

# A letter to Queensland MUA members from Bob Carnegie



**This year MUA members in Queensland vote for a new State Secretary of the union.** It is an important choice. It has to be an informed choice.

The information circulated to all members is limited, by election rule, to a 100-word statement from each candidate.

For candidates already in office, this is not too big a problem. Members will know about them already. New candidates need to make an extra effort to give information.

Some members will know me, because I was an activist in the Seamen's Union of Australia and the MUA from 1991 to 1998, and Queensland MUA Branch Organiser from 1994 to 1998. Newer members will not. That is why I am writing this letter.

## **I am standing on five planks.**

**1. To bring the union back to its rank and file roots.** I give an unconditional commitment that all stevedoring worksites in the port of Brisbane will see an elected official at least twice a week and the branch secretary at least once a week.

Throughout Queensland there will be regular visits at all major ports. Ships under the responsibility of the Queensland branch will see a union official on a timely basis.

Nothing is more important for union officials than to be constantly in touch with

and accountable to the rank and file. Nothing is more important for a union than that the rank and file can always communicate with, get straight answers from, and mandate the officials.

**2. To establish genuine democracy** in the union, which includes rotation of elected officials.

**3. To defend the rights of MUA delegates** with all the industrial, legal, financial and political might of the branch. As long as delegates can be sacked with impunity by stevedoring, port or shipping operators, the members who elected those delegates do not have effective union representation. That will stop.

**4. To fight an unwavering battle against casualisation.** The current levels of casualisation create crippling uncertainty for young and old workers and undermine union organisation. I will make sure that the branch strives to develop permanency of employment.

**5. Branch officials should primarily spend their time in developing campaigns** and representing MUA members in Queensland, not parading around the world stage like half-witted international playboys.

## **These planks are based on principles I have fought for all my life.**

I joined the Seamen's Union of Australia as a merchant seaman in 1981.

In 1985 I was the first person jailed during the infamous SEQEB power workers' dispute when Joh Bjelke Petersen declared war on workers, and was instrumental and inspirational in many other disputes.

In 1988 I became Honorary President of the SUA Queensland branch. Between 1988 and July 1994 I worked as relieving branch Assistant Secretary of the SUA Queensland Branch on a multitude of occasions.

In July 1994 I was elected Deputy Branch Secretary of the SUA Queensland Branch and Branch Organiser of the MUA Queensland Branch. From 1995 I was International Transport Workers' Federation inspector for Queensland too.

I resigned my positions in 1998 after the waterfront dispute of that year. I had known the leadership of the union, particularly on the seafaring side, virtually all my adult life, but I knew they were going down a completely wrong path. Some of them had convinced themselves theirs was the most brilliant plan to save the union.

The leadership's answer was for the workers in the industry to forgo stabilisation and to have it replaced by casualisation. Since then, in the stevedoring area, casualisation has become an integral part of the industry.

Members accepted the leadership's plan because it was put as part of a package with measures in areas such as training and single-point-of-engagement for seafarers, and of course government assistance to the industry, all of which never happened.

I faced a huge contradiction between loyalty to the union leadership and loyalty to the rank and file.

**I chose loyalty to the rank and file, as I always will.**

After being out of work for five years, I obtained employment in construction, and then from 2004 to 2008 worked as an

organiser for the Builders Labourers' Federation.

When I resigned as an organiser in 2008, the BLF journal wrote: "He has acquitted himself well in the role and left a legacy especially for the new young organisers coming through. Bob has always supported the advancement of youth and the renewal of the union through new blood. There are thousands of working-class men who looked up to him as an organiser and will support his decision to go back to his roots among the rank and file".

Unable to find employment on the sites, I went back to sea in January 2009. I have been shocked by the deterioration in conditions and in the union's ability to defend its delegates and members since I last worked at sea.

**Loyalty to the rank and file also means willingness to put**

**yourself on the line** by running for leadership positions when you think the union is on the wrong track. My decision to do so was consolidated by discussions with Chris Cain, MUA Branch Secretary in Western Australia, with whom I worked when employed on an offshore gas rig off Western Australia.

The employers must tremble once again at the very mention of the Maritime Union of Australia. We will rebuild our branch so that we become the envy of all workers, not just in wages and conditions but in the way we will walk tall and defend those who have less, so that all working people can have a better life.

**Yours in solidarity,  
Bob Carnegie**

**Contact me at  
bobcarnegie2011@groups.facebo  
ok.com**