MIGRANTS AND THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

by Frank Stevens

The Jaundiced Eye

Firstly, I must view the problems of migrant workers somewhat with a jaundiced eye. I am not a migrant and I do not, in any sense of that term, work in industry. The problems of migrant workers, therefore are fairly distant from me and the best people to comment on these problems are the migrants themselves. However, in the absence of any migrant worker coming forward to fill this role I will attempt to act as a catalyst for discussion.

Although I am not a migrant and do not work in industry, I have had occasion to consider the problems to which migrant workers are exposed in Australia. Some of you may be aware of my work on race prejudice in Australia. Fewer people would be aware of the work I have done for UNESCO on the impact of race prejudice on educational and information systems in Australia.

I only mention this aspect of my work in an endeavour to improve my credentials to assist in giving support to what I want to say in the body of this paper which, I hope, will prove to be controversial and which, I am sure, will not be accepted by all as being a fair and reasonable comment on the situation which exists in the relationships between the trade union movement and migrants. However, the object of my role, as I view it, is to act as the Devil's advocate, bell the cat, and stir up a bit of debate. My comments might well be taken in this context.

Trade Unions as Conservative Bodies

As the first contribution to the attempt to stir up controversy, I would like to make a bald and bold statement, that the reason why there is apprehension in the migrant community about its relationship with the trade union movement is the fact that the trade union movement is, in the main, a rather inert, conservative, bureaucratic mass, which has, frequently to the chagrin of some of its leaders, occasional radical elements which provide the public image of the trade union movement being liberal and progressive.

1980-5-40
Objectives and Services of the Clearing House on Migration Issues

The CLEARING HOUSE ON MIGRATION ISSUES (C.H.O.M.I.) is the documentation unit of the Ecumenical Migration Centre, a non-profit welfare and community education agency established in the early 1960's. It provides Australia-wide unique information-documentation resources on

- the cultural background of the main ethnic groups;
- the immigration experience in Australia and around the world;
- current issues (welfare, education and bilingual education, employment conditions, political and religious participation, legal aspects, inter-generational differentials, etc.) faced in inter-ethnic relations;
- discrimination, prejudice and race relations;
- ethnic and community organisations and services;
- government and community programs and policies.

It makes available a collection of some

- 700 files of press clippings;
- 600 boxes of material containing more than 30,000 documents (mainly journal articles and unpublished reports and papers);
- 200 Australian and overseas periodical publications;
- 40,000 cross-catalogued bibliographical references;
- 15,000 analytical-abstract cards;
- over 500 selected microfiche;
- tapes.

It publishes

- Migration Action, the only Australian quarterly on ethnic relations;
- CHOMI-DAS, a bimonthly bulletin of documentation and abstracts;
- Reprints of articles, papers and reports of interest to the community and selected groups;
- Kits for workshops, seminars, meetings;
- Bibliographies on selected topics;
- Monographs.

It assists

- teachers, teacher educators, school administrators;
- social welfare and community workers;
- lawyers, doctors, nurses and other professionals;
- social researchers, urban planners and tertiary students;
- lecturers and writers;
- community and ethnic groups;
- librarians.

in their understanding and appreciation of the ethnic groups in Australian society.
There was a time in Australian history when trade unions, as a whole, might have been considered progressive and liberal and (heaven forfend!) even revolutionary. But that time has long since passed. With the introduction of the Conciliation and Arbitration Act in 1904 and the widespread supporting State legislation, trade unions became part of the arm of the courts and the government of this country.

Through the allocation of jurisdiction over organisation in particular industries, they no longer had to compete for membership authority and status, in the manner of trade unions overseas, but had a ready made clientele, the only contact with which was the necessity to organise. Competitive organisations are kept out of the areas allocated for each union to operate in and the only skirmishes which eventuate occasionally relate to demarcation issues.

I am not making this comment to be derogatory of trade unions or of the Conciliation and Arbitration system which, as a lawyer, I endorse. What I am trying to say is that to fully understand the problems which appear to exist between the migrant community and the trade union movement you have to recognise the true personality of the trade union movement before you can be appreciative of the problems which it has in responding to the needs of migrant workers. Once having understood these constraints you are in a better position to devise policies and actions which can overcome the problems of inertia which face the trade union movement in this area.

Low Interest in Migrant Affairs

Possibly, the main reason for apprehension amongst migrants about the role of the trade union movement over and surrounding the problems of migrant workers is the disappointment in the low level of activity and appreciation of the problems being faced by migrant employees. This low level of appreciation and activity about migrant problems, as distinguished from the wide variety of problems which affect the Australian community generally, could well be a product of the lack of penetration of the migrant community of the trade union movement itself. In this respect, it can be seen that the problem has a two-way cause. Part of the blame for which rests with migrants themselves.

The nature and magnitude of this problem, which I have suggested has a two-way cause, might be indicated by a count that I once made of the names of conference delegates to a particular ACTU Congress. In a list of some 350 delegates I could only identify some 10 non-Anglo-Saxon names.

The lack of migrant participation in trade union leadership is, possibly, one of the major reasons for apprehension about trade unions by migrants themselves. As the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission has noted, in the light of the information available on this aspect of social organisation, there is no statistical reason why the migrant presence should not be felt:

"A national survey in 1976 showed that immigrant workers tend to have a higher rate of union membership than Australian born workers. Of the total union membership, 27 per cent were overseas born and 17 per cent were born in non-English speaking countries ... Estimates of immigrant membership made by the union secretaries interviewed were even higher than the national survey indicated: In five unions between 40 and 65 per cent of the membership was overseas born and in one union covering unskilled workers it was 97 per cent. The lowest estimates placed a third of the total membership as overseas born. In one instance, this represented about 12000 members ...

Few immigrants from non-English speaking countries were union officials or members of union executives."

In a recent reference to this particular problem the Commissioner for Community Relations, Al Grassby, made the following points:

"Evidence from a recent survey indicates that while in many cases there is a great desire on the part of migrants to take an active role in their trade unions, they find themselves unable to cope with the language and procedures. In some cases there have been outright misunderstandings.

It is obvious that there is a need for trade unions to develop special programs to involve this 27% of the workforce in their activities and to help migrant workers integrate with the community generally ...

Trade Unions have not kept up with the times in terms of the great changes in the Australian workforce. There is urgent need for new initiatives to encourage involvement in trade union activities and to gear trade union policies to the needs of workers as they see them and, above all, to carry out education programs at the factory level in which the trade unions should have a major responsibility and play a major part.

The gap between trade union officials and the migrant workforce is illustrated by the fact that in relation to their numbers migrants are inadequately represented in the ranks of trade union officials.

This is further evidence of the lack of positive participation that must be overcome both in the workforce and the nation at large if we are to attain the progress that can flow from unity and amity."


Another main stimulus to apprehension about trade unions amongst migrants rests in the disappointment about the level of response of trade union officials to migrant problems. This aspect of the problem might be approached from a number of different angles. For example, if you accept what I said above about the basic conservative nature of trade unions, there is no reason why one should expect the average trade union administrator to respond in a dramatic way to the difficulties being experienced by a minority of his membership. The only way a conservative person will react to change is to place the person, himself, under threat. Then you will see some response. Migrant issues, then, need to be strongly and forcefully articulated and pursued within the trade union movement itself, if migrants are to expect trade unions to respond.

There is no necessary corollary in trade union organisation that all one has to do is to present the logic or the need for special action and trade union officials will respond.

Trade union officials have many competing demands on their time and energies and are, invariably, underpaid and overworked. In this situation, of course, they will service those needs of the union which, to them, are the most obvious, immediate and important. If they have any time left over, they might get around to attending to migrant problems.

Trade Unions and Moral Issues

Proof of this statement might be seen in the almost disconsolate manner in which the trade union movement responded to the demands for equal rights for female employees. Admittedly, the ACTU and other organisations wrote the principle into their policy, but it was many years before a significant number of trade union officials genuinely believed in either the logic of the policy or its economic feasibility.
Another area of great disappointment to myself, of course, is the failure of the trade union movement to come to grips with the problems of Aboriginal Australians. As late as the 1960's I have evidence of one very prominent trade union organisation actually instructing its regional offices not to enrol Aborigines. Indeed, it was only in the late 1960's that the trade union movement and the Australian Government, for that matter, made any endeavour to ensure that the last vestiges of race prejudice were removed from the formal side of rules, constitutions and law in this country. I was called upon by the Australian Government to assist it in identifying where such affronts to personal dignity still remained in Australian legal practice so that our house could be put in order to assist us in meeting obligations under international treaties.

In the Aboriginal field, of course, the basic lack of concern of the trade union movement and the Australian people, is still patently evident. Aborigines suffer under an unemployment rate in excess of 50% of the available workforce and still stand, oppressed, deprived and wanting of the material welfare that is available to most Australians. If the trade union movement was serious about Aboriginal affairs it could have resolved many of these issues a decade ago. But, it decided not to elevate it in its order of priority in relation to all of the other matters with which it has to deal.

Personal attitudes and power politics, of course, frequently have an important bearing on what areas the trade union movement is going to become active in at any one time. During my work in Aboriginal affairs I recall clear instructions being issued by a senior trade union official of the 'left' to one of his staff to go easy on the 'Aboriginal' issue and the rights of his Aboriginal members for fear that it might be misinterpreted by his white members that he was more concerned about Aboriginal welfare than their own.

This type of reaction and decision, of course, may have been well founded in the particular union secretary's industrial experience and it could well relate to his realistic comprehension of incipient race prejudice which still remains in Australian society. However, from the Aborigines point of view the instructions had a long term and lasting affect on the prospects of them being elevated beyond the dust heaps and rubbish dumps of the outback.

Institutional Racism

The point I want to make about this material is that there remains, in Australian society, an environment of prejudice which, although hard to delineate, must be taken as a conditioning factor in the response of social institutions to the problems of those who form a minority and/or alienated groups within our midst. In relation to Aboriginal affairs (and I believe that the same conclusions can be reached in relation to migrant affairs) Dr. Peter Moodie came to the following conclusions after a survey of experience and literature in the field of medical services and race relations ranging over some fifteen years:

"The general conclusions which the writer has reached after his brief examination of the racial implication in Aboriginal (read migrant) health are that, firstly, there is a vicious circle involving ill-health and ethnocentrism or prejudice; secondly, that while governments and the majority of health and medical personnel are not blatantly racist in policy and behaviour, there are many highly ethnocentric aspects of government health policy, and ethnocentric or unconsciously racist individuals harming race relations with Aborigines (read migrants) and exerting psychological pressures which Aborigines (migrants) should not have to face in this so-called enlightened age; thirdly, governments have both the responsibility and the opportunity of breaking the vicious
circle at two points - the removal of remaining discriminatory practices by themselves or by health and medical personnel and mounting a more vigorous attack on those diseases which reinforce discrimination and prejudice on the part of the white (non-migrant) population.

Both governments and Aborigines (migrants) can contribute to these objectives by working out a formula for the employment of greatly increased numbers of Aboriginal (migrant) health services."


The additional value of Moodie's work is this: following a careful survey of wide experience in his profession at the most important area of race conflict in Australia, he had very few kind words for the reactions of his fellow professional workers in relation to their responses to the obvious needs of the minority groups with which they were working. To me this ignorance and practised prejudice is even less forgivable as it was shown to be present in one of the best educated groups of Australians. If this is the case, one must savour the thought; if bald prejudice still exists here, at what level does it exist amongst individuals with less favourable educational background?

In translating Moodie's experience with Aborigines to that of migrants who are faced with similar, if less distinguishable attitudes, we do not have to search far for authoritative support of comparative analysis. Professor Ronald Henderson, Chairman of the Australian Government Commission of Enquiry into Poverty had the following comment:

"The degree to which migration becomes a traumatic experience will depend in part upon the ego strength of the individual, but also upon the supports available to, and the prevailing attitudes towards, the migrant as a new arrival. ... Typically, the migrant commences life in the new environment at or near the bottom of the social and occupational ladders and is faced with the slow and difficult process of upward mobility and integration. Whether he succeeds or not ... will depend, in large part, on the structure of social welfare and the individual's ability to utilise its provisions."


Although the Henderson Report appears to have overlooked the degree of incipient race prejudice faced by migrants in Australia, people more closely associated with the area than Professor Henderson do not find it difficult to isolate: George Papadopoulos (a Melbourne lawyer) comments might be sufficient to bridge the gap. Writing in a study of The Injured Ethnic he had the following comment:

"Migration policy has tended to follow the needs of the labour market and in consequence large numbers of largely unskilled or semi-skilled persons have been brought to Australia in the last twenty years from Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy and Turkey and whom (sic) today constitute a significant proportion of the work force.

Briefly stated they are confronted by three main problems in respect of work related injuries:
Firstly, lack of knowledge of the language and the social culture
Secondly, lack of knowledge of the legal system
Thirdly, institutionalised discrimination" (emphasis mine)

Culture of Poverty

It is one thing to identify a problem; it is another to provide a solution. As Oscar Lewis has pointed out in The Culture of Poverty, the inter-locking social systems of poverty, poor education and lack of economic opportunity are self-sustaining, particularly if the group concerned is both of significant size and identifiable within the broader framework of the social system.

There is plenty of evidence that many migrant groups meet these criteria, although one must say, happily, many migrant groups in Australia have displayed a degree of upward mobility which defy Oscar Lewis' analysis. But the foundation of a continuing irremedial cycle of poverty along ethnic lines, is quite apparent from the Australian figures. The situation is supported, of course, by the insidious aspects of institutional prejudice referred to above.

Possibly one could look forward to a quick reversal of the social and cultural parameters of migrant and ethnic problems in the Australian context if there was some light of hope in the industrial conditions under which they labour. But this, unfortunately, is not the case. The Report of the Jackson Committee had the following comments on the industrial conditions of the migrant workforce:

"Our studies of the human condition in factories indicate serious and deep-seated problems. For most of the workforce, the quality of worklife falls drastically short of what people would like. The rising expectations, education and standard of living of most workers contrast starkly with remote and centralised decision making that considers them as ... 'resources' or 'labour'. Industry is heavily concentrated in major cities. The problems of overcrowding spill over into worklife. Alienation and frustration are evidenced by unrest, absenteeism, high turnover and indifferent quality of product.

The workforce is multi-racial and multi-cultural. Four out of ten were born outside Australia. They ... frequently do the dirtiest, least skilled, menial tasks; tasks for which, despite unemployment, young native-born Australians cannot be found. Women are a quarter of the workforce and in some sectors eight out of ten. Little attention is paid to their special needs, particularly of the two-thirds who are married. The married migrant woman in industry is trebly disadvantaged. People remote from the shopfloor who staff governments, traditional firms and unions do not appear to be conscious enough of these long-term problems, or well enough prepared to deal with them."


Industrial Oppression

If the statistics presented above show the disadvantages which migrants need to overcome to achieve a viable foundation on which to project or identify fully with the broader Australian community, the incidence of industrial accidents and general ill-health, further emphasise the handicaps which they face in endeavouring to bridge the gap.

There is plenty of support for the Jackson Committee findings:
The Living at Work: Australia 1973 study carried out by Emery and Phillips for the Minister for Labour and Immigration (1973) surveyed the attitudes of 2,000 random workers to their work and their life.

This study verified that not only do migrants work in the most socially undesirable jobs but "they know it". They found that 66% of migrant women complained they "had no opportunities in life" compared to 20% of all workers. This research also found that 25% of migrants compared to 8% of all workers were "turned off" their work completely and had no-one to turn to among unions, management or workmates.

Emery, Fred E. and Phillips, Chris: Living at work (Canberra, AGPS, 1976)

The 1975 CURA Survey of a sample of some 710 migrant women working in 30 factories (i.e. clothing, meat, food, boot and metal industries) in Melbourne which employed nearly 3000 women, verified the findings of the Jackson Report on Manufacturing Industry.

This study found that women worked in often appalling physical conditions (cold, draughty, stuffy, poorly ventilated, high risk of injury, often damp, cramped and smelly rooms). Women knew this and wrote statements how work causes headaches, sore eyes, coughs, lung infections, arm diseases, varicose veins, hearing defects, whitefinger, etc.

Employers interviewed stated that the work was easy:-

"It's not hard work ... It's an ideal job for women to do because there's nothing skilful or hard in it". "The women are suited to these jobs because they can sit at the machine all day doing the same thing. If they were more intelligent ... they would go round the bend. But this class of person is suited to the job ..."

Storer, Des: "But I wouldn't want my wife to work here....": A study of migrant women in Melbourne industry (Fitzroy, Vic., CURA, n.d.), p. 82.

Migrant women did not describe their situation as the previous employers have:- They complained about the appalling physical conditions. 83% stated they worked because they had to survive (as husband's factory income was not enough) and didn't have the language or education for other jobs and they didn't want their children to end up "in these shit factories". They complained about how "we are exploited", "the boss keeps the production line going very fast", "the piece work system makes us mental wrecks", "I can't stand how the boss yells at me and always watches us", "the treatment here is harsh and makes me nervous". In summary migrant women knew they were doing unpleasant work. They only too well know the effects this is having on them and their families. They know they are likely to receive physical injuries and it causes social disruption to their lives. But they have to do this work to survive.
The problem of workforce deprivation of migrants is, of course, exacerbated by the exposure of migrants to additional debilitation through industrial accidents.

"The Commissioner of Community Relations Annual Report (1976) details a survey of all reported industrial accidents in Australia. This research found that 40% of all industrial accidents in Australia involved migrant workers. In many industries twice as many overseas-born are injured in the workplace as locally born. Australia-wide figures for the last financial year, covering all workers indicated 400 killed, 250,000 assorted injuries and a loss to the nation in monetary terms of more than $1000 million".

Centre for Urban Research and Action: A project to evaluate the situation of injuries and occupational health of migrant workers (Fitzroy, Vic., 1977), p. 6.

If you study the figures you will find that not only do the ethnic communities in Australia bear the brunt of over 40% of all industrial accidents (although they only make up some 28% of the population) they bear more than double their share of unemployment, fail to take advantage of the advanced education system, earn at rates of pay well below the Australian average, live in conditions which are substandard, bear children at a greater rate than native born Australians, have a higher level of ill health, possess fewer skills, and fill the ranks of the menial workers when they are able to obtain employment.

Subservient Role

In the terms of Oscar Lewis' analysis of the culture of poverty, Australia stands on the edge of a self-perpetuating endless cycle of social discrimination and poverty along ethnic lines. As most migrants have chosen to come to Australia with a view to improving their relative status and standard of living conscious appreciation of their relegation to a subservient role may well produce the catalyst to political action which could serve as the mainspring to drive them to action, not only in the trade union movement but in the affairs of state as well.

A paper given at a Conference of Greek Welfare Workers, Shalom College, University of New South Wales 18/5/79.

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