

Special Edition – 29 April 2021

Special Edition – Mick Carr – Veteran Unionist Honoured



Friends, colleagues and comrades came together at the Morningside Panthers' Football Club in Hawthorne, on 27 February to pay tribute to the life's work of former Maritime Union National President and long time Branch Secretary, Mick Carr.

Despite border closures and pandemic restrictions, 80 members, past and present joined political and labour leaders on the day to raise a glass as National Secretary, Paddy Crumlin presented Mick his Life Membership.

Laurie Horgan, long time comrade and tugs delegate was MC, with Thomas Mayor and Michael O'Shane providing the Acknowledgement of Country.



"You've always been there for all our people," said Thomas. "Your service to the union, the working class and First Nation people is second to none."

National Secretary, Paddy Crumlin was a comrade and contemporary of Mick over half a century. He recalled the political fervour of their youth and their lifelong fight for justice and human decency – not just for maritime workers, but other working men and women in Australian and internationally.

"We all came from the same generation of young communists and socialist activists, right in the middle of the worst threat human society has ever seen, the Cold War and the arms race," he said.



"Mick, you've been president, you've been a leader of the greatest union in this country and the world," he said. "That's an honour and it happened because people believed in you."

Acting Queensland Branch Secretary Jason Miners paid tribute to his mentor for dedicating his entire life to the movement.

“You set a course and took the members with you,” said Jason. “You never went off that course, comrade. We can never thank you enough. This is a celebration of a man so selfless in everything he did, so articulate, so principled. Our members sitting around here today have some of the best conditions in the country and that’s because of you, mate. You led the charge.”



In response Mick stressed that you can never achieve anything alone in the world and it was by building bridges with others that the union won so many battles when so many times it went down to the line.

“We’re a small union, but by building united fronts we will win,” he said, stressing Australian seafarers would never have a shipping industry again without a Labor government.



Special guests included Terri Butler, ALP Federal Member for Griffith, Yasmin Catley, NSW Deputy Leader, ALP and her husband Robert Coombs, former Sydney Branch Secretary and MP.

Peter Allen, State Secretary Rail Train and Bus Union joined Gary Bullock, State Secretary, United Voice.



MUA Branch Secretaries Paul Keating (Sydney), Glen Williams (Newcastle), Mick Cross (Port Kembla) and Jason Campbell (Tasmania) flew in alongside Dean Summers, outgoing ITF Australia Coordinator and Jim Donovan, MUA veterans.

Those unable to attend, sent their congratulations via video put together by Jamie McMechan, Sydney wharfie and MUA film unit.

Click here for the link to the video tribute:

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=ZK908d3ANyU&feature=share>

Mick’s Story

Mick Carr was in the rec room of the *SS Lake Illawarra* waiting to go on watch on the night of 5 January 1975, when the ship collided with the Tasman Bridge.

“She shuddered and started taking water within minutes,” said Mick. “Water was coming up the alleyways.”

It was the 21-year-old boiler attendant’s first ship and his first voyage.

The ANL 10,835 gross tonne bulk carrier hit the bridge pylons spanning the Derwent River in Hobart just minutes from its destination in Risdon.

It was around 9.25 at night, Mick recalls. He ran to the bulkhead door adjacent to the cabins and called down for everyone to get out.

The third engineer stayed in the engine room trying to deballast. He never survived.

The shipwright up on the fo'c'sle head was trying to drop the anchors when 127 metres of bridge decking came down.

Seafarers ran to the stern of the ship and jumped as the ship sunk. Some were trying to get the lifeboats away.

The *Lake Illawarra* was carrying a cargo of zinc concentrates and was down by the head and listing with the stern well out of the water.



"It was a lengthy jump going under the water and felt like an eternity before surfacing again," he said.

The ship was all but gone against a dark and rainy night. The water temperature was between 15-16 degrees Celsius, according to contemporary Bureau estimates for January.

"Having only a pair of shorts and singlet on, it felt a lot colder," said Mick. "It was hard to swim restricted with a life jacket, but four of us made it to a pylon and climbed up a barnacled ladder until a tug finally came to get us."

Five people unlucky enough to be driving across the bridge at the time lost their lives and seven seafarers went down with the ship.

Mick was one of 35 crew who survived. He says he owes his life to the Union. At the deck boy's school only weeks earlier, veteran seafarer George Martindale taught the young seafarers how to survive in the case of emergency such as the tragedy that unfolded in a few short minutes that night, 46 years ago.

The Union school in those days was in Newcastle at the TAFE college. Trainees stayed at the old Cross Keys Hotel where most of the real training took place.

George had sailed around Cape Horn on windjammers and knew how to deal with a schooner or two while reliving his adventures.

"We were an enthusiastic group, but with a training wage of \$7 a week not too much damage was done," said Mick.

One of the lessons George taught was how to get a life jacket on while protecting your neck from damage. The largest loss of life during WWII sinkings was seafarers breaking their necks when they jumped.

Mick went on from boiler attendant on the *Lake Illawarra* to President of the Maritime Union of Australia in a career spanning 40 years. He remained dedicated to safety at sea all his life, always encouraging younger members to go down to the Union School to learn the ropes.

On 27th of February 2021, the Union awarded Mick Life Membership at a function in his honour at the Morningside Panthers Football Club in Hawthorne, Brisbane.

"Mick made a tremendous contribution to the Union over the years," said Maritime Union National Secretary Paddy Crumlin. "He led the union delegation to Moscow for the World Youth Conference and helped raise \$100,000 for the Cuban children's hospital in Havana."

As a union activist, Mick cut his teeth in 1977 fighting to win Australian seafarers jobs on Utah Development Company bulk carriers. The dispute was fought out over four years.

'At the time it was the longest in history and made the Guinness Book of Records,' Mick said.

The Columbus Line picket that followed went even longer.



By his side was Dave Howard, retired seafarer and one of Mick's oldest comrades. They sailed together on oil rig tenders, tugs and bulk carriers between Weipa and Gladstone. They also did a fair bit of fishing.

During the Bjelke-Petersen era of state gerrymanders and police corruption, the 1998 Patricks dispute and the Emerald picket line in support of miners, they occasionally shared a prison cell.

"It was only ever a night or two," Dave recalls. "Someone always got us out. If we weren't let out, ships would sit alongside until we were."

Mick's dad, Leo was both a wharfie and seafarer, his grandfather a wharfie and boxer and his uncle a wharfie. For a time, Mick's son Shawn was also a seafarer.

Mick's mentor was the legendary Seamen's Union Queensland state official, Jim Steele. Mick was on the pickup one day in Brisbane in 1988 when Jim tapped him on the shoulder. The rest is history. Mick went on to win eight elections, many hotly contested, and became Joint Branch Secretary of the Maritime Union when Jim retired in 1994. Mick went on to be branch secretary and, in 2007, became MUA National President, before standing down in 2015.

Grandfather of towage

One of his first tasks as an official was the State's tugboats, a fleet of 30 plus vessels, spread over 10 or 11 ports.

"Mick was known as the Grandfather of Towage for his achievements in that industry," said MUA Queensland Branch Assistant Secretary Paul Gallagher.

"Industry restructuring in the nineties saw widespread job losses," said Mick. "We got attacked by towage companies, wanting to reduce the union crew. I said we had to be compensated, and together with delegates we achieved just that. Towage was all unionised when I was there, notwithstanding the engineer's union catch-up claim at the very time Dalrymple Bay marine services was up for contract renewal."

The engineers' catch up was for what the Maritime Union alone had achieved for seafarers with three different Federal Industrial Relations commissioners in three different locations.

"We then hammered Howard Smith and achieved good

conditions including extra super," Mick said. "But we had some major blues and tough negotiations as companies merged. Without the great delegate structure, we would not have been as successful."

Laurie Horgan, now retired, was the towage delegate.

"We bargained hard and were able to negotiate good increases in salary and conditions through the leadership of Mick Carr," he said. "We maintained four men because we argued it's work in open seas with up to eight metre swell if there are cyclones around."

"Tugs used to all have eight men," he said. "You don't like to see a man go, we fought vigorously to keep them."

At Dalrymple Bay Coal Terminal, Mick led negotiations to get line-boat crews the same deal as tug crew. It added up to a \$15,000 annual wage rise.

Laurie describes Mick as a strong person with a strong commitment to his Union.

"My view on Mick is that he is a very deep thinker," he said. "When he was doing an enterprise agreement or whenever there was a problem, he really dug down pretty deep."

Industry Unionism

In the lead up to amalgamation in 1993, the Seamen's Union and the Waterside Workers Federation began working side by side. Mick had the opportunity to travel around the state inspecting Port Authority operations with WWF General Secretary Tas Bull who was preparing submissions and evidence for the case.

The Commission favoured the maritime unions.



“The decision itself was around 300 pages, enough to choke a donkey,” said Mick. “It was very satisfying to go down to Fisherman Island and sign-up workers who previously were covered by land-based unions with no ports affiliation.”

Col Davies was WWF Branch Secretary at the time.

“Mick was a pretty insightful character,” said Col. “We worked together on the amalgamation. Mick could see what was on the horizon. That gave us time to work out a strategy.”

War on the Wharves

“After the Howard Government was elected in 1997, the signs were not that hard to read, it was becoming obvious in the body language,” said Mick. “We saw it coming, but when it did come it was like a sledgehammer.”

The prelude to the nationwide lockout was Cairns. Mick got the picket going.

Local union delegate Terry O'Shane had taken unpaid leave off the tugs to chair the Regional Council of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission.

Mick and Terry go back nearly 50 years to when they met during the Comalco Dispute in Weipa.

“One of Mick's grandmothers was of North American Red Indian descent, so he's got his First Nation too,” said Terry. “Mick was always very supportive of our mob.”

When Terry heard International Purveyors, a stevedoring company at the port, was attempting to bypass the union, he soon got the support of his fellow commissioners.

“I took the whole ATSIC Regional Council to the wharves – men and women – 12 in all,” he said. “We spent three days on the picket.”

Then came the 1998 nationwide lockout.

It was capital that was on strike, not the workers,” Mick said, setting the record straight. “They locked the wharfies out.”

Back in Brisbane, Col and Mick ran the resistance at Fisherman Island Container Terminal with National Officer Jim Tannock.

“Mick was on the Trades Hall executive and arranged for the executive meetings to be held at the Camp Solidarity picket at Fisherman Island,” Col recalls.



“Mick led from the front, protesting along the railway lines where they bought the scabs in,” said long-time friend and retired Cairns delegate Bernie Gallen. “He was threatened and injured along the way.”

“We all aged about 20 years,” said Mick. “But we did what we had to do, and we got our members back to work.”

Fitzroy River win

The Patricks dispute was huge, but it is the 2008 *Fitzroy River* sit-in that Trevor Munday, Mick's deputy of 16 years, highlights as Mick's biggest achievement.

“The strategy Mick developed during the *Fitzroy River* dispute stands out,” said Trevor. “It was going to dry dock. Mick and I went up and had a word with the crew. They refused to sail. We finished up in the Federal Court and we won.”

The *Fitzroy* would be replaced with an Australian-manned vessel. The Union then negotiated an agreement with Rio Tinto to keep four MUA-crewed vessels on the Gladstone-Weipa run.

“Everywhere else when shipping companies tried to remove Australian tonnage off the coast, they were successful,” said Trevor.

Internationalism

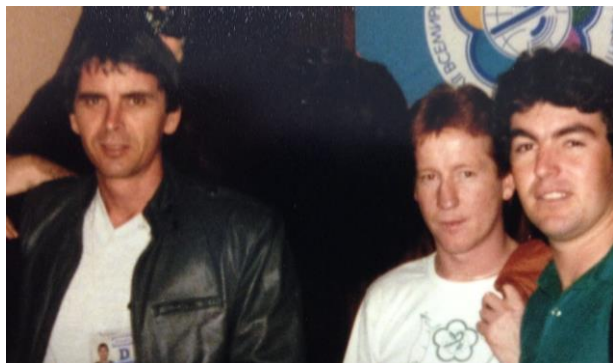
Over four decades, Mick dedicated his life to the Union and workers' rights.

Bernie Gallen, Cairns delegate, remembers Mick as a well-respected advocate for workers worldwide.

“He encouraged us small port guys to be ITF inspectors, and we had quite a few wins for foreign seafarers in far North Queensland,” Bernie said.

"Mick has been a true comrade," said retired seafarer Dave Howard. "He was a true socialist – never wavered."

Over the years Mick went on union delegations to Viet Nam, Moscow and Prague, made three trips to Cuba, including for the 50th anniversary of the Revolution, as well as the USA, Mexico and Canada.



United we stand, divided we fall

After 26 years in office, Mick called it a day in mid 2015, but he kept paying union dues for another five years.

"I never sought to be a union official, I was just happy to have a union book," said Mick.

Since retiring, Mick has battled cancer with the same tenacity he fought the bosses over the years.

As for the future, Mick says the Union badly needs to get back to a United Front.

"We have all been lucky enough to have stood on the shoulders of the giants of the past, and surely respecting the Union's oath of Fealty is not that tough," he said.

"We've got to get rid of the Libs, if we want any chance of keeping Australian crewed ships and workers' rights," he said. "Advancing technology is a big challenge (if we want to get any of the tech jobs of the future)."

Looking back

On the 46th anniversary of the sinking of the *Lake Illawarra* this January, Mick reflected on how both he and his father had survived maritime disasters exactly two decades apart.

"My old dad was a survivor along with the rest of the crew of *Ulooloo* in 1955," Mick said. "The vessel was caught in a cyclone and foundering off the Queensland coast. It had lost all power and was headed for the rocks. My old dad was a coal shovelling fireman and the last fireman out of the stokehold. Water was up to their waists, the fires lost and there was little hope."

Ship's bosun Frank Finch said it was pure luck that the big Dutch tug *Starzee* was steaming down the east coast and came upon them. It put a line up and towed the vessel to safety.

"The traditions of the sea are magnificent," Union counsel told the Court of Marine Enquiry into the sinking of the *Lake Illawarra* in 1975.

"The skill of seamen controlling huge ships the size of factories or even city blocks at speed without brakes is awe inspiring," he said paying tribute to the breathtaking courage of seafarers who were staring death in the face while executing the master's orders.

A memorial to the Lake Illawarra tragedy still stands at the site.

"If I'm still around in 2025, I might go down to Hobart for the 50th anniversary," said Mick, "I've never been back to take a look."



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