I've done nothing wrong. I know my rights as a law-abiding citizen and I want to see a solicitor."

"One of them gave me a nice couple of back-handers that made me know what they were about. Then they called out to their sergeant: "Do you know this smart bastard?" One of them answered: "He's one of these broke who knocks around with doctors Dibble - he's a Communist."

This smart bastard reckons he knows about the Law and what he's entitled to."

"Well, they really went berserk. They rushed over and gave me the hollering of my life. They had everything about me in a flip."

The arresting policeman was Constable Eric Clements, who charged Bull that he "did at Victoria Dock within the Port of Melbourne on 25/5/52 address an annoyerage of persons without the consent of the Harbour Trust Commissioners," and then he "did, when requested to state his name and address, refuse to do so." Ted was then taken to Bourke Street West Police Station and hauled out by a violator named Max Mortimer. The men on the job had marched on the union offices and demanded that the officials assist Ted.

When Ted returned to work, the men also resumed work and all ships started again.

The ensuing legal wrangle, "The Harbour Trust v Bull," is still cited in cases concerning civil liberties and free speech.

The charges against Ted were heard together on Mann, 3, 10, 53/S2 at the Melbourne Court of Petty Sessions before Mr. Addison S.M. Ted was acquitted.

An appeal against his acquittal was heard on April 3, 1952, to the Supreme Court. On July 18, Justice Millar ordered that the case be referred for hearing and determination by the Full Court of the Supreme Court.

On November 27, 1952, the Full Court of the Supreme Court, constituted by Justices Herring, Martin and Smith, dismissed the appeal.

On March 12, 1953, the High Court of Australia dismissed yet another appeal against Ted's acquittal. Justices Kitto and Williams dissenting from the ruling of Justices Robins, Fullagar and Taylor.

The struggle for free speech and proper conditions of work was made all the more difficult by the absence of a genuine union leadership. The Executive was dominated by corrupt
The ballot box was like a high-braced, only twice the size. It had a false bottom about a foot deep. That's how we had been stolen in previous elections.

The ballot box was put on display for many years. From 1954, a Returning Officer and scrutineers were introduced and "whenever the box went down onto the floor for a vote; at each ship there were representatives from each side present. The box was sealed and deposited in a bank every night.

The State Electoral Officers came down to look at the ballot and said it was better conducted than any government ballot. We got a turn-out as high as 97.3 per cent, with the rank-and-file ticket winning overwhelmingly.

It is a matter of history that The Groupers were driven from power on the waterfront. Following the initial breakthrough in the early 'fifties, the progressive forces swept to power. A new era came to the Melbourne waterfront.

Ted has seen, and been part of, changes that have affected not only the rights and conditions of the men, but the very nature of their work. The draught horses that used to steal his lunch were soon replaced by the little Lister machine. Thin came the small three-ton forklifts and the steam, water and friction winches. Today, a visitor to the wharves is overwhelmed by huge container cranes with a 240-ton capacity, big hydraulic winches, forty-ton power forks, and jumbos that lift 500 tons.

"Much of the back-breaking work has gone."

The Stevedoring Board, that later became the Steve- dring Authority, has been abolished, replaced by a system of direct negotiation with the ship-owners. The Board's offices, which were hardworking shanties, were charged with "impeding the safe and expeditious handling of cargo" have now been taken over by the Waterways Workers Federation.

The number of stevedoring companies has dwindled to about three, as the big has gobbled up the small. The former British monopoly has been cut down by American, Japanese and Soviet interests.

Ted is very much the forward-looking 'young man', with a clear and splendid vision of the future. An unequivocally patriotic Australian and Communist, his feelings for the people are matched by his feelings spilling their opponents.

"Australia shouldn't be dominated: we should own and control our own shipping line. Here we are, an island continent, surrounded by water, with 80 per cent of our exports and imports going by sea. Yet foreign multi-nationals do it to us."

"In the 1920s, we had our own national line, the Bay Line or "People's Ships". The Bruce-Peppi government sold it to British interests somewhere round 1925. A scandalous situation developed with Lord Lucan reaping on pay- ments. As an aftermath - during the war we were charged for transporting our own troops in our own boats!"

"Now it's in the wind that the few ships we do have are also going. The Australian National Line needs to expand and develop its own stevedoring company. It's only recently that A.N.L. have built steamer-going ships for overseas trade."

"We've proven that we can build ships. Some of the millions going out of the country each year could be diverted into ship-building, employing thousands of men."

Traditionally, the Conference Line (a type of cartel of the last power by ship-owners who meet to determine freight rates) has proved the main threat to the National Line. An announcement by the Russians in the early '70s, that they considered co-operating with the Conference Line, therefore lowering rates for Australian farmers, manufacturers and other exporters was importers of goods, was supported by the Waterways Workers Federation.

"The Soviets shipping line wanted to break the Conference Line domination. They offered to transport our wool 15 per cent cheaper. However, once the Soviets got their slice of the market, they joined the Conference Line - and up went the freight."

The Soviet line also threatened to undercut the A.N.L.'s freight rates by 25 per cent in order to cause A.N.L.'s small slice of the market. This time we were wise.

Bull has now retired. Union rates prescribe compulsory retirement at 65. Since he left there have been no big splash in the daily press. Bull has worked publicly. He is an intense man, certainly a leader, but with a capacity to stay among men. Throughout the interview he reiterated: "I was one man among thousands of workers. It is the might of the working class that changes history."