

Harry Black

No Religion, Politics or Sex

How often have you heard the advice that you must not talk about religion, politics or sex?

This advice may have some value if you are taking afternoon tea with the local Methodist Minister and his wife. However, it had no value if you were having smoko with a gang of wharfies. No subject was banned or frowned upon on deck, down below, making up cargo for discharge or out in the wharf shed.

Politics was always the flavour of the month and left wing politics occupied a dominant part in most discussions. However, vulgar and negative features did arise from time to time when a broke and disgruntled wharfie related how his visit to Randwick on Saturday proved to be a financial disaster and his opinion of jockeys, bookmakers and horses could not be published or repeated. During the football season strong feelings were often aimed at referees and opposing teams. Many arguments were marked by fierce debate, anger and frustration.

The Menzies Government came in for some special mention, followed by Arbitration Court Judges, Shipping and Stevedoring Companies, an assortment of bosses, the police and the unanimous condemnation of the mass media.

This ensured a robust and interesting environment. Lunchtime and smoko job meetings added another dimension to the job and allowed rank and file members to hear and speak on reports embracing important national and international issues. You must understand that this did not sit well with the powers that rule. Wharfies and their union were often sent to the sin bin to be fined or suspended.

Strong united action was often the order of the day. Job and strike action were features of the Sydney waterfront in the decade of the '50's. The attempt to ban Communist Union Officials, Menzies Referendum, soundly defeated by the people, war in three years, and the 'rabbit out of the hat' in the form of the Petrov conspiracy saw militant trade unions under heavy pressure.

In 1954 an attempt had been made to smash the Waterside Workers Federation with the full support of the Menzies Government. Every port in Australia was closed down. The Union, under the leadership of Jim Healy set up Strike Committees in all ports. Sydney was a hive of activity with eight special committees on action. At the centre was the Publicity Committee, contacting factories for meetings and support. The members went to the highways and byways conducting meetings and receiving wide support. Outstanding work was performed by the Women's Committee; their meetings in factories, workplaces and on deputations obtained some of the best results in the campaign.

As a job delegate I was engaged in addressing meetings wherever workers assembled. One meeting I shall always remember. I was sent out to a Botany wool wash to contact the delegate and arrange for a meeting on the following day. I located the factory and the delegate who proved to be a friendly bloke and I was settling all the details for the meeting when we were interrupted by a gentleman in a suit and carrying a brief case who turned out to be the General Manager.

He informed me in loud firm tones that he did not want me upsetting his workers with political statements and industrial issues which were no concern of theirs.

In my defence I stated the first thing that came into my mind. I assured the Manager I would not be talking about politics, but on the establishment of a National Shipping Line, adding with emphasis that this should be near and dear to his heart and would be good for his company and Australia generally. Much to my surprise he accepted this and stated as long as you are not going to speak about politics. (I didn't know what he thought a National Shipping Line was about.)

Next morning I arrived just before smoko. My mate Mick handed out our leaflet stating the facts of the strike. It was a leaflet prepared by the Strike Committee with a strong political content. The setting for the meeting was perfect. Workers perched on bales of wool, some four and five high, and other sitting on the bales at various heights and angles.

The delegate from the Wool and Basil Workers Federation introduced me and the meeting was underway. I immediately hoed into Prime Minister Menzies telling the workers of his hatred of militant unions and how he became known as Pig Iron Bob. My next target was the Arbitration Court and its judges, and my audience appeared to respond well to what I was saying. I spent some time on our wage demands and a few other issues. I concluded by placing before them a resolution of support for the Waterside Workers Federation. The resolution was carried unanimously.

I felt great satisfaction with the meeting and its outcome. The Delegate walked with us towards the gate. Like many speakers before me I sought the opinion of the Delegate who appeared most enthusiastic about the meeting. He stated with some emphasis that it was a good meeting. No one could object. It had no politics. I was stunned and my mate Mick did not improve matters by laughing all the way back to the Union Rooms.