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Fighting Through Their Filmwork - the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit

Lisa Milner

This is an edited version of Lisa's recent address to the Sydney Branch on the history and impact of the Wharfies' Film Unit. Lisa's history of the Film Unit, Fighting Films, was published by Pluto Press in 2003

This essay examines the origins and development of a radical Australian film unit of the Cold War, the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit (WWFFU). With the active support of the Communist-led Waterside Workers' Federation, it arose in the 1950s in response to the repressive policies of a conservative government.

In history books, newspapers, films and newsreels, Australians are invited to recall the 1950s as a progressive time, with an overall sense of stability and security. In that decade, our small population of eight million bloomed to ten with the huge migrant intake from Europe, with accompanying developments in our society and economy. It was a period of sustained, predictable growth. The fifties are also remembered by many Australians, however, as an oppressive, conservative period, with a Cold War consciousness characterising its mood: as a culture dominated by political conservatism and stifling, suburban values. And for some people, life was not all consumer paradise and suburban bliss. Many Australians experienced severe food and housing shortages, whilst tuberculosis, polio and diphtheria outbreaks continued to affect the populace. Culturally and politically it was a transitional time that failed to resolve many problematic legacies of the past, and sowed the seeds for the better-known protests of the coming decades. The industrial scene was full of unrest, and unions were more active in the fifties than ever before or since, with campaigns on many fronts. And it was also a time when nuclear testing in and around our island nation began: historian Manning Clark wrote that '1954 was the year of shame, the year which drained off the last dregs of optimism about the future of Australia generated during the Second World War'.[1]

One group that emerged from this environment was the wharfies' Film Unit. The emergence of the Unit is embedded in two areas of activity in Sydney: industrial (the activity of militant unionists) and cultural (the work of inventive activists and filmmakers).

Social Levers of the Cold War - Industrial Context

The 1950s witnessed a high level of employment. Along with peak levels of unionisation, this placed workers in an advantageous position to achieve many of the gains they had been refused throughout the war years. After the lifting of wartime prohibitions on industrial action, the number of disputes was high. One feature of industrial relations was the introduction and strengthening of parliamentary bills and amendments affecting organised labour. Another was its diversifying constituency: the proportionate increase of migrants and women in the workforce, together with the rise in white-collar employment and the effects of mechanisation and automation, transformed and reorganised union perspectives and tactics through the fifties. All these issues made for a highly charged atmosphere within the labour movement.

In the period leading to the Film Unit's establishment, the successes of the labour sector had proved its strength, and the relatively expansive industrial climate allowed for a space within which non-essential activities could be supported. The union community was marked by prolific publishing activity, with newspapers, journals and magazines circulating widely. Unionism of workers and industrial concentration were particularly high now, especially in blue-collar industries. As a consequence, there were the physical numbers-and therefore union dues-to support such extra-curricular concerns. These activities were not purely industrial, but

more widely political, thus stepping outside the boundary of traditional union functions and transforming unionists into 'social levers in their own right', as Ian Turner has described them.[2]

Wharfies, the 'men on the margins'[3], were such 'social levers'. They have always been crucial to the life and development of island nations, and Australia has been no exception. During the Cold War, wharfies were perceived as marginal and threatening to a socially cohesive Australia. They could hold the country to ransom by striking and tying up the ports. They were often the target of attacks from the government and the mainstream press: in 1951, the *Sydney Morning Herald* asserted that 'Moscow has long concentrated on the wharves of the world as the most convenient and effective points from which to strike at the economic lifelines of democracy'.[4]

At the height of the work of its Film Unit in 1957, the WWF boasted its largest ever national membership of 27,000. 'Big Jim' Healy made no secret of his Communist affiliation. Under his leadership the Federation vigorously followed the CPA's position on many issues. The NSW branches of the WWF were led by a 'unity' ticket of ALP and CPA members, and enjoyed a balance of militant strength and a wider mainstream appeal. The Sydney Branch was particularly militant, with a strong leadership in men like Tom Nelson, Jim 'Dutchy' Young, Ted Roach and Stan Moran. The struggles to improve working conditions were important parts of the union's history, and were vital to the constitution of its militant outlook. It is this industrial context of the state of the Sydney labour movement, particularly on the waterfront, that partly sets the scene for the establishment of the Film Unit in 1953.

An Upward Surge - Cultural Context

As well as this industrial arena, an important area of context for the Film Unit's work is cultural. Unit member Norma Disher recalls that 'we were part of the whole upward surge in creative work that was going on in the progressive movement of the time'[5]. Here she identifies her group as part of a social formation, one that can be termed left cultural activists. These people had strongly-held opinions on the nature of social justice, and faith in the utility of collective action. They mobilised their own creative resources to establish and sustain their groups. They relied on informal networks of communication and association, and often aimed to provide not just artistic but political training. Throughout the post-war period, these networks figured in various creative involvements, including the Realist Writers, the School of Realist Art, the Contemporary Art Society and the New Theatre.

A number of other Sydney-based groups used the technologies and forms of existing screen culture for an oppositional purpose. Like many other left cultural groups, their activities, directly or indirectly, inspired and supported the work of the Unit. Groups operating in Sydney in the 1950s included Quality Films, New Dawn Films, and the Realist Film Association. Lenin believed that for socialists, the cinema was the 'most important' of the arts[6]. The WWFFU was one group to take up this challenge: one of its aims was to 'consolidate the understanding of the use of film as a powerful propaganda weapon in their struggles for justice and social progress'.[7]

The rise in popularity of the sixteen millimetre film format also inspired the Unit's establishment. Although the format had been used for educational purposes since the mid-1920s, in the context of the changed social and cultural climate of post-war Australia it provided a widespread means of access to film screenings outside commercial circuits. Sixteen millimetre films on many topics screened in schools, municipal buildings, libraries, universities, and workplaces, thus reaching a variety of audiences and creating a non-commercial distribution and exhibition system. People far and wide formed a growing number of film societies, union cinema groups and workers' study groups. They imported, screened and discussed local and overseas films, and in some cases ran small but dedicated production facilities. Not only were cineastes and filmmakers involved, but educationalists, poets, political activists, dramatists, unionists, and artists.

These industrial and cultural spheres intersected in many places, not least of them the WWF Sydney Branch building, which became 'a vital centre of working class activity' through the early 1950s[8]. Membership was high, and, through a compulsory members' levy and a bank loan, funds were available to upgrade amenities with new cultural facilities. The building's hall was filled at lunchtime and after work with concerts, recitals, dance performances and

lectures, thus affording entertainment and education for many wharfies. Sixteen cultural groups were active, including a wharfies' choir, art classes and children's groups. Sports carnivals were held, and workers formed athletics, cricket, football and other teams. One wharfie commented that 'in the 1950s the Sydney waterfront was a worker's cultural heaven'[9].

The success of this extraordinary range of achievements was helped by the fact that the hall was next to the docks and the 'Hungry Mile'[10]. Many unionists and their families lived nearby, so it was not far to travel to an after-hours event. The gang system had another advantage here: the relatively flexible shift system made it a little easier for workers to devote time to pursuits outside work. The busy curriculum was encouraged by the actors, musicians and artists who, returning from World War II, could not find employment in their preferred occupation, and went onto the wharves, where casual employment was the norm. Gang 364, filled with these activists, was dubbed 'the Brains Trust'.

'We Film The Facts' - The Film Unit The establishment of the Unit was possible through the industrial strength and the large membership of the Federation, and the general vision of the leaders to accept that film could be a useful tool of propaganda. The WWFFU was, at least in the 1950s, the only film production unit in the world that was funded by a trade union. There were three members of the film unit: Jock Levy, Keith Gow, and Norma Disher. All three were members of the New Theatre, and up to 1956, were members of the CPA. Levy and Gow, both 'Brains Trust' members, worked on the wharves as well as in film and theatre, whilst Disher worked at another labour organisation before being employed by the WWF. In 1953 they produced their first film, *Pensions for Veterans*, to support the Federation's current campaign, which was to achieve pensions for older members, many of whom had worked on the wharves for all their lives in terrible conditions. They produced fourteen films on subjects that other production units would never tackle, like housing shortages, industrial disputes from the union members' viewpoint, and issues concerning workers' rights and health and safety.

The Unit's second production, *The Hungry Miles*, premiered in February 1955. It is their best-known work, and presents a history of the Sydney waterfront, with an emphasis on unity and the unionists' struggles for improved working conditions. The film's program explains:

> In establishing a Film Unit for the production and presentation of Documentary Films to the public and to its members, the WWF recognises the need to use the most important medium of our time. Commercial cinema at its worst reflects an appalling absence of cultural background of international understanding and a dangerous escapism from the social problems which only an alert public opinion can lead to a satisfactory stage of solution. In presenting *The Hungry Miles* the WWF brings to the people an important social document filmed from the viewpoint of those most vitally concerned-the Waterside Workers themselves. In continuing to make documentaries of this character, the WWF hopes to show to as wide an audience as possible, the problems of the Australian working people and to contribute to realising their hopes and aspiration.[11]

Their statement shows the Unit's intention to work with different aims compared with commercial production operations: they saw the need to challenge the dominant use of cinema as entertainment.

They were also commissioned to make films for other left-wing unions that perceived the value of film as a political and educational tool. *Hewers of Coal*, for example, was made in 1958 for the Miners' Federation; in the same year, *Think Twice*, on safety in the workplace, was produced for the Boilermakers' Union. The unit also made an episode of their own newsreel, for screening to unionists nation-wide. The production of this was a direct outcome of the perceived need to 'challenge the monopoly control of the mass media'.[12] As well as film production duties, the WWFFU provided still photography for the union's compensation claims and for various labour publications.

The Unit worked from a room at the top of the union's building. They produced animated sequences and cartoon films on a handmade animation bench housed in the basement. For the first film, they borrowed a camera from Bob Matthews, a former member of the Melbourne Realist Film Association. Then, in early November 1954, the Unit members were able to acquire their own Bolex sixteen millimetre camera and tripod through the WWF, noting that 'this equipment … could act as powerful propaganda in showing to the general public the correctness of our past fights and the justice of present claims'.

The WWFFU produced their work on colour film as well as black and white. They travelled widely throughout Sydney to shoot their footage. They also recorded sequences in Melbourne, Newcastle, Port Kembla and Wollongong, on wharves and coal mining areas, and at Canberra's Parliament House. Soundtracks most often consist of a voice-over narration laid over pre-recorded orchestral music. Sound effects as well as newly recorded music (some by wharfie-musicians like Arnold Butcher and Dick Hackett) were also used in some works. Voices from the Waterside Workers' Choir and Cedric McLaughlin's Link Singers feature on other soundtracks. Known as the 'voice of Australia', actor Leonard Teale recorded the narrations for eight of the Unit's films.

In the practices of the WWFFU a heightened sense of collaboration is evident in three areas: (i) the collective nature of their work; (ii) their inclusion of other workers in this process; and (iii) their conscious intention to investigate the community of their films' subjects. The Unit members had great respect for each other's contribution to the group process: they maintained that they worked collectively, not taking on strictly defined crew roles. As Levy recalled, 'the members of the Unit didn't want to specify who did what in terms of job descriptions; we were a Unit, we were interdependent'. Secondly, they involved wharfies and other workers, notably builders' labourers and miners, in their production practice as performers, extras or helpers. The filmmakers also seconded actors from the New Theatre.

In a third instance of collectivism, the Unit members extended their energies to investigate the industries they documented. Levy commented on a difference he perceived between the Unit's worker-as-filmmaker circumstances, and other film production personnel who lacked direct experience in the industries they chronicled: 'we were workers on a job. We could see things that should be common knowledge to every member of the WWF ... I think the advantage was ... because we were working down on the waterfront, not some outside group ... but from our experience from underneath'.[13] I believe that the immediacy Levy describes - that of directly encountering working and living conditions in their political and social contexts - made for a particularly close examination of those circumstances.

It was not only a characteristic of films made on the wharves. For *Hewers of Coal* for instance, Gow and Levy immersed themselves in the working and living community of the miners. At the NSW south coast coal mine of Nebo, they worked alongside miners, without disclosing their reasons for being there, to gain experience in the industry. [14]Then, with Disher, they moved to the Hunter Valley mining area for the duration of the filming. Disher fondly recalled their trip:

> it was a wonderful experience to have gone up there and to have spent six weeks with the miners and their families ... we got to know so many people. We heard so many stories about the Depression and the lockouts, and the cave-ins, and the specific trials of the men and their families who worked in the mining industry.

Their practice of integrating themselves as much as possible into the lives of those depicted in their films worked against commercial filmmaking conventions. They helped the workers understand why and how their filmwork was occurring, and gave them every opportunity to share in the process, rather than being alienated.[15] It gave the Unit members the feeling that they were representing their subjects accurately, from the worker's viewpoint. This practice of integration allowed events to be filmed that may never otherwise have been captured. And it was also responsible for bringing a more sympathetic bias to the films.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this group's work is the low-cost, highly innovative and very personal methods the workers used to get their films seen by as many people as possible. A valuable contribution the WWFFU made to the nature of cinema was the employment of an alternative distribution system that was organised at a grassroots level against an extremely high level of resistance. The wharfies' film practice was a much more communal, community view of using film, rather than the prescriptive one of the commercial or government-owned media. Union members were given every chance to see the films. Prints were sent to all branches of the Federation, nation-wide, and were shown to many thousands of members, often at mass stop-work meetings or in lunch-hours. Other trade unions also bought and distributed their films. The Unit bought a Kombi van, which they used as their production vehicle. The van was also used to screen films: they projected films from inside the van onto a screen on the door; in that way they could show films in daylight. By travelling around and taking the films to the people, instead of the other way around, the Unit was able to have direct contact with a surprisingly large audience. The wharfies' films were seen by

non-union audiences as well. They were to be found on the programs of film society and festival screenings throughout the country. They were seen by tens of thousands of people in these diverse ways.

By accessing these alternative distribution methods to the mainstream cinema circuit, the WWFFU made sure that people who could not afford even to see a newsreel could watch their films. It was this approach, such as these very practical and personal methods of distribution, that particularly distinguished them from commercial and government film-making units of the time-apart from the left-wing subject matter. To emphasise this, a banner displayed on the Unit's production van boasted that 'We Film the Facts'.

Final Curtain-The End of the Unit's Work By 1956 the Unit's achievements were becoming increasingly well known, and organisations in a number of industries were keen to sponsor new films. With this planning of filmwork as well as the sponsored productions for other organisations already completed, a change of feeling emerged within the WWF Federal Executive. There had already been indications that

> if the Film Unit is to continue and extend, the financial responsibility must be borne by more than one trade union. This need is emphasised by a proposal from Mr. Ted Roach that the personnel of the Unit be reduced. Mr. Roach is convinced of the value of the work of the Unit but is undoubtedly concerned about the continued financial burden to the Federation.[16]

Roach proposed to terminate the production of film within the WWF, and instead to establish a trade union co-operative film unit inside the ACTU, through the NSW Trades and Labour Council. He noted that

> [the WWF] Council is of the opinion that the work done by the Film Unit has been of tremendous value to our Federation and we congratulate the Unit on the high standard of its work. However, the field of operation within the Federation is limited and consequently the comparative cost is fairly high. Viewing this aspect we believe that much greater scope and much greater value in relation to cost can be obtained by reforming the Unit into a Trade Union Co-operative.[17]

The debate continued, led by terms including 'value', 'costs' and 'self-sufficiency'. Executives from other unions saw the significance of a collective: the plan won general support from at least nine unions.[18] But this was not enough: the TLC failed to organise the co-operative, and the WWF disbanded its Film Unit in the winter of 1958.

The most apparent cause for this was the unions' financial circumstances. BWIU executive Tom McDonald recalled that 'it had become a question of unions always having to weigh up priorities, because they've got cost factors and limited resources. And I think that while everyone agreed [that the Unit deserved to continue], it was a lower priority than a lot of other things'.[19] In 1981 WWF General Secretary Charlie Fitzgibbon wrote that the Unit was discontinued 'because of rising costs which the Federation was unable to meet at the time':

> The Unit never achieved anything remotely resembling self-sufficiency and the only costs retrieved were those involved in supplying copies of films to Branches at a cost met by the Branch concerned, both on the basis of expenditure way below true unit cost. A few copies sold to educational organisations, etc., were costed more or less on the same basis ... the Unit performed valuable service but was only able to do so because the [whole] Federation took over the responsibility of meeting the expenses involved up to the stage where it became too burdensome [for the Sydney Branch].[20]

The opinions of the Unit's work as both 'valuable' and 'burdensome' showed the conflicting priorities of the Federation as to the worth of the Unit. Its initial aim had never been to make a profit, but to augment the Federation's propaganda arsenal. The filmmakers asserted this:

> Our experience in the sixteen millimetre documentary field is that little financial return can be expected. However, because of the tremendous power of the film medium and the increasing possibilities for expanding exhibition, we feel that the propaganda value must be the first consideration. We feel that film production

> should not be regarded as a means of profit making, nor even able to secure financial returns equal to the outlay. It should be regarded as a valuable and persuasive weapon-a worthwhile expenditure equivalent to the Trade Union Press.[21] [original emphasis]

It was not the aim of making something that could be sold to the public that supplied the impetus for production; rather the key motive was the political commitment and creative drive of these producers *to make propaganda*.

After five years of production, the work of the unit had ended in 1958. The Unit was supported by the strength of communities in the labour movement and the cultural sphere, and with few resources, it achieved a great deal in the five years of its operation. That it did not exist for a longer period should not be viewed as a failure. The Unit took advantage of a set of circumstances to operate energetically for those five years. During that time, it transferred and represented the power of the militant labour movement onto film. However, the original intention of the filmmakers-to produce and disseminate their work on a non-profit basis, outside accepted organs of cinema-was challenged by a desire by some union officials for the Unit to become a profit-making business concern. When it met with this ultimatum-in keeping with the dominant culture of conservative authority, capitalist and progressive-and the ACTU did not take up the opportunity for the Unit's administration, its work ended.

There are other reasons why the WWFFU did not continue its operation. The concurrent effects of modernisation and automation resulted in a decreasing number of wharfies from the middle of the 1950s. Correspondingly, the Sydney Branch experienced a downturn in the vitality of its extra-curricular activities. Another change in the Australian labour profile had an impact: young men were less inclined to become wharfies because there were other industries with better working conditions and prospects, notably in the growing white-collar areas. The ACTU's changing political position was another factor.

It was also during this period of heightened suburbanisation that an increasing number of waterside workers and their families began to move out of the inner city. This meant that many wharfies no longer lived so close to the Branch, and it was harder to encourage wharfies and their families to travel longer distances to after-hours events. Workers were finding the collective nature of these events less attractive, especially after the introduction of television in 1956. Members of the WWFFU and others on the left perceived this increasingly popular view of individualism. With an increase in individualism in many sectors of Australian society, the weakening, in Stuart Macintyre's term, of a 'tribal solidarity'[22] amongst manual workers, along with the decade's demonisation of militant trade unions, led to a decline of unity in the Sydney labour movement amongst both leadership and rank and file. Norma Disher commented that

> if there'd been unity amongst all those possible backers it would have been different. But there wasn't. It was all too hard to bring off. Plus the fact that cultural things always have a struggle in the political scene: I mean, action through culture is very difficult to sell.[23]

Levy considered that by 1958, 'we'd almost done what we wanted to do. Because I think that if we were to continue, we would have had to continue in making films on a commercial basis, and there were so many difficulties with that'.[24] For Disher, the Unit's output 'represents five years of my life which I found stimulating and, in retrospect, very worthwhile, and I feel proud of the work that the three of us did in that time'.[25]

One of the most valuable features of the Film Unit was that it was a team of working-class people creating its own cultural commodities. Despite the antagonism towards militant unionists, 'reds' and cultural activists, these people operated against ruling-class politics and organisations. In Australian film, especially in the 1950s, there were few works that underscored class difference, and even fewer that focused on workers' problems-problems still in existence despite the increase in many people's living standards. The WWFFU films challenged many truisms of life in Sydney in the 1950s, and they contradicted the decade's powerful myth of conformity. They showed ways in which Australia was not 'the lucky country': it was not luck, but the capitalist system that created inequality.

Endnote

1. Manning Clark, '1954: The Year of Shame'. *Overland* , no 62, 1975, p.34.

2. Turner, Ian, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, Canberra: ANU, 1965, p.xvii.

3. Brett, Judith, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* , Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1992, p. 88.

4. 'Communist Retreat on Waterfront' , editorial, *Sydney Morning Herald* , 8 March 1951. p.2.

5. Interview with John Hughes and Margot Nash, 27 Oct., 1979.

6. Quoted in Eisenstein, S. 'Soviet Cinema', *Voices of October* , New York, 1930, p.228.

7. 'Wharfie Film Unit Powerful Aid to Union Struggle', *Maritime Worker* , 6 Mar. 1956, p.2.

8. *WWF. Souvenir Program to Mark the Occasion of the Ownership by the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia Sydney Branch of its Union Building,60-66 Sussex Street, Sydney,* Sydney, 13 Dec. 1978, np.

9. Stein, Harry, 'Introduction', *Artists and Rebels on the Waterfront*, Exhibition programme, WWF Sydney Branch, July 1992, p. 2.

10. The stretch of docks from Darling Harbour east to Woolloomooloo was known as the 'Hungry Mile'; every man who wanted work would have to walk the length of the wharves.

11. *The Hungry Miles*, Program, WWFFU, 1955. Communist Party of Australia, *Statement on the Media*, Mitchell Library, MLMSS5021/58.

12. Interview with John Hughes and Margot Nash, 27 Oct. 1979.

13. Interview with John Hughes and Margot Nash, 27 Oct. 1979.

14. This was different not only to other film units, but also the mainstream press. Gow commented on 'the difference between our reception when we arrived there with a camera on the job and a *Daily Telegraph* reporter, who arrived on the waterfront with a camera, which would probably finish up in the water. Both of them'. Levy added: 'Precisely the point to be made, that we were part of them. They recognised us as part of them, working for the same things that they wanted' (Interview with John Hughes and Margot Nash, 27 Oct. 1979).
'Report June 1956, Beginnings and development of the WWF Film Unit', Noel Butlin Archive Centre [NBAC], WWF File E211/163.

15. WWF Federal Council Meeting Minutes, 1956, 2 Nov 1956, NBAC, N114/127.

16. The idea of a film co-operative was supported by the WWF, the Seamen's Union of Australia, the NSW Teachers' Federation, Electrical Trades' Union, Australian Timber and Allied Industries' Union, Australasian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation, Building Workers' Industrial Union, Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Australian Railways Union (Roach, Ted, Letter. 15 Jan. 1957, NBAC, BWIU File Z285/118.).

17. McDonald, Tom, Personal interview, 16 Dec. 1997.
Fitzgibbon, Charlie, Letter to Mr. M Linskey, National Film Archive,

18. Feb. 1981, NBAC, WWF, E211/163. pp. 3-4.

19. WWFFU, 'Report June 1956, Beginnings and development of the WWF Film Unit', NBAC, WWF, E211/163.

20. Macintyre, Stuart, *A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999 p.202.
Disher, Norma, Interview with Margot Nash and Margot Oliver, 'Norma Disher:

Waterside Filmmaker', *Sixty Years of Struggle*, Communist Party of Australia, 1980, p.34.

21. Levy, Jock, personal interview, 3 Feb. 1997.

22. Disher, Norma, personal interview, 25 August 199