

Trades Hall backed Uni

By ROD NOBLE
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From left: Charlie Morgan, Henry Scanlon, Norman 'Ross' Mearns, Alex Dowling.

THE 50th anniversary of the University of Newcastle is a good time to give credit to some of those involved in getting it established. The Newcastle Union Movement played a very important role.

Up until the 1930s most of the attempts to gain a university in Newcastle had been isolated events. However, from then on, a greater effort began. Even though Newcastle Trades Hall Council had been discussing the need for better higher education opportunities for many years, in August 1942 it made a decision to campaign more actively to have a university established in the city.

University of Newcastle historian Don Wright places the beginning of this campaign at a Parents and Citizens (P&C) meeting on July 21, 1942, and identified the headmaster of Newcastle Boys High School, Norman "Ross" Mearns, as the key instigator.

Given the Trades Hall's long involvement around the issue, and the fact that Ross Mearns was a delegate to Trades Hall, one can see that the Trades Hall was involved from the beginning of the campaign. Nevertheless, the P&C meeting led to a number of city organisations being approached and to the setting up of a University Establishment Committee.

The Trades Hall was one of the first organisations involved on that committee and apart from Mearns, two of their most prominent representatives were leaders of two of the most powerful unions. They were Miners union leader Henry Scanlon and Iron Workers union leader Charlie Morgan. Both were members of the Communist Party. Mearns and Scanlon were among a number of prominent Novocastrians who delivered radio broadcasts to raise support for the idea from April to June 1943.

The Trades Hall envisaged setting up a higher education institution attached to, but not controlled by, Sydney University. At a Trades Hall meeting in August 1942 Mearns addressed delegates on the issue and said that a university could begin immediately with Arts and Economics. During debate delegate Arthur Osbourne reminded all present that "setting up university facilities had been a concern of the labour movement for 20 years". Delegate Stan Deacon outlined the role of higher education in a new social order where there would be complete and free education for all. Others expanded on the idea that working class children should have the same educational privileges as those given to the rich.

At the meeting in April 1943 Mearns again addressed Trades Hall on the issue and stated that: "universities in Australia were not democratic and that is why unions are not represented on their Councils". He praised the contribution of Scanlon, the president of the Northern Miners Federation, for his work on the Establishment Committee and urged unions to "raise money to ensure that they would be represented when the university council is established".

The move to raise funds was supported by Morgan, who noted that "the system of higher education in Australia was such that only the children of sufficiently affluent parents could take advantage of it". Morgan urged all unions to contribute to a library fund for the Newcastle University

Committee. The Trades Hall carried a motion along those lines, and the first large contribution came in from the Ironworkers Union. Later Morgan was to become the secretary of the Establishment Committee.

Over the next 10 years, the Trades Hall kept campaigning for a local university with particular attention being paid to the issue at the Trades Hall meetings in July 1943, and February and September of 1944. The latter meeting saw Trades Hall accuse the Senate of Sydney University of being a "conservative body that was opposed to a university college being set up in Newcastle".

Wright confirmed the attitude of Sydney University Senate as "determined as ever to prevent further university developments outside Sydney". By April 1944 the push for a university college affiliated with Sydney University had turned into a call for a full university in its own right serving from the Hawkesbury to Taree.

In 1944, Trades Hall had passed a motion that demanded that the NSW government should amend the University Act to enable the establishment of a university in Newcastle without requiring the consent of the Sydney University Senate. The motion was moved by delegate Mearns.

Earlier that year, Mearns had written an article in the Trades Hall's fortnightly newspaper that was critical of the Sydney University Senate. Mearns quoted a professor from Sydney University as saying that "it was stupid to assert that a university education is the right of all and that the extension of university education would lower the standard of Sydney University to mediocrity". Mearns pointed out that: "there was no cry of mediocrity when university colleges were announced for other places only when one was proposed for the working-class community of Newcastle". He added, "Our democracy does not stand for equality of opportunity". Mearns concluded that what some on the Sydney University senate were really saying was "Let the children of workers stay workers". Vera Deacon, who was treasurer of the Newcastle Technical College Student's Council in 1945, recalls that the establishment of a university was top of the Student Council's agenda.

In 1948, the Trades Hall elected Jim Keane, a Railway Union delegate, as a new Trades Hall representative on the Establishment Committee. Interest was revived in March 1949 when the NSW Minister for Education Bob Heffron announced that there were plans to set up five new universities including one in Newcastle. In December 1949 when the issue seemed to be drifting off the agenda again, the Trades Hall again called for a University in Newcastle.

In February 1952 a report to a Trades Hall meeting noted that the goal posts kept being moved. First the Minister agreed that if 200 students were available for first year there could be a university, then said that nothing could be done unless the Sydney University Senate agreed. Finally the Senate agreed but the Minister was now hard to find.

The Trades Hall resolved to work to remove all obstacles to establishing the university and to be represented on a delegation to the Minister. Later that year the Trades Hall secretary Alex Dowling reported on another deputation to the NSW Premier and the Minister for Education, and the Trades Hall resolved to "ask the University Establishment Committee to call a public meeting of protest to demand that the federal government make finance available to build the university".

In 1953 at a large Newcastle unions convention held at City Hall and attended by hundreds of delegates, the matter was placed on the agenda by a number of unions as well as Trades Hall and fully supported.

Trades Hall delegate Jim Keane recalls that the Establishment Committee met monthly and up to 20 people would attend and that at least four or five of these were associated with Trades Hall. Some of these, apart from Keane himself, were Dowling, Morgan and Les Bailey. Other people on the committee included community representatives, Department of Education staff and politicians. Importantly, Morgan was the secretary of the Committee.

The ultimate success of the quest is history now, and has been detailed by Wright in his book (Looking back, a history of the University of Newcastle). Less known, and not duly recognised outside union circles, is the pivotal role of the Trades Hall and Dowling's role specifically. He was a highly respected and tough negotiator, a very capable and experienced advocate, and had a broad knowledge on a wide range of subjects. His membership in the delegations to Sydney on the issue of the establishment was crucial, and the other representatives of Newcastle were dependent on him to a significant degree for tactics and strategy and consulted him regularly.

Along with the Trades Hall itself, Dowling is certainly worthy of a place in the history of the University along with Mearns, Scanlon, Morgan, Keane, Bailey and the other Newcastle Trades Hall Council delegates who served on the University Establishment Committee.

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