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Tom Bramble (2008) ***Trade Unionism in Australia: A History from Flood to Ebb Tide***, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne. xv + 293 pp., Paperback, RRP \$49.95

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It is not often in industrial relations today that one encounters books written from a Marxist perspective that seek to examine the past in order to explain the present. It was, therefore, with some pleasure that I contemplated reviewing Tom Bramble's *Trade Unionism in Australia: A History from Flood to Ebb Tide*. My expectations, however, were only partially met.

The book tells the story of the rise and decline in the fortunes of the Australian union movement in the decades between 1945 and 2007. Its central focus is on the years 1968–2007. Bramble argues that this was a critical period for the labour movement, during which it moved through three stages: flood tide, stand-off, and ebb tide. Bramble suggests that, following a decade's low employment, the years 1968–1974 witnessed a 'flood tide' of activism, during which workers pushed for improvements to their conditions of work and wages, as well as for political reform. There was an upsurge in strikes that helped to swing social attitudes to the left, challenging not only the establishment but also conservative trade union leadership. Accompanying increased strike levels was a growth in union membership 'from 2.1 million in 1966 to 2.8 million 10 years later, [which] reversed a 20-year decline in union coverage' (p. 204).

Bramble argues that the years 1974–1983 were 'a standoff' and marked a turning point for the union movement and the end of the flood tide. This section chronicles the 1970s economic crisis, the dismissal of the Whitlam government, the election of the Fraser-led Liberal-National coalition, and more aggressive employer behaviour. All impacted on union leaders and working class militancy. Bramble maintains that, although there were many bitterly contested disputes during this period, rather than focusing on their own class interests, unionists began to absorb the view that the health of the national economy was a consideration that was not to be ignored.

The introduction of the Prices and Incomes Accord marks the beginning of the 'ebb tide' (1983–2007). Bramble argues that employers went on the offensive. The period culminated in the election of the Howard government and the introduction of Workchoices. Paralleling these developments was 'a 25-year decline in union coverage and strikes'. During this period, unions adopted strategies such as amalgamation and unions@work. These, however, were essentially ineffective in reversing the ebb tide because they were not underpinned by the militancy that had characterised the flood tide. Bramble argues that, although the *Your Rights at Work* campaign saw record numbers of workers take to the streets and was crucial in the defeat of the Liberal-National coalition government, the campaign became 'increasingly dominated by electoral considerations' and 'allowed Labor to coast to power with the most right-wing industrial relations policy in its history and did nothing to prevent employers from using the legislation for more than 18 months' (p. 244).

The book provides an interesting overview of this important period in Australia's recent past, and provides a wealth of information on better and lesser

known events. Among its many strengths is its capacity to provoke heated debate, both in university classes where I set sections as required reading, and among colleagues who take issue with elements of Bramble's argument. The recent passage of the *Fair Work Act 2009* and the proposed harmonisation of Occupational Health and Safety laws make it timely to reflect on the relationship between the trade union movement and the Australian Labor Party, to whose wishes, Bramble contends, the union movement has paid too much deference.

There is cogency in much of Bramble's argument that strikes may produce benefits for unions and their members beyond improved wages and working conditions. The importance I attach to this analysis possibly explains why I found this the most frustrating aspect of the book. If strikes are a potential solution to declining union density—the union movement's most serious and enduring problem—a more thorough argument needs to be made about what it is about strikes that gives them such power. What is it that workers learn from strikes or militant struggle that is then translated into activism and union membership? A cursory survey of my colleagues came up with a range of hypotheses. Many of the activities that might contribute to a growth in membership include greater communication, enhanced activity, and a sense of working towards a goal or purpose. These, however, may equally underpin more conservative movements (eg. industrial groups). It is also possible that union militancy alienates the wider community at the same time that it appeals to those engaged in the immediate struggle. Bramble needs to flesh out his argument if it is to be convincing.

It is the absence of a rigorous analysis of potential explanations that detracts from Bramble's work. Assertion is no substitute for explanation. This lack limits the book's usefulness as a tool to prosecute arguments about the potential benefits of militancy, which I assume was one of the underlying purposes of the book. Failure to confront these issues head on unfortunately encourages critics to unfairly pigeon-hole Bramble's hypothesis as wistful romanticism.

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