

JOHN COOMBS — TRIBUTE

Statement

HON KYLE MCGINN (Mining and Pastoral — Parliamentary Secretary) [6.38 pm]: It has been a bit of sad day today. I rise today to put on record my condolences and thoughts about John Coombs. John Coombs was a former national secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia and led the MUA through the very significant Patrick dispute in 1998. John passed away today, aged 81. I am going to read a few statements that have been put out because I do not think I could summarise John's life as well as people who have worked around him throughout his career and remain friends with him. I will start with the president of the International Transport Workers' Federation, Paddy Crumlin, who is also the national secretary of the MUA. He said —

On Behalf of the Maritime Union of Australia and the International Transport Workers' Federation, and with great sadness it is my responsibility to inform you that John Coombs, Retired National Secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia has passed away this morning after a long illness.

On behalf of our membership, officers and staff here and around the world in the wider transport industry, we pass on our deepest sympathies and condolences to John's wife Gwen, children Jenny and Stephen and their family.

John was a giant of the trade union movement both here and internationally and his small and wiry stature belied the size of his courage, determination, vision, and leadership that followed similarly in the traditions and great substance of maritime union leaders such as Jim Healy, Eliot V Elliott, Charlie Fitzgibbons, Pat Geraghty and Tas Bull.

John was a waterside worker in the port of Sydney and went on to become a National Official under the leadership of Norm Docker and Tas Bull taking over from Tas on his retirement. John's leadership was critical to the success of the establishment and consolidation of the key social and transformative national infrastructure in superannuation, universal health care, and maritime reform that was underpinned by maritime reform under the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments.

He worked very closely with the ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty in particular and worked alongside Greg Combet when he was an industrial officer for the union and subsequently in his role in the ACTU.

The formation and consolidation of the Maritime Union of Australia in the merger between the Seamen's Union of Australia and the Waterside Workers Federation was one of his greatest achievements as a leader and the importance of that leadership was most clearly manifested in the Patrick dispute, where the Federal Government and Patrick Corporation entered into what the High Court found was the probable conspiracy against the Patrick workforce that was sacked on the one evening all over the country and replaced with non-union labour, carefully selected and trained to break unionism on the Australian waterfront and under Cabinet-in-Confidence documents as part of a wider attempt to undermine trade unionism in the Australian workplace.

The great irony of John's senior leadership in the union was that it was critical to the nation building initiatives of the Hawke Keating government and the Australian trade union movement through the ACTU in establishing the social compacts of superannuation, universal health care ...

I think Paddy has doubled-up on that one. It continues —

John then spent his last years of leadership in the front line combating the attempts of the Federal Government under John Howard and Peter Reith in undermining those reforms and attempting to sever the relationship between unions, employers and government that was, and remains critical to, their ongoing success.

Regardless of the fake news and political spin of the time John's contribution in that time effectively identified the political and ideological nature of the attack in a way that resonates in Australia and around the world today. The Australian public and working community mobilised into one of the most extraordinary fightbacks in the face of the Patrick sackings ever seen in this country or indeed internationally.

The widespread community picket lines and international support in an industry that is critical to the national interest continues to stand as a great tribute to his and the trade union movement ongoing importance to Australian values.

The union under Charlie Fitzgibbons negotiated the first industry superannuation arrangements for maritime workers in 1967 that led on to the wider industry superannuation under the Hawke government in the late '80s. John was a long-time board member and chair of the Stevedoring Employees Retirement Fund and subsequently Maritime Super. He was also instrumental in the consolidation of community banking that was first established by the union in the late '60s. He was long time chair of the Waterside Workers Credit Union now Unity Bank that has consistently provided loans and mortgages for maritime workers.

John retired to care for his eldest son Gary who developed multiple sclerosis and became a significant advocate on behalf of all MS sufferers in particular, and the disability sector in general.

Mildly spoken, formally or semi-formally dressed in the style of trade union officers of that time, humble in his aspirations, but a strong and courageous trade union leader in the tough and demanding trade unionism of the waterfront, John has left an indelible mark on both our union and the Australian aspirational way of life for a fairer more just and economically effective nation.

He was also renowned for his work on the Executive of the International Transport Workers Federation and was known for his determined advocacy for workers rights and trade union rights in all sectors of the transport industry and the wider trade union movement. His leadership and the prior leadership of the MUA helped lay the groundwork for the recognition of other Australian trade union leaders such as Sharan Burrow the General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation.

John will be greatly missed, a person of courage and character and enjoying the great wit and sense of humour of the Australian waterfront. He was tough and courageous in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds and was a lightning rod for galvanizing actions against injustice and elitism, but also for aspirations of a genuine vision for Australian political, social, economic and industrial rights based on access and true process.

He came from the deep traditions of political and industrial activism within our union and Australian trade unions. He was an inspiration to a whole new generation of young new trade union leaders that cut their teeth on the extraordinary and cynical circumstances of the Patrick dispute and are now in the forefront of trade union leadership today.

John was a person of deep family values, totally reliable in his friendship and comradeship, he will be greatly missed because of the qualities of his character, but also greatly appreciated for the work of his life on behalf of working women and men, particularly in reconciliation and justice for First Nations People's over his lifetime on the job, in office and in retirement.

Again, from the MUA and ITF our deepest sympathies and condolences to Gwen and the extended Coombs family and all of his brothers and sisters, comrades and friends in Australia and around the world.

I also have comments from the Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary, Bill Kelty, who paid tribute to John, as quoted in an MUA press release —

“John Coombs was a giant in the union movement. He stood on the shoulders of others before him in the MUA and he led his union in the greatest reforms and one of the most significant disputes of last century. John fought for and defended his members and the members of all unions. His contributions to the union movement and the rights of ordinary workers across the country was immeasurable.

“John was a great friend and warrior who loved his union and who was so loved by his union in return. We owe John Coombs a great debt.” Kelty said.

Retired national president of the Maritime Union of Australia, Jim Donovan, said —

John was one of the few self-taught people that could grasp every position that he held, and he did it so well. He took the job to heart and knew it was a big job, but he gave it all he had. He was a great unifier, and his leadership during the 1998 dispute was outstanding.

Greg Combet said —

No one who lived through the waterfront dispute in the late 1990s could forget John Coombs' tenacity, passion, and integrity as the leader of his union. He was a titan of the labour movement.

ACTU secretary, Sally McManus said —

For generations of trade unionists, John was the dragon slayer who led his union when they won against all the odds and all the might and power of the Government and employers. Twenty-three years later unionists still shout out the defiant “MUA – Here to Stay!” as under his leadership the MUA prevailed. This can never be forgotten.

Humble, strategic and a man of great integrity. John was much loved by all of us as for a period of time, we all looked to him to lead us on picket lines across the country. The union movement sends all our love to his partner Gwen and his family.

John was well known for what he achieved throughout the MUA ranks. He was also part of the amalgamation in 1993 when he started his term, which was one of the biggest amalgamations in this country between two very militant unions that became one very militant union.

I want to put on the record my condolences to the family and I want to say that John created a union that fights back and stands up for its workers' rights right across this country. Workers have been locked out at Qube in Fremantle

for over five weeks and have been on a picket line and fighting against their employer about a better family friendly roster. They are the types of principles John embedded into the union. I want to say to the workers there, “You will last one day longer and one day stronger.” Vale, John Coombs.