

The Trades Hall Part of Our History

*You aid them friends, with more than empty praise,
Your contribution will assist to raise
A people's palace on yon vacant soil-
A palace built and own'd by hardy sons of toil¹*



Image: State Library of Victoria

Trades Hall, Corner of Lygon and Victoria Streets, Carlton (Photographed by John T. Collins in 1964)

At a time when the nation's biggest convenience store chain is being cast as 'robbing wages of its workers' it is worth noting that the history of one of the world's earliest trade union buildings is in Carlton, on the fringe of the central city, originally solely financed and built by the workers to serve as a place for the labour movement. Melbourne building workers had successfully taken up an issue first raised by Sydney stonemasons for an Eight Hour Day. The skilled tradesmen, stonemasons, bricklayers, carpenters, joiners, plumbers, painters, slaters, quarrymen, coach builders, were Chartists or radicals who had emigrated from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, who had settled in cheaper suburbs like Collingwood, Fitzroy, North Melbourne and Richmond, who considered themselves 'the fraternity of labour', 'the working bees of society', 'the producing classes' and 'the pioneers of the colony'.^{2 3}

Their leader's names are recorded on an honour board on the main staircase of the present building including Charles Don, Thomas Vine, James Stephens, James Galloway and Benjamin Douglass. Their families were also involved as the original Eight Hours flag was hand stitched by Vine's three daughters. However, as Murray-Smith and Dare's book indicates, there was not immediately wholehearted support for the idea of such an institution, by either employees or business, prompting a heated exchange, which was reported and played out in *The Age* and *The Argus*.^{4 5}

The Melbourne Trades Hall, or the Workingman's Parliament opened as a small wooden building in May 1859, the first of ten stages, on a government grant of land, and then was extensively rebuilt or upgraded between 1874 and 1925, by the architectural firm of Reed and Barnes. That architectural firm, with various changes of names, has a very distinguished architectural history across Melbourne and its environs, encompassing public buildings like the Royal Exhibition Building, the Melbourne Town Hall and the State Library, the Faraday Street school, now the Kathleen Syme Community Centre, a number of buildings at Melbourne University, numerous churches, hotels, banks and the long-gone Eastern Market. Many of those buildings were in Carlton. All of the extant buildings are well worth visiting and most are generally breathtaking.⁶

This article centres on the role of one of these buildings, the Trades Hall in Carlton and its connection with the fight for regulated working conditions, particularly the Eight Hour Day. It was built after a successful union campaign in 1856. Appropriately, the building on the corner of Victoria and Lygon Streets is now diagonally opposite the Eight Hour Day monument and is classified by the National Trust and included in the Register of Historic Buildings as Building No. 781. The building itself is of architectural significance and is an example of 19th century craftsmanship, combined with the best local material. The original timber building was largely replaced by a two storey building with an imposing classical façade, bluestone foundations and brick walls with a cement render finish, while preserving some of its original 1870s style. The initial building was transformed from a temporary building of timber and galvanised iron into a two storey bluestone structure in 1874, to which was added a grand façade of stone-work a year later. Then in 1884 a bluestone and red brick Council Chamber was added, as well as a Female Operatives Hall.⁷

Many skilled tradesmen came to Australia attracted by the possibility of finding gold and the Stonemasons' Society in Sydney had taken the initiative and demanded an eight-hour day from employers, which they won in March 1856, although that victory also meant a reduction in wages. A similar movement, by the more militant craft unions in Victoria, saw workers employed on public works winning an eight-hour day with no loss of wages in 1856. By 1858 the eight-hour day was firmly established in the building industry and was widely worked throughout Victoria by 1860. From 1879 the eight-hour day was recognised by a public holiday but it was not until 1916 that the Victorian *Eight Hours Act* was passed, granting those hours to all workers in Victoria, and not until the 1920s that those hours were achieved nationally.⁸

Over the following years the Trades Hall not only became the birthplace of the Victorian Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trades Unions. It has housed many unions, community organisations and left wing political groups, hosted occupational health and safety training, provided rooms to be hired for functions, meetings, conferences and also theatrical productions and art works, as well as a bar and a bookshop. On one occasion in October 1915, it was the scene of a shootout in which a police constable was killed.^{9 10}

The bookshop reminds us that, as well as celebrating the eight hour day, the stonemasons wanted to build not only a Trades Hall but a literary institute, a combination of political and educational concepts, where working men could 'hold meetings, attend lectures and borrow educational books from a lending library'. For the founders the Trades Hall was: 'A place where workmen may their minds engage to useful purpose o'er the printed page.'^{11 12}

To further those educational aspirations, the Trades Hall Committee, led by William Murphy, its secretary, worked with the wealthy squatter and philanthropist, the Hon. Francis Ormond, to match his donation of £5000, to establish a Working Men's College, later the Melbourne Technical School and now the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Planning for that building complex started in 1881 and the Working Men's College was opened on 4 June 1887, and if you do not count the State Library, was the third official tertiary provider in Melbourne, after the Athenaeum in 1839 and the University of Melbourne in 1853.

The College contributed to Australia's war effort in World Wars 1 and 2 by training returned service men in vocational qualifications between 1917 and 1919, and during the World War 2, training service men and women, mainly in radio communications and munitions manufacturing, as well as manufacturing parts for Beaufort Bombers. In 1954 the College was awarded royal patronage for its service to the war effort and to education. In 1960 the College Council began reconstituting the college as a tertiary institution and its new name became the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, while the non-tertiary sector concentrated on TAFE courses.

Interestingly, and despite the name, women had always attended the Working Men's College from its inception, although in considerably fewer numbers than their male counterparts. For example 32 women compared with 783 men enrolled per term in 1887, while 3,390 individual students enrolled, of whom 1,565 were male and 543 were female in 1900, a ratio of about 3 to 1. Even when external or correspondence courses were offered, or when the Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy amalgamated with RMIT in 1979, men still substantially outnumbered women, although women and children had featured in an 1891 design for a College badge and Class Certificate. Women in both the tertiary and TAFE sectors tended to be concentrated in art, domestic economy, fashion, dressmaking and secretarial courses, although a few did courses like engineering, but did not find them particularly welcoming.^{13 14}

Marcella Pearce in *Melbourne Trades Hall Memories* recalls on her 13th birthday dancing with Dr William Maloney, MLA, at the Trades Hall, admiring his height, although he was a short man, and being utterly surprised when the band struck up *Happy Birthday*, wondering how they knew it was her birthday, only to discover it was the popular politician's eightieth birthday as well.¹⁵

Memories can be very misleading or confusing so they must be checked again and again, but as they provide clues they can be useful. The Trades Hall is definitely worth a visit because of its role in our political and educational history. While it is a monument to the achievements of the labour movement, the Trades Hall was not all work and no play. Not only did it provide 'a focus for the union movement but also a place where working men could spend their leisure time in educational and cultural pursuits, in keeping with contemporary notions of social responsibility and self improvement'. The Trades Hall, built by workers to support workers, combined with its role in helping to establish the Working Men's College, highlight this as a historically significant building and institution.¹⁶

It seems appropriate to finish this article off with an early slogan:

***'Eight hours to work, eight hours to play,
Eight hours to sleep and eight 'bob' a day'¹⁷***

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November 2015

References:

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 - 9 Trades Hall, Wikipedia (Viewed 23 October 2015)
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 - 17 W.F. Murphy, *History of the Eight Hours 'Movement*, 1896, Vol 1. p. 5