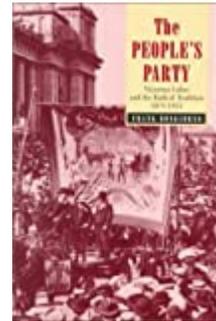




Frank Bongiorno. *The People's Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition, 1875-1914.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996. xii + 268 pp. A\$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-522-84738-3.



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In 1910, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) won control of both houses of the federation parliament and formed the first majority Labor government in the world. In this book, Frank Bongiorno, a member of the history faculty at the Australian National University, provides a detailed and insightful treatment of the origins and early development of the Labor Party in Victoria.

In reviewing previous treatments of this topic, Bongiorno notes that most previous historians of the ALP have been critical of it and that most of them, too, wrote from the perspective of either radical nationalists or members of the “old,” Communist-oriented, Left. Like both some of them and some recent historians of the ALP, Bongiorno finds “laborism” central to his understanding of the party. By “laborism,” he means the central notion that a capitalist state could be managed to the advantage of workers through a combination of strong trade unions and a powerful Labor party in parliament. Where earlier historians had found in laborism a failure to reach a Marxist perspective on class and politics, Bongiorno tries to approach the concept on its own terms, as an evolving set of political attitudes that derived from producerism and opposition to class-based privileges. “The people,” for those espousing this “laborist” perspective, were male wage-earners and other “wealth producers” and their dependents. Bongiorno also emphasizes the

importance of understanding institutions as not a passive reflection of objective social interests, but instead as a way in which collective identities were constructed—as “a process rather than a thing, as contested ground rather than conquered territory” (p. 9).

Bongiorno develops his topic through an approach that is both chronological and topical. His first chapter treats the labor movement in Victoria Colony and especially its political and ideological ties to liberalism from 1875 to 1890. He follows with an examination of the emergence of a labor party in 1890-1904. In developing these topics, he traces the development of unions both urban and rural. He is especially effective in presenting the connections between trade unions and liberalism, a connection based in some part on Liberals’ commitment to a protective tariff, democratic institutions of government, and social egalitarianism. Bongiorno then reexamines the maritime strike of 1890, long identified as prompting unionists toward a separate political identity. He emphasizes that this separate political identity was first expressed as a caucus within the Liberal party and that its proponents only gradually moved toward a competing party organization. The Australian Labor Party was formed in 1901, and the election of that year was the last in which the Labor party of Victoria allied themselves with the Liberals. Having carried the development of the

Labor party in Victoria through the first few years after the creation of the federation in 1901, he then turns to a series of topical chapters exploring various aspects of Labor's development up to 1914, including the roles of race and gender in the Labor party, Labor's continuing indebtedness to liberalism, and the relations between the Labor party and organized socialists, the Labor party and the Catholic church, and between the Labor party and John Wren's gambling empire.

Bongiorno's first topic is the new party's base of support among both urban and rural voters. By the eve of WWI, union membership had grown substantially, providing the Labor party in Victoria with a broad working-class base and giving unions the dominant position in Labor party conferences—the state-wide gatherings that set party policy. Even so, relations between the Labor party and trade unions were never easy, as the Labor party reached beyond the unions for electoral support and unions sometimes qualified their support for the Labor party. Union control was never absolute, largely because it was the local branches of the party that selected parliamentary candidates, and participation in the branches was open to all party members. Unionists took part in that process on a basis of equality with other participants. Unionists, as well, sometimes disagreed among themselves over the selection of candidates or on policy decisions.

Bongiorno surveys Labor's and unions' commitment to a white Australia, to be accomplished by excluding all immigrants but those of European descent, but also he argues that previous historians were too quick to conclude that racism pervaded every aspect of the labor movement. This is perhaps the only disappointing part of an excellent book. While Bongiorno provides evidence here for a variety of perspectives on race within the Victorian working class and within the unions, he might well have provided a more thorough analysis of this crucial subject, both to demonstrate the complexity of Labor's views on race and, more importantly, to integrate more fully Labor's views on race with the party's views of class, public policy, and the ideal commonwealth. Given the many parallels between the labor movements of San Francisco and Melbourne, especially their attitudes toward Chinese immigration, the treatment of race in chapter 6 of Michael Kazin's *Barons of Labor* (1987) might have provided a useful comparison.

Bongiorno further stresses Labor's links to liberalism by tracing Labor's commitment to the protective tariff from its liberal origins through its expression in Labor

conference statements. He also argues that Labor's commitment to "a union of classes against class privilege" owed as much to liberalism as to the influence of socialists. He notes, too, the connections between Australian progressives (including both Liberals and those in the Labor party) and their counterparts in Great Britain and the United States who sought to use the state to bring both efficiency and social order.

Australian women gained the suffrage in 1902, resulting largely from Liberal progressivism rather than Labor initiatives. Labor, in fact, was ambivalent about women's rights, and Bongiorno characterizes the Labor party's organizational structure as "a gendered space in which women were denied autonomy" (p. 134).

Though socialists were influential within the Labor party during its initial development, some of them grew increasingly alienated and broke openly with Labor in 1907. Even so, other socialists remained involved and the Labor party itself continued to evolve in a socialist direction. Thus, Bongiorno specifies that "labourism, whatever its limitations, should be regarded as a part of the socialist tradition. Labor Party members, as parliamentary socialists, were committed to the use of the state as an instrument for achieving a more just society. They embraced the socialist idea that a redistribution of wealth was desirable." Acknowledging that "the party's analysis of capitalism was hazy" and "infused with Christian morality," he concludes that "for all of its limitations and failures, labourism was the fruit of the labour movement's effort to construct a moderate and electorally popular version of socialism" (p. 137). Though the Labor party in Victoria was in advance nearly all other state Labor organizations in taking on a socialist aspect, the party's definition of its class identity remained a contested terrain. In the 1912 state conference, a motion to exclude employers as candidates for office failed by 61-100, and a similar motion in 1914 lost by 52-81. Thus, Labor often remained ambivalent regarding its definition as a class-based party, continuing a liberal-like commitment to abolish class distinctions and to oppose privileges for any class.

While the Labor party in Victoria received strong support among Catholic voters, it did little for that church, and it refused to endorse state aid to denominational schools. However, it also opposed Protestant sectarianism, including restrictions on liquor sales and gambling. That, in turn, brought the Labor party into a political entente with John Wren, the master of Melbourne's liquor, gambling, and gaming interests. Though Wren

sought to control some Labor party branches, Bongiorno specifies that he could not exert control over the party conference nor the state-level executive body.

When Bongiorno explores the language of the Labor party in Victoria, he finds a significant populist strain, one that included a romanticization of preindustrial values and of small producers. He points to parallels with and borrowing from American Populism, even to the point that some Victorians promoted the initiative and referendum and a few even advocated silver coinage. This populist dimension, Bongiorno specifies, proved especially helpful in times of intraparty conflict “to resolve contradictory demands among Labor’s supporters and focus discontent on an easily identifiable enemy” (p. 208). The Labor party, he notes, was devoted to both Australian nationalism and the British empire, and few saw no conflict between them. The party defined itself as much by what it opposed as what it favored, and it most consistently opposed monopolies, the “money power,” class privilege, party politics, “rings” and “boodlers,” and immigration by any but whites. By developing a new political language and political tradition, the Labor party of Victoria defined the political identity of a diverse group of supporters and secured their electoral allegiance.

There is much in Bongiorno’s book to commend to historians interested in labor politics in places other than Australia. I was impressed by the many parallels (as well as the variations) between events in Victoria and those in California at the same time, resulting, in San Francisco, in the creation of the Union Labor Party in 1901 and its domination of city politics until 1911. Bongiorno’s careful treatment of the Victorian Labor party’s relation with socialism bears comparison with that of the Union Labor Party of San Francisco or the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation of Saskatchewan. All in all, I found Bongiorno’s study a model of its type, illuminating many of the distinctive features of the Labor party in Victoria and, at the same time, exploring topics relevant for historians of early-twentieth-century labor politics in other parts of the English-speaking world.

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