

Laurence Cohen (1874 – 1916), Unionist, Politician, Social Justice Worker, ALP pioneer.

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“A giant in the cause of humanity”

Laurence Cohen lived a hundred years ago, a time when Australia was establishing who we are and how we live. He was an important, powerful man with a strong sense of justice. He worked to make this world a better place. He died early, falling out of a hotel window. Newspapers all over the country were full of it: the shock, the praise. Even his adversaries spoke highly of him and mourned his loss.



Laurence Cohen’s father was English, his mother was French. They lived in a small gold mining town near Mansfield, Victoria, with six kids. They moved to Melbourne when Laurie was still a boy, and lived in inner-city Melbourne. He was small and Jewish and working class.

Like many working class kids of the 1880s, he left school in his early teens to find work. He landed a job as a letter-cutter with a well-known stonemason, George Atyeo. Three of the Cohen girls married Atyeos and in fact it was George Atyeo who designed and built the headstone and monument now standing tall on Cohen’s grave.

Laurie Cohen learnt quickly and was soon recognised as an expert letter-cutter and figure-worker. He was commissioned to do several government contract jobs across Victoria that required a high level of skill and craftsmanship. One report in *The Australian Worker* newspaper stated that many of Melbourne’s “stateliest buildings bear artistic evidence of his skilled craftsmanship”¹. His work, no doubt, still exists in Melbourne’s city and suburbs. Maybe we walk past it every day without looking twice.

Realising that unionism fitted well with his own values, Cohen became a delegate and later Secretary of the Melbourne Stonecutter’s Union. He threw himself into this work and gradually moved up the ranks to Trades Hall Council Executive and then Assistant Secretary of Trades Hall. He was on the Eight Hours Committee and the Industrial Disputes Committee. He was known as someone who fought hard for worker’s rights and “never spared himself when the Labor interests were involved. He settled many industrial disputes, spoke at many public events and “worked night and day when called on”.

Laurie joined and then led the Political Labour Council, the forerunner of today’s State ALP, with the view that even the worse Labor government can’t be worse for the worker than the best Liberal government.

At 35, amidst a busy political career, Cohen married Sarah Lemmon, the sister of a long standing Labor politician (John Lemmon, MLA) and daughter of the caretaker of Trades Hall. They lived their lives in North Carlton in Wilson Street and Keppell Street, without children.

After he died, the newspapers described Cohen as someone who dedicated his life to improving the world for the working class. Some of these reports described him as “a fearless and outspoken champion of working class ideals” and “a vigorous and active propagandist”. They wrote that he had “an utter disregard

¹ *The Australian Worker*, Thursday 17 February 1916

for rank and position”, was “one of the most capable leaders in the industrial field”, had “a fighting spirit which never quailed before the fiercest opposition”, that this “brave little man was a giant in the cause of humanity”.

As was the norm at the time, obituaries gushed with superlatives. They reported that Cohen had been “a possessor of a resonant voice and a rugged personality combined with an unbounded faith in the principles he espoused” and an “excellent fighter for the cause of industrialism” and that he leaves behind “a record shining with good deeds in the cause of the people”. He was called progressive, a man amongst men, a “Big Australian”.

He also had enemies and adversaries. There was an ongoing argument with *The Argus*, played out in print. He was referred to, during his lifetime, as radical and extremist. He responded to this “inky attack²”, writing that he had been misquoted and misinterpreted³. and “had the power of stirring up the anger of the *Argus* and those unscrupulous self-seekers and enemies of the common good that the daily press represents⁴”. One article wondered if he had lived longer whether he would have toned down and modified his extreme opinions and learnt that “even capitalists and non-unionists have their uses”.

Even his political enemies recognised in him a man of principle and straightforwardness. His detractors described Cohen, during his life and after his death, as militant, uncompromising and aggressive. He was called “a servant of socialism”, and an “aggressive socialist, although not of the “red rag” variety⁵”. Whether disparaging or commending him, he was someone who “believed in smashing his way through all obstacles⁶” and who loved the labour movement “with the fervour of a religious zealot”. This was a man who made his mark.

Cohen died in Adelaide just before he turned 42. He had travelled by train to Broken Hill with Chris Bennet, the President of Trades Hall Council, to speak at a meeting of striking miners. He was appealing to the crowd for funds for the strikers. A first-hand report from that meeting described Cohen calling for donations: “‘Who’s got another half a crown for the starving families of the strikers?’ he cried at the open air gathering on Friday night. ‘A bob then (pause), or threepence’. There was no response. The crowd had already given what they intended to. ‘Well you’re a hard-hearted lot of beggars’ he commented.”⁷

He had spoken to the meeting organisers about being tired and worn out after the trip. They said he was “fagged out” and looking forward to having a day off at home on Sunday.

Cohen and Chris Bennett travelled back to Adelaide from Broken Hill and stopped over at the Prince of Wales Hotel. The hotelier later described how Cohen had retired to his room before 11pm. Just after midnight his body was found dead lying on the footpath beside the hotel. He was found in a pool of blood with a fractured skull. The police suggested that he may have planned to have a smoke before going to bed and, as he was used to having to go outside to smoke (his wife didn’t tolerate him smoking in the house), he stepped out the window expecting a balcony. Such a simple mistake.

Bennett travelled back with Laurie Cohen’s body to Melbourne. He was quoted as saying “little did we think as Mr Cohen and I set out on our journey to Broken Hill that one of us was nearing the end of all journeys.” He said it was a sad to think that they had been looking forward to a free day of rest after having made progress at Broken Hill with the miner’s strike, but that “his comrade’s days here had closed”⁸.

² *The Australian Worker*, Thursday 17 February 1916

³ *The Argus* (Melbourne), Monday 9 October 1911

⁴ *Labor Call* (Melbourne), Thursday 17 February 1916

⁵ *Barrier Miner*, Wednesday 16 February 1916

⁶ *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), Monday 14 February 1916

⁷ *Barrier Miner*, Wednesday 16 February 1916

⁸ *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), Tuesday 15 February 1916

The funeral was held at Trades Hall, where Cohen had married Sarah only seven years before. Descriptions of the funeral mention the flag at half mast, the dais at Council Chambers draped in black and representatives from every union, all labour organisations and members of state and federal parliament. Two thousand people attended the funeral. The cortege was a mile long as it led from Trades Hall, up Lygon Street, along Nicholson St to Coburg Cemetery.

A fund to support Cohen's widow, Sarah, was started. One of the first donations was from John Wren, the well-known Melbournian personality, bookie, entrepreneur and businessman. He had known Cohen when they were children living in working-class Collingwood. Wren donated a hundred pounds and wrote that Cohen was an acquaintance since boyhood. "I have always admired him for the courageous manner in which he fought for the principles of trade unionism and for his manly actions".⁹ Many unions chipped in to support Sarah and show their thanks for Cohen's life. True to form, The Argus ran a letter of complaint about the Labor party donating money to the fund.

About 18 months after he died, a monument was erected on his grave. Carved by his old employer and father-in-law George Atyeo, this monument was referred to as "one of the most striking in the Coburg Cemetery". There is a picture in a local newspaper of his past comrades, serious men in suits and hats, stoic and proud, at the ceremony here in the winter of 1917¹⁰. This monument is still considered remarkable. It stands out. It implies this was someone revered and respected. This was not just another old guy in a suit.

Laurie Cohen spent his life working to make the world a better place. He lived his life with sincerity and passion. Much that Cohen fought for in his lifetime was won. He was an important cog in the machinery that improved working conditions for Australians and established fair and equitable systems of influence the ways we work and are governed.

His is now just a name carved into granite, mostly forgotten. Many of the most fervent unionists, politicians, and officials currently fighting for their own version of social justice don't know who Laurence Cohen was. At a time when the conditions he fought for are now eroding, we can take courage and inspiration from remembering the work and life of such a man, and many like him buried here at Coburg Cemetery, the preferred "resting place" for so many of Melbourne's past left-leaning activists.

Today, in one of the world's richest countries, standing in Melbourne's sunshine, as we enjoy a day off work or a day funded by superannuation or pensions or benefits, we say a big "thank you" to Laurie Cohen. Perhaps we can remind the world who this man was and what he did with his life. Maybe he can inspire others to continue to make this a better world.

Main sources of information about Laurence Cohen's life and work:

- The Australian Dictionary of Biography <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cohen-laurence-5715>)
- Monument Australia <http://monumentaustalia.org.au/themes/people/community/display/104120-laurence-cohen>)
- National Library of Australia, Trove, Digitised newspaper archives, (<http://trove.nla.gov.au>). Note: many references to Laurence Cohen in Australian newspapers have now been tagged "Laurie Cohen" to make them easier to find.
- Friends of Coburg Cemetery Inc. www.friendsofcoburgcemetery.com

⁹ Labor Call, Thursday 24 February 1916

¹⁰ Leader (Melbourne), Saturday 28 July 1917