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REAPPRAISING THE WATERFRONT
DISPUTE OF 1998

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Abstract

Literature about the waterfront dispute is analysed in terms of "realism," "radicalism," "critical analysis," and "cultural, reflexive or discursive analysis." These four headings are used to investigate various possible backgrounds to the dispute and to consider contending interpretations of the course of the dispute. None of the literature has anything to say, however, about the use of web pages and email during the dispute. Interviews with four web masters reveal two insights: one, it is pertinent to distinguish between the use of computers to disseminate information and their use to promote union campaigns and organisation; and two, it is productive to analyse political actors in terms of how they deploy available discourses.

Introduction

To the extent that national politics in Australia resemble a mass spectator sport, revisiting the waterfront dispute of 1998 is something like reliving a dramatic grand final victory. However, even at first glance, the exercise of revisiting the dispute entails more than nostalgia because it seems that the election of a former union leader, Simon Crean, to the position of leader of the ALP and the Opposition has inspired the third Howard Government to revive its ambition to reform the institutional setting for industrial relations in Australia. At the same time, much more was at stake than there is in any sporting contest and the ramifications of the dispute do go further afield than the arena of parliamentary politics, or indeed of industrial relations per se.

This article reviews literature about the dispute published in books, on web pages, and in academic journals. It leaves aside the legal journals and the very numerous articles and reports in the daily press, which are in any case summarised in several papers. The review discerns four approaches: 1) a realist approach that emphasises leading actors in established arenas — the Maritime Union, the Australian Confederation of Trade Unions (ACTU), the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal Party, the National Farmers' Federation, and Patrick's Stevedoring, in the courts, the media, parliament, and the corporate world; 2) a critical approach that focuses on...
the dispute's setting within far-reaching debates about economic liberalism and globalisation; 3) a radical approach that focuses on the importance of national and international working class mobilisation against capital; and 4) a less clear "new politics" approach that focuses on gender, culture, and communications technology within industrial relations. Much of this literature falls under two or more of those headings, although most of it under the realist or radical headings. A small amount falls under the critical heading and very little under the new politics heading. A striking feature of all this commentary, however, is that it bears little relationship to the lessons that the ACTU itself drew from the dispute and a study mission undertaken soon afterwards. These lessons were subsequently published in Unions@Work (ACTU 2000) and have shaped a reorganisation of the ACTU itself. In a final section, I draw on interviews to point out that online activists involved in the waterfront dispute addressed some of the "new politics" issues mentioned only briefly in the literature about the waterfront dispute. Where that literature about the waterfront dispute can be obscure or inaccessible, activists address the issues directly.

Backgrounds to the Dispute

What counts as background to the waterfront dispute of 1998 depends largely on the scope of the analysis of it. Radical analyses start in the 1890s with the wharf strikes over the right to organise unions (Bramble; Macintyre; Petzall et al.; Wilson; Wiseman). They then go on to the setbacks of 1928–29, involving one death, bombings, police-protected strikebreakers, and penal powers, and turn then to the advances during the Second World War when the "bull" system of auctions for daily casual employment was abolished in favour of rosters, holidays, and safety measures. Radical analyses go back a hundred years, painting the background to conservative governments and employers attacking waterfront unions, and they go back just as far to illustrate an argument that the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) attracted wide international support in 1998 because of its proud tradition of supporting other workers and causes, from their £500 donation to London dockworkers in 1898, to the ban on pig iron exports to Japan in 1938; support for the Indonesian liberation movement in the 1940s; support for the ANC throughout the 1960s, '70s and '80s; support for North Vietnam in 1967; a ban on unloading rainforest wood in 1991 to support native peoples of Malaysia; and the ban on French shipping during the French nuclear tests of 1995. Radical analyses' background to Patrick's actions during 1998 go back a century but they also argue that in Australia during the last two decades industrial relations have been strongly influenced by the libertarian ideology of the HR Nicholls Society's campaign against centralised arbitration and for individualised employment contracts. The National Farmers' Federation clearly
hoped that Australian employers might emulate the union-busting strategies of News Corporation at Wapping, UK, in 1986 and, more relevantly, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company on the Liverpool waterfront in 1995–96. The long period of the radical analyses’ context to the 1998 dispute is a logical consequence of searching for the root causes of the dispute in class struggle between capital and labour. The long background also tends to present the resurgence of neo-liberalism amongst employers in the last two decades and a concomitant post-Cold War slump in radical socialism as a passing historical phase, and the waterfront dispute as an episode that portends a new turn in the wheel of history.

Critical analyses overlap with radical analyses because they too look at economic relations. But beyond a focus on working-class mobilisation, corporate globalisation, and state partisanship in the struggle between labour and capital, critical analyses focus on more recent policies of economic rationalism (Crawthorne; Petzall et al.; Stratton; Wiseman). As is well known, these policies have been developed by Labor and Coalition Governments alike at Federal and State levels since the early 1980s, and have accompanied both the decline of what Castles has called the “wage-earners’ welfare state” and the rise of corporate globalisation in the 1990s (Stephen Bell; Castles; Vandenberg & Tregenna). Background to critical analyses starts with the combined effects of tariff cuts and containerisation putting heavy investment demands upon stevedores and consequent pressures on workers to re-skill in order to do more work with fewer people and more machinery. In 1995–96, 70 per cent of imports and 78 per cent of exports went through the waterfront, and mostly through five key ports in the south and east. But the total volume of trade is small compared with the largest ports in the world and almost all of the cargo is at either the beginning or the end of its journey by sea. In very large cargo transit ports, such as Singapore, transferring cargo between boats is more common and it is usual for five cranes to work on a boat emptying or filling it completely. Australian ports are among the most efficient in the world at bulk handling grain, coal, and iron ore, but the time it takes to find and pick out only some of the containers on a boat means the efficiencies of scale can justify only one or two cranes working on any one boat. The late 1980s, however, saw the Hawke ALP Government make a concerted effort to improve efficiency on the waterfront.

During 1989–92 the longstanding Accord between the ALP government and the ACTU saw the general policy of “progressive competitiveness” applied to a particular combination of economic restructuring, and targeted income security for groups vulnerable to globalisation due to tariff cuts. After two years of study, an Interstate Commission recommended that the waterfront shift from industry awards to enterprise level agreements, and in 1989 the unions and employers agreed to the institution of the Waterfront Industry Reform Authority (WIRA). Aided by a $415 million redundancy package for
waterfront workers, WIRA negotiated a rationalisation of twenty awards into a single industry award, a reduction of the stevedoring workforce from 8,872 to 3,818 by October 1992, a 100 per cent increase in cargo movements per worker per shift, a 20 to 30 per cent increase in ship turnaround time, and savings to importers and exporters of $170 million per year (Stratton 91; Crawthorne 15).

Over the same period, the declining numbers of waterfront workers and pressure from the ACTU to rationalise union coverage combined to see the Waterside Workers’ Federation and the Seamen’s Union merge into the Maritime Union of Australia in 1993. However, at the same time, the waterfront workers’ long-standing strategic power to harm the profitability of many companies and industries throughout the Australian economy had, if anything, been enhanced by the merger of Australian National Terminals and Strang Patrick Stevedoring (later Patrick Stevedores) in 1993. Between 1988 and 1993 the number of stevedores competing to handle Australian cargo had fallen from five to two. The stevedoring duopoly could to some extent avoid pressures to rationalise their operations by simply passing on the costs of machinery investment, wages and better conditions to importers and exporters who had no competitor stevedores to turn to. These stevedores maintain their duopoly through long-term leases on docks in the major ports, which resemble the way airlines in Australia limit competition through their leasing of terminals at the major airports.

One response to inefficiency on the waterfront has been undertaken by state governments around Australia transforming their old maritime services boards into commercial port authority corporations, much as ports in Britain have done. A second response has been undertaken by entrepreneurs and by state and federal Governments floating the possibility of a railway link to Darwin as a cheaper alternative to the ports in the south and the east of the country. The third response was to attract a non-unionist employing stevedore onto an Australian wharf in the hope that it might break both the Patrick–P&O duopoly and its acceptance of the MUA’s “closed shop” union coverage, which arguably amounts to a monopoly over the supply of labour. During 1997 a partnership between the Chinese government and Hong Kong stevedores negotiated with the Kennett Government about starting a non-union operation in Melbourne. The negotiations broke down when the Chinese decided to employ MUA workers in order to steer clear of any black ban by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF). Similarly, the threat of an ITWF black ban foiled an attempt by the mining corporation Freeport and the US stevedores International Purveyors to employ non-union waterfront workers, first in Cairns and later in Melbourne during 1997 (Stratton 91–95; Crawthorne 15–18; Petzall et al. 5; Bramble).

Realist analyses sketch much briefer backgrounds to the dispute, which in turn is primarily limited to the events of Easter 1998 and the
subsequent court decisions in April and May that year. The realist background begins with the election of the first Howard coalition government in 1996 and the legislation of the Workplace Relations Act 1996, along with amendments to the Trade Practices Act 1974 inserting penal clauses against secondary boycotts, all of which came into force in January 1997. Further key events include the Howard cabinet resolution of June 1997 to support an “activist” approach to reforming the waterfront, the failure to introduce non-union waterfront workers in Cairns during September 1997, insiders leaking crucial details to MUA officials between November 1997 and January 1998 about training ex-servicemen in Dubai to work as non-union waterfront workers in Australia, and Patrick’s formation of four employment firms in January 1998. There is considerable overlap between the realism of Anne Davies and Helen Trinca, for example, and the critical analyses introduced above because many journalists largely sided with the MUA and against both Patrick and the Howard government (Warby & Morrison 11; Davies 107; Trinca & Davies). However, where critical and radical analyses conclude that Labor and Coalition governments alike have sought to promote pro-market economic restructuring in Australia’s ports at the expense of the social networks and communities in which waterfront workers and many other people are embedded, realist analyses have instead concluded more narrowly that the unions and the stevedores each understandably played their contest very hard, pursuing their respective interests, but that the Howard government failed to uphold an expectation that it play the role of a neutral umpire. By contrast, the Hawke Government played a more neutral role and, arguably, achieved more reform through WIRA.

Contrasting interpretations of the course of the dispute

Continuing with the heuristic strategy of distinguishing between various analyses as a means of asking questions about the literature on the Australian waterfront dispute of 1998, this section asks questions about contending interpretations of lessons to be learnt from the dispute itself. There are two primary debates to be discerned in the literature. First, realist and radical analyses present contending emphases on the relative importance of elites’ strategies in established arenas versus mobilising working-class and community support (Kimber). Second, critical and cultural analysts present contending emphases on the relative importance of the global economic context vis-à-vis the contributions of women, information technology, and cultural change (Brook; Evans; Greck; Hinkson “Victory of Sorts,” “John Hinkson Replies,” “Politics of Culture;” Hollier “Magazine Wreck,” “Left Turn,” “Importance of Class;” James; Roberts et al.; Sharp).

Within realist analyses, two reasons are advanced for why the unions might be regarded as having won the battle over the waterfront
(even if they lost the wider war). First, in March 1998 the MUA employed the services of a particularly astute firm of public relations consultants. According to one of those consultants, whom Amanda Gome cites in Business Review Weekly online:

"When we were called in, the MUA was the underdog ... the MUA was running with the message that the Government was attacking it — wrong message, given that the public did not have a lot of time for wharfies. This set the tone of the communications strategy. The consultants told the union to change its message to focusing on the attack to pointing out that the Government was not playing its role, which was to sort out the dispute and be fair to both sides: 'We also told the MUA to play on the insecurity and job loss, and run with the line "we are all going to be sacked." Then, when Patrick did sack them, we told them the dispute would turn 180 degrees in their favour. And it did.' (Gome)

At a seminar convened after the publication of her book co-authored with Anne Davies, Helen Trinca reinforced this view. She denied that journalists reporting the dispute were prejudiced or biased against Patrick and argued instead that the MUA simply "won the propaganda war" (Trinca 107). Clearly, the union PR strategy was also aided by several serious mistakes by Patrick, including the secretive scheme to train ex-servicemen to operate cranes in Dubai before returning to Australia to take up positions at non-union docks, and the decision to employ burly guards wearing balaclavas and handling security dogs. For almost two years since its defeat of the Keating ALP government, the Howard coalition government had been waging a persistent campaign against "lazy wharfies" and waterfront inefficiency, with numerous comments in the media by Howard and Reith, and a Sixty Minutes TV program noted by several commentators. However, Patrick's PR mistakes saw journalists take up the labour movement's rhetoric about "mercenaries" and a "war on the waterfront" (Bramble; MUA), which was undoubtedly well suited to the simplifications that are intrinsic to TV coverage (Bell; Warby & Morrison). In most industrial disputes unions get a bad press because their strikes appear as a visible and provocative step even though any dispute is a complex chain of actions and counteractions, but this time the unions had initiated no strike and the employers had initiated a lock-out of unionists. Patrick's astonishingly aggressive actions all too readily illustrated ALP rhetoric about industrial "mercenaries" and subsequent union rhetoric about a war on the waterfront.

The second reason that the unions might be regarded as having won the battle is that their lawyers adopted a brilliant strategy that persuaded judges in several courts and that neither the government, nor Patrick, nor Patrick's bankers anticipated. According to Trinca and Davies, Josh Bernstein and Herman Borenstein offered their legal services to the ACTU before the unions had even had time to consider
employing lawyers and proposed a legal strategy married to an industrial and public relations strategy: namely, a conspiracy between Patrick and the National Farmers’ Federation against workers’ right to join a union (Trinca & Davies 121–24). This strategy confirmed the union leaders’ knowledge, supplied by whistle-blowing insiders, that not only had Patrick been party to the Dubai scheme in December 1997 but had also been part of wider plans by the government to undermine unionism both on the waterfront and in general. It is no wonder the lawyers’ proposal interested the ACTU leaders. A conspiracy case fitted well with both the views of activists and members on the pickets and the PR strategy in the media. Between 11 February and 4 May the ACTU lawyers persuaded first Justice North of the Federal Court, then three justices of the Federal Court, and finally the full bench of the High Court, that Patrick had a conspiracy case to answer. Consequently, the banks that were financing Patrick’s internal corporate restructuring pressed Corrigan to reach a compromise with the MUA. They were most anxious to avoid the marketing nightmare of being named as co-conspirators, which would have caused many of the union movement’s supporters and the unions’ own superannuation funds to take their accounts elsewhere (Trinca & Davies 235–41).

On a radical analysis, the workers might have won much more had it not been for the moderating influence of their officials at the pickets. Tom Bramble’s analysis contrasts the failure of the “comparatively timid” Brisbane picket against the success of the Melbourne pickets where “mass working class action … made the police powerless to act … [and] was decisive in winning the MUA its victories in the courts.” Bramble puts the blame for shortcomings in the final settlement squarely on union officials, who were “lead in the saddlebags” and “sought to relegate mass involvement in the campaign to background music, while key people, the soloists, rehearsed their role behind closed doors.” By contrast, Baker’s realist study assumes that police should be neutral umpires keeping the peace among a plurality of parties to various disputes rather than merely be instruments of the most powerful parties, such as governments or employers (125). He therefore argues that “the dispute centred on the courts, the political arena and the media, but the wharves remained a symbolic theatre of the struggle and the core of the grassroots campaign.” But it is arguable that both a realist disparaging of the merely symbolic importance of the pickets and a radical celebration of their decisive impact rest on undue simplifications. Interaction between union officials and the picketers involved more complexities than either realist or radical analysis can readily incorporate.

There were a few moments when the pickets might have erupted into something like an actual war on the waterfront with rioting and serious violence. One moment was the evening of 28 January at the very beginning of the picket at Webb Dock in Melbourne when comparatively small numbers of aggressive MUA members faced a small
band of confrontational security guards, before alcohol had been banned and procedures with the police had been settled (Trinca & Davies 107–19). Another moment was dawn on 18 April at Webb Dock when 2000 construction workers marched from inner-city building sites down to the picket, came up behind the police, and sandwiched them against 4000 picketers who had been there all night (Baker 133). Violence also looked likely on 16 April in Brisbane and in Fremantle (Bramble). In Brisbane picketers became frustrated over their inability to prevent trucks accessing the Patrick wharf because the relevant gate crossed a common road used by P&O Stevedores as well; and in Fremantle riot police moved in to disperse picketers at 2 a.m. For the most part, however, talk of a war on the waterfront was indeed theatrical symbolism, considering the deaths and pitched battles during many other disputes in the past and elsewhere (Baker 128). In Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle, ongoing negotiations between police officers and union officials saw comparatively peaceful self-regulating pickets satisfy police requirements that order be maintained, while the police accepted for their part that the sheer numbers of picketers meant they could not supply enough officers to enforce any strict interpretation of laws prohibiting obstruction, besetting, harassment, abuse, intimidation, and assault. At other ports, where there was less of a media presence and picket numbers were smaller, there was also little negotiation between police and picketers.

Despite his realist assumptions about the comparative unimportance of the pickets, Baker’s study of policing during the waterfront dispute provides much detail about contemporary techniques of protesting and policing. He argues, for example, that a particular police pay claim current during the waterfront dispute had no bearing on the police hierarchy’s professional integrity dealing with the general dilemma that industrial disputes pose when the police themselves are close to completely unionised and significant contributors to the ACTU (136–38). Radicals have traditionally regarded the police as inherently conservative instruments of the employers and capitalists, and in the 1980s and 1990s there have been no shortage of violent clashes between the police and strikers or protestors and particularly in Victoria. At the same time, many more police are university educated and they readily accept that in prominent disputes TV monitoring imposes an accountability that makes violent enforcement of the law disadvantageous, and peaceful negotiation of order advantageous, for the police and protestors alike (Baker 134). The importance of police discourses about professional integrity and operational independence, and union officials’ appreciation that community-based civil disobedience can be more powerful than aggressive men actively attacking scabs who try to cross a picket, all demonstrate that significant numbers of moderately powerful people and actors intervene between “the state” and “the people.” The actions of people such as police officers and union officials, along with activists, journalists,
lawyers, public relations consultants, and public servant whistleblowers, as well as established parties, unions, companies along with new networks, are all shaped by diverse and often contradictory discourses in ways that neither realism nor radicalism can readily comprehend.

The debate between radical and realist (or pluralist) analyses is, however, reasonably straightforward compared to the exchanges between writers associated with *Arena* and *Overland* about radical versus other possible left-wing analyses. One thing that makes it difficult to characterise either side of the *Arena–Overland* exchange is that both sides claim to support critical analyses of economic rationalism which reject the social engineering of both state socialism and economic liberalism and imply or pose an alternative social rationalism (James; Hinkson “Politics of Culture”; Hollier “Importance of Class”). Another common ground, despite some counterclams, is that both sides point to the importance of understanding the waterfront dispute in a wider socio-economic and historical context (James; Sharp; Hinkson “Politics of Culture”; Hollier “Importance of Class”). Both sides also hope to promote better quality public debate. Paul James suggests a Habermas-flavoured critique of the ACTU’s decision to employ PR consultants and engage in the “image politics” that results from any “soft sell on hard issues with caricatured content,” and which degrades the quality of public dialogue (James). Similarly, John Hinkson suggests that *Overland* offers “broad educational and infrastructural support and planning” for all those who seek “to facilitate genuine dialogue between social groups.” Finally, both sides point to the importance (and neglect in the mainstream media) of appreciating the role of gender politics for defusing the potential for violence and reinforcing links between the MUA and a much wider community of supporters (Greer; Roberts, Bibrowska & Devlyn).

It would be well known to many readers, however, that the *Overland* writers endorse a historical materialist emphasis upon class conflict between capital and labour in the waterfront dispute, while the *Arena* writers seek to overlay or supplement that sort of radical analysis with some sort of cultural, reflexive, or discursive analysis of communications technology and globalisation. In *Overland*, Hollier acknowledges that “what is most culturally unique about postmodernity is the presence and function of communication technologies,” but he endorses a Jamesonian view of “postmodernity … as a form of late capitalism.” He insists that the material realities of wealth, gender, race, education, and social standing play more important roles than communications technologies in “shaping modern subjectivity” (Hollier “Importance of Class”). By contrast, in *Arena* Hinkson insists that the new communication technologies involve much more than efficient information transmission, because “techno-capitalism” challenges welfare states and excludes many citizens from meaningful democracy in diverse ways. He also argues that attempts by *Arena*
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writers to problematise such developments cannot be dismissed as a question of subjectivity nor sidelined by schematic distinctions between class and cultural analysis, or economy and culture more generally ("Politics of Culture" 161, 163, 164).

In all of these exchanges between *Arena* and *Overland* writers neither their extensive common ground nor their points of disagreement led any of them to mention Takver’s soapbox (<http://www.takver.com/>), Daniel Pocock’s web page for Young Left Labor (<http://www.yll.org/>), the email list run by LeftLink, or the email list run by the ACTU. Several commentators on the waterfront dispute note that mobile phones were important for maintaining continuous negotiations between the police and union picket marshals; that telephone trees were an important technique for mobilising picketers quickly; that TV reports were important for notifying very large numbers of potential picketers about likely confrontations, and that the presence of many electronic media journalists had a major impact on the conduct of picketers and the police. But in all of the literature about the waterfront dispute, I have found no commentary on the role of web pages and email. This absence is all the more striking because web pages and email are precisely what the ACTU focused upon when it turned to the task of learning lessons from the dispute.

Efficient communication, networking, and organising

It is common to view web pages and email as offering means of communication that are cheaper, faster, and more effective than older means, such as hardcopy newsletters, personal communications via fax or phone, or indirect mass communication through the mass media (Poster Mode of Information). The MUA clearly regarded its web pages this way, but at the same time they also worried that the new communications media might expose them to greater risks of surveillance. The media officer and webmaster at the MUA, Zoe Reynolds, explained that after the Dubai mercenaries were exposed in December 1997, the union’s anonymous informers warned John Coombs that their offices and telephones were probably bugged. Everyone at the MUA was also worried about the police or the Competition Commission raiding their offices looking for evidence of organising secondary boycotts, or a “conspiracy” of support, from other unions around Australia and around the world. Consequently, throughout the dispute, officials wrote down nothing important on paper, let alone on a computer. They would leave the building to discuss important matters and they shifted comprehensively to the relative security of mobile phones. Reynolds said it was “real cloak and dagger stuff” and after the sackings at Easter the atmosphere of mayhem felt more intense than anything she had experienced as a correspondent in Suharto’s Indonesia or in Beirut during the war. This sort of threat to
the union did not, however, interrupt its internal procedures because, as Reynolds put it:

"This is a very traditional union ... it probably has the highest ratio of organisers to members of any union. It relies a lot on getting down to stop work meetings and they are very good orators, most of the officials. That is one of the real strengths of the union. One of its weaknesses has been IT. We've only just had an IT consultant coming in to develop a strategy for us because it has been very ad hoc. (in interview)"

The old-fashioned and highly masculine traditions of face-to-face loyalty among maritime workers go hand in hand with the MUA's extraordinary industrial leverage, which of course is precisely what globalisation of the Australian economy has begun to erode, exposing a long-term weakness within the MUA's traditions.

At the same time as the traditions of the MUA were proving themselves strong enough to withstand a concerted if also clumsy campaign against a bastion of Australian unionism, Reynolds argued within the MUA for at least some money to take up the opportunities offered by a web page. In January 1998 she found an activist who for a nominal fee designed a comprehensive suite of web pages, which in mid-March won "labour website of the week" from LabourStart (www.labourstart.org <http://www.labourstart.org>) in London. The web page turned out to be very useful for spreading text and photos to other union journalists. In interview, Reynolds freely acknowledged that: "Because I'm a journalist and because it wasn't being used as an organising tool, the website was primarily the magazine cut and pasted on to the web." Magazine material could be published on the web much more often, allowing many more people to access it quickly and easily. She believes the web page was important primarily for other unions but media outlets from around the world could readily download the releases. But the website remained a low priority for the MUA which, especially as the dispute deepened, decided to spend its money on lawyers and focus its activities on negotiating with police and organising community pickets at the docks.

Since the ACTU formulated Unions@Work, with its policy of training delegates in the use of email and the web as networking and organising tools, Reynolds's distinction between using the Internet for distributing the union's magazine and using it as an organising tool is much clearer than it was in 1998, when few people in the unions had much idea about the potential of online computers. The MUA has, for example, recently spent $50,000 rewriting its web pages with a view to their use as an organising tool.

Linda Gale, an official at the National Tertiary Education Union an? seconded by the ACTU during February, April and March of 1998 to help on the waterfront campaign, pointed out that, up until her arrival, the ACTU's web page was very much a matter of distributing information, such as media releases and officials' speeches, online. At
the morning meetings of ACTU staff to co-ordinate and plan their campaign activities, she put forward ideas to develop a more campaign-oriented web site and soon realised that nobody had much of a clue about what she was proposing: "the general response was 'that sounds great, go and do it,' so I went and did it." Where the MUA was overwhelmed by requests from mainstream journalists seeking interviews with John Coombs, along with all sorts of volunteers wanting to help and union journalists seeking text and photos, the ACTU was overwhelmed primarily by volunteers ringing to find out how they could help, asking for T-shirts, stickers, wanting to join the telephone tree, and so forth. Gale therefore developed a graphically simple page with information about how to order campaign materials, information about the telephone tree, many links to online articles in the mainstream media, and links to international and local labour movement sites. In recollection, she remembers Daniel Pocock's site at Young Left Labor and Takver's Soapbox site as being particularly important.

Pocock's and Takver's web pages were important for two reasons. First of all, unlike all of the key people responsible for union web pages during the dispute, they were highly skilled computer industry workers. Pocock has started a small business setting up firewalls and protecting web sites and workplaces from hackers and viruses. Takver administers the intranet of a large corporation. They did then and still do each design and maintain web sites for a living. The second reason they were important is that they offered their valuable skills for free as activists who were concerned about the fate of maritime workers during the waterfront dispute.

Under the auspices of Young Left Labor, Pocock set up several web-page forms that readily facilitated a bottom-up, mass onslaught against key players in the dispute and mainstream media organisations. From the Young Left Labor site you could write your own comments in a particular window and then choose whether to fax your message to Corrigan at Patrick's, Prime Minister Howard, Minister of Industrial Relations Reith, to any of several radio or TV stations, or to the MUA or the ACTU. He chose to arrange for the messages to go to fax numbers rather than emails because of the possibility that filters might be used to screen out emails. People from around the world also used his page to send faxes of support to the MUA. Many of these were read out aloud to the picketers around Australia. It was not surprising that Linda Gale at the ACTU might set up a link to such a useful page maintained by a kindred organisation, but the link to Takver's soapbox was less predictable because it was set up and maintained by an anarchist who clearly stated his views, even if he also astutely avoided pushing his views upon visitors to his soapbox.

Takver explained how his site gradually became more comprehensive as the seriousness of the dispute deepened. Late in January 1998 he followed a Friday evening cycling group, Critical Mass, down to the picket at Webb Dock and soon afterwards set up a minimal web
page with news of what was going on. Like Pocock, he wanted to encourage communication among people as a supplement and an alternative to the mainstream reporting on the dispute, which tended to be anti-worker, in their views. For the first couple of weeks, Takver’s web page was comparatively static, adding new links or updates only every few days. When he scaled up to daily updates, he also took the precaution of summarising the mainstream reports rather than quoting from them on his page. At that time, the ABC archived stories for only twenty-four hours but he knew enough to worry about the copyright implications. He also began sending his summaries to email lists, such as LeftLink based in Melbourne and A-Infos for anarchists internationally. In the second week of April, Eric Lee from LabourStart (www.labourstart.org <http://www.labourstart.org>) in London declared Takver’s Soapbox “Labour website of the week.” Suddenly, his page went from getting 10-15 hits per day to getting around 200 per day. He spent so much time maintaining his web page that he only visited the pickets on a couple of key occasions, but he also got extensive help from his household and from Marg Hutton at the New International Bookshop. Hutton ran the LeftLink email subscription list, which had around 500 subscribers during the dispute. When Takver had to visit ailing relatives over Easter, Hutton helped him maintain his web page remotely via an old and slow laptop computer, by sending him text files of mainstream media reports for him to summarise and circulate.

When I asked Takver why the ACTU and the MUA had so freely linked their web pages to his web page, rather than maintain their traditional distance from anarchists, he suggested it was partly because the threat of legal action over secondary boycotts or investigation by the Competition Commission restricted the amount of popular and labour mobilisation they could pursue. But he, rightly, believed that it was mostly because the union officials were run off their feet and had no time to make daily updates to their web page. However, both Gale administering the ACTU’s web page, and Reynolds administering the MUA web page, told me that no one around them had any idea who Takver was, that his and the union web pages were interlinked, or that his networking around Australia and around the world reinforced their own campaigns. The web pages of both the MUA and Takver had an important role promoting wider interaction with Eric Lee’s LabourStart page, which was established in response to the poor media coverage of the Liverpool dockers’ strike. The Australian mainstream media’s comprehensive coverage of the waterfront dispute came to be a crucial difference between the Liverpool and Australian disputes. But the legal pressure on the MUA in particular meant that Takver’s site became an alternative source of grass-roots international networking from, for example, the west coast of the USA, the Public Service International which met in Geneva in April 1998, and the International Longshoreman’s and Warehouses Union. The international networking
aspect of both the waterfront dispute, and union organising more
generally, is a most interesting avenue for further research.

My interviews with Reynolds (MUA), Gale (ACTU), Pocock
(Young Left Labor), and Takver were part of a research project that
planned to undertake analysis of an email subscription list run by the
ACTU, but the archived tapes of the list have been lost. The plan was
to appraise Poster’s arguments about the altered role of language in
the electronic mode of information and consider the usefulness of
Hindess’s model of the political actor (Poster *The Mode of Information,
The Second Media Age*; Hindess “Rational Choice Theory,” “Actors and
Social Relations,” *Choice, Rationality, and Social Theory*). Several of my
questions to the webmasters I interviewed distinguished between the
role of online computers as highly efficient means of disseminating
information, and the potential for online computers to promote net-
working and break down differences between authors and officials at
the centre of everything and a mass of readers and members receiving
the information. *Unions@Work* has since amplified that distinction. I
was also interested to ask them about relations between the MUA and
the ACTU and the wide-ranging network of supporters that sprung up
as the dispute deepened.

At the time, the MUA in general tended to regard its web page as
a superior means of efficiently disseminating information, rather than
seeing it as a tool for organising members and networking with a
wider community of supporters. As an experienced journalist in the
mainstream media, Reynolds’s assumptions about the usefulness of
web pages largely coincided with the attitudes of union officials
steeped in the face-to-face traditions of a union whose members
enjoyed considerable economic leverage. However, Gale at the ACTU
was more knowledgeable about the potential for interactivity among
online computer users to enhance campaigns, even though few other
people at the ACTU were yet awake to that potential. Outside the
ACTU and the MUA, the unpaid activists Pocock and Takver were
positively excited by the democratic mobilising potential of the elec-
tronic mode of information during the waterfront dispute. I was inter-
ested to discover that, no matter what their position, inside or outside
the established union movement, none of these web masters were con-
tacted by any journalists, including Davies and Trinca, or anyone else
who has written about the waterfront dispute. But what do reflec-
tions upon my conversations with these web masters have to say
about the literature on the waterfront dispute?

Concluding commentary

Perhaps there is no mention of web pages or email in any of the liter-
ature about the waterfront dispute, and no journalists or academic
commentators on the dispute contacted any of the web masters, be-
because online computers were still in their early days, so to speak.
But why, then, were Takver and Pocock, from positions outside the established union movement, so much quicker than people working within the unions to see the potential of online computers as means of mobilising community support for unions? Here, I find Hinkson’s arguments about techno-capitalism more relevant than Hollier’s historical materialist arguments. In general, gender, age, wealth, and social standing are factors in the way online computers are used. Younger, well-to-do, tertiary-educated men tend to use them and see the opportunities they pose more often than others do, and this is reflected in the memberships of blue-collar versus white-collar unions, and male-skewed versus female-skewed industries. So it is, therefore, not surprising that the MUA would be a little slow to see that online computers can be an organising tool, while the more white-collar-oriented ACTU was quicker to see the opportunity; but why were a young man from Young Left Labor and an older anarchist so much quicker than either the MUA or the ACTU? Age in general is somewhat pertinent in that a younger and tertiary educated, incoming ACTU leadership wrote Unions@Work. But ideology per se had no relevance. The old left and right of the union movement have been equally interested in developing the policies of Unions@Work. Among the key web masters during the waterfront dispute, all identify with the broad Australian left, all supported the MUA wholeheartedly from early in the dispute, and all support the development of wide community support for unionism. Compared to these sociological or socio-economic dimensions for general explanations, a discursive analysis of professional experience and organisational allegiance offers a more satisfying, if also necessarily provisional, explanation for differences between Pocock and Takver on the one hand and the union webmasters on the other.

Clearly, the democratic potential of networked computers inspired Pocock and Takver to initiate the development of particularly useful web sites and at the same time their advanced computer skills granted them considerable power to amplify their political activism in ways unheralded in Australia. Others less initiated in the ideology of cyberspace (see Stallybrass) and less skilled in writing web pages were both less inspired and less capable than they were. Here, it seems to me that Gale was both more initiated and skilled than Reynolds, who for her part was constrained by lack of time and money due to her union’s decision to prioritise the legal campaign and the pickets. The organisational allegiance of Takver and Pocock poses an interesting contrast with the union webmasters. I have argued elsewhere that mainstream journalists, party politicians and union officials or employees are more likely to be skeptical about the populist dangers of direct democracy via networked computers because the media and the political parties have been crucial to the reconciliation of capitalism and democracy with the rise of universal suffrage during the twentieth century (Vandenbergh; on the role of parties see Macpherson, also Held; on the rise of universal
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suffrage see Therborn, also Dahl). I argue that Hindess's model of the political actor offers a reasonably direct means of addressing, first, how communications technology affects the deployment of available discourses within an actor (whether that is an individual, an official, or a collective), and second, how the outcome of particular disputes can affect the articulation of several arenas of conflict.

My discussions with the webmasters active during the waterfront dispute suggests that Poster's contrast between old ideas about efficient information dissemination and new ideas about networking is pertinent, even if Hollier disputes the relevance of poststructuralism or reflexive analysis as outlined by Hinkson. My discussions with them also suggest that Hindess's model of the political actor offers a useful detour around rather staid debates between both realists and radicals, and between cultural analysts and historical materialists. But of course the obvious point that I only spoke to four people about the use of communications technology during the dispute must temper these conclusions. Much more research is needed to investigate the implementation of Unions@Work and to consider how communications technology will continue to alter the activism of citizens and organisation members; the role of international networking among grass-roots activists; the role of mainstream parties, unions, and the media within procedural democracy; the importance of interactions between local and global corporations; and the role of temporary networks of single-event protestors.

1 A Priming Grant from the Faculty of Arts, Deakin University, financed the research in this article.
2 Funding for the package included $165 million from the Federal Government, $10 million from stevedores, and $240 million from a levy on trade until December 1995.
3 My sympathies lie largely with the efforts of the Arena writers, even if the editor of Overland Nathan Hollier does have strong points to make about a tendency to obscure argumentation and jargon in the writing of John Hinkson, Paul James and Geoff Sharpe.
4 A single exception proves the rule: I could not find the article, but Takver told me that on 28 April 1998 a reporter, writing for the IT section of the Age, pointed out to readers that the MUA, Patricks, the Government, Takver and lawyers on NetJustice were making extensive use of the web to discuss and comment on the dispute.
5 In interview.
6 In interview.
7 In interview.
8 In interview, Takver explained that he maintains "Takver" as a public pen-name because of bad experiences with fascists. He has a photo of himself but does not name himself anywhere on his web pages. However, as he pointed out, anyone could email to arrange a meeting, as I did, or formally seek identifying details from his Internet service provider. I therefore maintain his chosen degree of privacy and use "Takver" as well.
Hutton declined to be interviewed, preferring email correspondence with
the author.

Again an exception that proves the rule: when checking this article with
Takver, he told me that since I interviewed him in 2000 a PhD student has
contacted him.

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**WEBSITES**

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LabourStart  
http://www.labourstart.org/

LeftLink  

MUA  
http://mua.tcp.net.au/

Takver’s soapbox  
http://www.takver.com/

Unions@Work  
http://www2.actu.asn.au/campaigns/@work/report/osreport.rtf

Young Left Labor  
http://www.yll.org/

**INTERVIEWS**

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Marg Hutton declined to be interviewed, preferring email correspondence with the author, 13 September 2000.

Daniel Pocock, Young Left Labor, 5 September 2000.
Takver, Takver’s Soapbox, 23 August 2000.

Zoe Reynolds, MUA, 5 October 2000.