

WEE ON THE DRY SIDE 239

THE DARWIN WATER FRONT

John Hyde

Unions often claim to be misrepresented. They say they are not as prone to bloody-minded misuse of power as the 'new right' say they are. The following story, was told to the HR Nichols Society by Mr Roger Rooney of Rooney Shipping and Trading. It is about self-destructive thuggery that did not happen in Papa Doc's Haiti but in Darwin. If it had been Haiti I think I might have found it funny but here somehow the joke is too much on me.

Bruce Perkins founded Perkins Shipping in 1959 with a landing barge taking oil-drilling equipment to Timor. He then served the isolated mining and aboriginal communities. Perkins was not one of your silvertails and Rooney was his ship's cook. Everyone bogged in and cargo was loaded and unloaded at Francis Bay (not the Darwin wharf) by company employees who belonged to no union.

Freeport Sulpher, who have a mine at Amamapari in West Irian, established their main purchasing office in Darwin. The company was spending about \$9 million a year through it---in a community as small as Darwin \$9 million is significant. In 1973 Perkins Shipping contracted with Freeport to deliver 21 containers to Amamapari. The Australian National Line delivered these to the Darwin wharf where the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) members placed a black ban on their removal to Francis Bay for loading. Freeport did the obvious thing; it took its purchasing office to Singapore, where it is to this day. The WWF and Perkins lost the work and Darwin lost a major source of income.

Perkins' employees joined the Transport Workers Union (TWU) but Mr Perkins was summonsed before the Stevedoring Industry Authority and told to employ WWF labour. All of his employees wrote to Mr Clyde Cameron, the Federal Minister, asking to stay with the TWU but, who told them to negotiate with the WWF. Perkins Shipping reacted by sending their only large barge to Timor where it could not be commandeered. Then the coastal Aboriginal communities, which relied on it for stores, complained to the government. Such was the influence of these communities at the time that within 7 days Perkins was exempted from the requirement to employ WWF labour.

Having lost Freeport, Perkins started a sevice to Dili in Timor towing a big dumb barge behind the landing craft. The

Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) banned dumb barge services to Groote Eyland, Gove and Timor. They lost the jobs.

Perkins survived for a time by purchasing his own cargos trading in cattle, timber and steel between Darwin, Brunei and Singapore. He eventually won a contract to ship yellowcake to Singapore. This needed a bigger vessel. It would have cost twice as much to build it in Australia as in Singapore but the ACTU banned overseas manufacture. This time the maritime unions were his allies. They realised that Perkins could not service twice the capital and talked the ACTU out of the ban.

Then the Labor Party, in Opposition, became anti-nuclear and the SUA banned yellowcake shipment altogether. The TWU and another company, Marine Contractors, broke the ban and it was called off. The WWF does not give in gracefully; they loaded 27 containers in six days. Darwin wharf still averages only six per hour compared with 25 in Singapore.

By 1984 ships would not come to the multi-million dollar Darwin wharf but Perkins' yard, a cheap affair designed for landing craft, had more cargo than it could handle. Cargo destined for Darwin was being shipped to the old Mission jetty at Gove (it had only a 30 foot frontage), and transhiped 500 miles to Darwin by landing barge; just to avoid the Darwin wharf. Rather than lift their game the WWF persuaded the SUA to ban these transhipments. They stopped!

Northern territory farmers won a market for their surplus maize in Papua New Guinea but it stayed in silos for four months because no ships would come to the Darwin waterfront for a reasonable price. Perkins offered to take it to Gove in containers and tranship it for a price the farmers were willing to pay but the unions said no!

To shift this cargo, Mr Rooney left Perkins, starting a service back-loading timber and fertiliser with a large dumb barge, a waterfront yard, fork lifts and three employees (TWU members). The maritime unions, which hate dumb barges, and the WWF, who seemed to hate Francis Bay, persuaded those paragons of paraded virtue, the ACTU, to ban the whole operation. In Darwin the Harbour Master, whose responsibility it is to prosecute the masters of unpiloted vessels, is also the pilot. He refused to pilot Mr Rooney's vessel. Mr Rooney moored with the help of Baramundi boats, while SUA members tried to cut his tow line and threw things at his employees and family until the police took them away in paddy waggons.

On the next load Mr Rooney, three employees and a contract welder unloaded 2500 tonnes and loaded 2400 tonnes in four days, through a picket line. Their only equipment was a \$100,000 fork lift and a \$150,000 barge landing. The comparison is millions of dollars of equipment and about two weeks at the Darwin wharf.

The WWF fined members for not picketing and paid outsiders to picket but still the picket collapsed. The SUA eventually defeated Mr Rooney's dumb barge operation by having the ACTU ban on Perkins' yard lifted and allowing Perkins to charter a foreign-manned vessel. In Mr Rooney's words: "Free enterprise put me out of business so I can't complain."

The tale has a slightly happier ending. The WWF have lifted their productivity by about 40%. Even so, a farmer gets \$1.50 for bale of hay in the paddock, a trucker charges a further dollar to load and cart it 200 kilometres, and the WWF and their employers, the stevedoring companies, charge a further \$4 to \$8 to shift the hay the last 25 metres onto the ship. There is apparently room for further improvement.

In Darwin there are now three small companies shipping around the coast and overseas. They have their own industry union. It is cheaper and quicker to ship some cargoes through these companies and truck it South than it is to ship directly to Southern capitals. There is more general cargo shipped through Darwin without the WWF than with them. There are many ports which could open to small shipping companies and dumb barges towed by tugs if only the transport companies could use employees from their own industry unions and not the WWF as happens at Francis Bay.

Militant bloody-minded trade union activity is by no means the only reason for our declining living standards and balance of payments difficulties but there can be no doubt both would be improved without it. This has been a tale of mindless obstruction but it has also been a tale of brave men and of some sensible union activity.

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