

REPORT

The 1984 Federation of Labour Conference

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Federation of Labour Conferences are often reactive and negative forums – reactive to industrial events of the day and negative about, in particular, Government policies. Three years ago, for example, the Conference developed an anti the Muldoon Government theme yet did not take the next step, and actively support wholeheartedly the election of an alternative Government – presumably a Labour Government. (Harbridge, 1981 p.92). The 1984 Conference represented a significant change in approach. In the 3 major policy areas Conference not just came out with policies that were “things against” but also promoted in their place policies that were “things for”. The first of these policy decisions was to campaign for a return to bargaining and for an end to the wage freeze. The second was to campaign for the election of a Labour Government at the next election and the end of the National Government. The third was for the development of new economic directives for the country – based on the principle of putting the interests of people ahead of the interests of the owners of property and capital. This last decision signified a realisation that, on its own, the election of a Labour Government would be no panacea for the problems faced by working people.

The 1984 Conference was held in Wellington at the old Town Hall from May 8 - 11. The Conference was attended by 397 delegates, and the 3 national officers, who exercised a total of 558 votes. 76 women attended – again an increase over previous years and an interesting growth given the problems of the school holiday “clash”. Conference was held in the first week of the May school vacation, not the last week of the first school term. This change was noted by delegates who before the end of Conference had resolved that where future Conferences were held during school holidays, the FOL should organise creche facilities. This recognition of the difficulties that the timing of the Conference placed on working parents was symptomatic of a growing recognition within the union movement that workers are not all single men lacking family responsibilities.

That recognition was manifested in a practical way with the adoption of a policy on early childhood education and childcare. This policy was prepared by a working party established at the 1983 Conference. The policy is based on the principle that the responsibility of the provision for early childhood services belongs to society. Provision of services, in terms of wages, buildings and equipment should rest with the Government and control of those services should rest with local communities. Support was given to the Early Childhood Workers Union whose representative Pippa Cubey outlined the plight of her members, working without an award and usually for between \$2.00 and \$4.00 per hour. Significantly, both men and women delegates spoke during this debate indicating that issues like childcare are increasingly perceived by some as the responsibility of all working people not just women.

The voting strength of Conference was about 30 - 35 down on what has been usual in previous years. This small drop was in fact an indication that the so called “right wing” of the New Zealand trade union movement had indeed collapsed. Tony Neary, Secretary of the New Zealand Electrical and Electronic Workers Union, stayed away from this year's

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Conference. The only unions to follow suit appeared to be Harold Callagher's Northern Laundry Workers and Northern Local Body Labourers and Neary's own Wellington Rubber Workers. These unions along with the Electrical Workers Union could have exercised 23 votes between them. Others that may have been expected to stay away in fact attended, and participated fully, making this year's conference one of the least divisive on record. If there ever was a right wing then it is now in tatters and Neary's isolation from the mainstream trade union movement is increased.

The media however, gave Neary his own private conference on television – asking him to comment on proceedings on at least 3 occasions during the week of the official Conference.

The media had attention focused on themselves before Conference proceedings commenced. Dissatisfaction with the last 2 year's television and newspaper coverage of the Conference had been noted and the tendency of the media to concentrate on divisions within the Conference rather than report the policy decisions made, had been addressed (Harbridge, 1983a, Harbridge, 1983b p.85, and Walsh, 1982, p.78). In February this year the National Council of the FOL confirmed a National Executive proposal to introduce restrictions on the media attending the Conference. A 4 part resolution was moved: background papers on the major issues before Conference were to be released at appropriate times during the Conference; Conference reserved its right to move into committee at any point; media representatives would be permitted to attend all open Conference sessions but that there would be no verbatim reporting of debate unless Conference specifically approved before the debate began; the President would hold press conferences at appropriate times. The section of the resolution relating to verbatim reporting was defeated – an extraordinary move given that the position had been endorsed by the National Council. The 3 National Officers along with a substantial number of unionists voted in support of the resolution in its entirety, probably out of what Cleaners Union Secretary Pat Kelly, described as "loyalty" to the National Council. The media didn't emerge unscathed and it was clear that daily attention was to be paid to their efforts. Had the original resolution been passed it is certain that the Conference would not have received any media coverage as journalists found the ban on verbatim reporting quite unacceptable. It is regrettable from the FOL's viewpoint that the other aspects of the resolution were not followed and media handouts did not appear, and neither did the daily press conferences. Both could have only improved the quality of media reporting.

Union organisation

A recurrent theme of the Conference was the need for the trade union movement to develop stronger unionism among women, Pacific Island and Maori workers, young workers, rural workers and unorganised workers. FOL Secretary, Ken Douglas, laid it on the line. The organisation of workers such as these had to be a priority for the movement. He stressed that the activation of Trades Councils was a high priority for the movement and that this was the responsibility of the delegates present at the Conference. There was nothing to be achieved he stated, by leaving Conference and then berating the few who did regularly attend the Trades Council meetings in scattered regions. Those officials sitting in the Town Hall had to take the responsibility and move to support their own people in the regions in reactivating those Trades Councils that had become inactive or which were not operating efficiently. The issue here related strongly to the issue of political action and the need to win a Labour victory in the General Election. Douglas pointed out that the tactic of the National Government in the 1981 election had been to divide the country over the Springbok tour issue and then to sacrifice the cities and win the election in the rural marginals. If unions are to assist in securing a Labour victory at the elections then it is essential that the regions become better organised.

A theme of trade union speeches to this Conference and elsewhere over the last few

months has been the need for "effective" trade unionism. The issue is not voluntary or compulsory unionsim, nor right or left wing unionism but rather effective unionism that meets the needs of working people. (Douglas, 1983 p.11; Campbell, 1983 p.5) Notwithstanding that, the development of debate on union organisation concentrated around two issues – the introduction of voluntary unionism with the implementation of the Industrial Law Reform Act on 1 February 1984 and the issue of the Long Term Wages Policy talks and the probable changes to union organisation that will be needed.

Union organisation : voluntary unionism

"Voluntary" unionism was interpreted by Conference delegates as an attack on the organisational rights of the trade union movement. Some saw the resolution to their problems as a return to the old system of unqualified preference. Elizabeth Tennet, Secretary of the Wellington Clerical Workers Union – one of the unions that has suffered the largest losses through voluntary unionism – moved a resolution calling for the old system to be returned. While the resolution was passed unanimously it was clear that the mood of delegates was one of caution. Bill Andersen (Northern Drivers Union) perhaps expressed that most clearly when he stated that the movement could not realistically expect legislation compelling workers to join unions to be invoked as a method of making up for the movement's own shortcomings. Workers, he said, had to be won to the union movement.

The issue of voluntary unionism had the potential for divisiveness, as early indications from unions reveal that most are having little difficulty maintaining most, if not all of their members. The difficulties with substantial defections appear to have hit the Clerical and Shop Employees Unions worst. Graeme Kelly (Shop Employees) argued that a return to compulsion was necessary as organising shop employees was like "trying to organise in a railway station". He observed that the turnover of workers was high, in some cases 700 percent per annum. The election of a Labour Government at the general election later in the year was seen by some as the cure all. Labour Leader, David Lange, spoke carefully however, on the subject when addressing Conference, promising as part of Labour's policy a return to the "principles" of unqualified preference. Exactly what those principles are, remains to be seen, but it is clear that there will be no return in the short term to the old system irrespective of which party wins the election.

Union organisation : wage fixing

Conference was given a succinct report of the Long Term Wages Policy Reform Talks by Ken Douglas as part of the Annual Report. The implication for union organisation here is immense, yet it seemed to be ignored by delegates. Essentially, the Government's proposal is that bargaining will take place on industry lines with specific provision for plant bargaining by one union per site or company. The implications for this were not spelled out in the Annual Report but clearly there will need to be substantial reorganisation of unions along industry rather than craft lines. The implications for craft unions are significant – carpenters, electrical workers and clerical workers for example, would be represented in bargaining by the one union on an industry by industry basis. Amazingly, there was not a single speaker on this issue and one would be forgiven for assuming that the penny just hasn't dropped for many union officials at this stage. FoL officials would do well to review the format of Conference to allow wider questioning and discussion of issues. Speakers "for and against" a motion can leave delegates uninformed whereas a workshop-type format may be useful for gaining a wider understanding of issues.

Union organisation: election of officers

The five year terms of President, Jim Knox, and Secretary, Ken Douglas, expired at this Conference and both were re-elected unopposed. The four sitting members of the National Executive up for re-election were opposed but were returned comfortably – Bill Andersen (501 votes out of a possible 558), Rob Campbell, Distribution Unions (421 votes), Wes Cameron, Meatworkers, (421 votes) and Ashley Russ, Carpenters, (419 votes). Women's Advisory Subcommittee convenor, Theresa O'Connell (Clerical Workers) was re-elected unopposed along with Sylvia Kelly (Hotel Workers) and Rebecca Hamid (Nelson Timberworkers). The very high degree of support for Andersen underlined the issue of "effective" unionism. Andersen is recognised as one of the most competent unionists in New Zealand and, if there is anything of a "right wing" remaining in the movement, then even they voted for him. These elections again underlined the unity of the movement.

Industrial action

The reaction by the trade union movement to the "\$8" General Wage Order effective from 1st April 1984 was a campaign of industrial action designed to break the wage freeze and allow employers and unions to return to bargaining. The Conference backed up an earlier call for action by a National Council meeting and resolved to put individual employers under sufficient pressure to encourage them to ask Government to remove the wage freeze. A number of interesting points were made during the debate. First, Ken Douglas stated that this campaign would not be won by an indefinite stoppage by one group of workers against one employer – the campaign needed to be much wider than that. This has, in the past, proved a difficult concept for some unionists to contend with. Second, it was agreed that the campaign should be co-ordinated locally by Trades Councils, so that not too many jobs were on strike at any one time thus improving the chances of maintaining financial support for those workers on strike. Third, it was agreed that on those sites where job action was unlikely, union officials would raise the issues of the freeze and invite representatives from those jobs taking action, to speak. Finally, where employers sought a joint approach to Government for an exemption from the wage freeze so as to allow the introduction of some new technology, the unions would in fact not cooperate with the application and would place a ban on the introduction of the new technology until such time as the freeze was completely lifted. For many unions this represented a complete about face from their previous position which had been to use every possible opportunity to gain legal exemptions from the freeze. It is now recognised that this tactic has backfired and taken pressure off those employers attempting to introduce new technology, rather than putting pressure on them to argue with Government for a complete remission of the freeze.

A communication difficulty within the FOL was highlighted when Auckland branch secretary of the Engineers Union, Jim Butterworth, asked why only the Engineers Union and the Meatworkers Union were taking industrial action. A number of speakers followed him pointing out that other industries and jobs had been participating in the campaign but had not received the media coverage of the engineers and meatworkers. Preliminary research indicates that up to the start of Conference some 40 separate job or industry actions had taken place (Harbridge, 1984, p.8; Billing, 1984, p.11).

Political action

Underlying the debates of this Conference was the belief that the Labour Party had to win the 1984 General Election. Len Smith (Labourers Union) referred to the twin objectives of the FOL in returning to bargaining and the election of a Labour Government.

He pointed out that it may be possible to return to bargaining under the present Government but that it would be to no avail. Labour Leader, David Lange, used the opportunity of addressing Conference to release Labour's industrial relations policy. In a wide ranging address, referred to by Jim Knox as "one of the best ever given to a FOL conference", Lange promised to repeal anti-union laws, a return to the principle of unqualified preference as a union membership system, to reform wage bargaining, to give workers a say in management through greater worker participation, to increase the funding available for trade union education, and to set up redundancy funds to compensate all redundant workers. Obviously in a short speech the details were not spelled out but delegates liked what they heard and responded generously. Deputy Leader, Geoffrey Palmer, who at the 1983 Conference had somewhat upstaged Lange with a powerful address on anti-union legislation, was this year low key — focusing on the Industrial Law Reform Act and its consequences.

Speeches on the subject of Labour winning an election are morale boosting for delegates, but without practical on-the-ground support Conference resolutions are of little value. Several delegates offered practical suggestions of support that would assist Labour. These included ensuring union members were on the electoral roll, raising the need for a Labour Government at job and union meetings, and practical support by unionists as part of the election day organisation. A sense of desperation about the need for a change of Government seemed to lead much of the debate and this may mean more practical support than has eventuated before.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the trade union movement went through a period of ambivalence over its relationship with the Labour Party and at previous Conferences the movement has referred to itself as the real opposition to the National Government (Harbridge, 1981, p.93). That ambivalence is now gone. The luxury of criticising the Parliamentary Labour Party in an election year is a thing of the past.

Conclusion

In the minds of the watching and listening public, the 1984 Conference must have gone down as one of the quietest on record. The sensational semi-public conflict between delegates was almost completely absent from the forum and left the media reporting either policy rather than personalities or nothing at all. For delegates, the Conference was hard work and long hours — 9am to 6pm daily — debating policy and issues about union organisation. While some delegates may view a Labour Party win as an opportunity to line up with their front-end loaders and dig into a pile of goodies, a mood of realism generally prevailed. Labour may certainly be the way out of many of the present difficulties faced by the trade union movement. Most delegates realised however, that a Labour win was going to be something that would have to be worked for — not handed on a plate — and that if success was achieved then that success would only be the starting point of the real work to ensure a change of direction of economic and other policies.

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