The following is an edited version of the 2013 Alex Macdonald Lecture Labour Day: Family, freedom and a fair go. The origins to Queensland’s Labour Day and the recent shift of dates which was delivered to the Brisbane Labour History Association on 1 May 2013 by Dr Glenn Davies:

THE FIRST WEEKEND in May has been of major cultural and historical significance for the union movement in Queensland ever since the state’s first Labour Day procession took place in Barcaldine on 1 May 1891 and the Labour Day public holiday has been celebrated in workers’ beds on the first Monday in May since 1901. It is deeply ingrained in Queensland’s history as a day to recognise workers’ rights.

During 2011, there had been widespread consultation on changing the holiday system and it was agreed that Labour Day would remain in May and the Queen’s Birthday public holiday would move from June to October.

At the time, Premier Anna Bligh said all holidays, except for the Queen’s Birthday, marked significant dates and were punctuated with official ceremonies or significance: “Unlike other public holidays, it’s not celebrated on a date that is particularly meaningful.”

The Queen’s birthday public holiday originated in 1912 to observe the birthday of King George V on 3 June. Over the years, Queensland, along with most other states, has continued to observe the Queen’s birthday in June even though the actual birthday of Queen Elizabeth II is 21 April. In Western Australia, the Queen’s birthday public holiday is held in either September or October. The Queen’s birthday is observed as a mark of respect to the sovereign but is not widely celebrated in community events like other public holidays.

Other public holidays are on dates of significance. Australia Day (26 January). Tick. Anzac Day (25 April). Tick. Labour Day (1 May). Tick. Easter. Christmas. Tick. Tick. Queen’s Birthday...errrr? It’s not celebrated on the correct date and there is no official ceremony or community engagement around it. However, all this was thrown out the window last year when legislation was passed through the Queensland Parliament by the LNP Newman Government to move the Labour Day public holiday to the first Monday in October and the Queen’s Birthday public holiday back to its previous June timing.

The history of Labour Day in Australia spans over 150 years. It is an important annual event that commemorates the granting of the eight-hour working day for Australians and remembers those who struggled and succeeded to ensure decent and fair working conditions in Australia. During the mid to late 1800s, the working day was long and arduous, where some employees would work up to 12 hours a day, six days a week. Many Australians saw the need for better working conditions and in the 1850s there was a strong push for this. On 21 April 1856, stonemasons at the University of Melbourne marched to Parliament House to push for an eight-hour working day. An agreement with employers for a 48-hour week was eventually reached and Australian workers welcomed the new eight-hour day. A victory march was held on 12 May 1856 that year and each year after that. In 1856, the new work regulations were recognized in New South Wales, followed by Queensland in 1858 and South Australia in 1873. In 1874, Tasmania joined the other states in adopting the shorter eight-hour working day. In 1879, the Victorian Government made one further step towards better conditions for employees by proclaiming a paid public holiday that year. However, while a change was made to the hours worked each day, the five day work week had not been adopted finally in 1948.

In Queensland, the first Labour Day celebration took place in Brisbane on 16 March 1861 and was essentially a celebration by a small number of skilled building workers who had recently achieved an eight-hour working day. The date of the event was chosen to coincide with the anniversary of the first workers achieving the eight hour day in Queensland. For more than 20 years, the bulk of workers who did not enjoy an eight hour working day were excluded from the celebrations and the focus was on celebrating trade union achievements. The small number of elite Queensland trade unionists who participated in the eight hour day celebrations showed little sympathy for their fellow workers who laboured in excess of eight hours.

The first to follow the example of the American workers were the Americans. In 1886, they decided that May 1 should be the day of universal work stoppage. On this day, 200,000 of them left their work and demanded the eight hour day. The historic strike of 1 May 1886 was a culmination...
of a concerted struggle. Chicago was the major industrial centre of the USA. Police attacked striking workers from the McCormack Harvester Co., killing six.

On 4 May 1886, at a demonstration in Haymarket Square to protest the police brutality, a bomb exploded in the middle of a crowd of police killing eight of them. The police arrested eight anarchist trade unionists claiming they threw the bombs. To this day, the subject is still a controversy. The question remains whether the bomb was thrown by the workers at the police or whether one of the police’s own agent provocateurs dropped it in their haste to retreat from charging workers.

In what was to become one of the most infamous show trials in America in the nineteenth century, but certainly not to be the last of such trials against radical workers, the State of Illinois tried the anarchist workingmen for fighting for their rights as much as being the actual bomb throwers. Whether the anarchist workers were guilty or innocent was irrelevant — they were agitators, fomenting revolution and stirring up the working class, and they had to be taught a lesson. Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel and Adolph Fischer were found guilty and executed by the State of Illinois.

In Paris in 1889, the International Workingmen’s Association (the First International) declared 1 May an international working-class holiday in commemoration of the 1886 Haymarket Martyrs. The red flag became the symbol of the blood of working-class martyrs in their battle for worker’s rights.

In light of the labour movement’s successful push for an eight-hour day, a large May Day meeting was held in Melbourne on 1 May 1890. Other Australian capital cities also held May Day meeting at the same time. On 1 May 1890, the Brisbane Workers editorial stated:

May Day, this is our May Day, the bygone jubilation of our forefathers for the reconquering by the bright sunshine of the bitter northern winter, the new-born celebration of the passing of the workers’ winter of discontent. In Germany, in Austria, in Belgium, in France, all through Europe, in the United Kingdom and in the great English speaking republic across the Pacific, millions of workers are gathering at this hour to voice the demands of Labor for fair conditions of laboring. Never in all history was there such a meeting.

The spirit of the activists and early workers organisers is summed up in Bernard O’Dowd’s poem, May Day where he calls for Australians to stand up united and maintain their rights to an eight-hour working day.

Come Jack, our place is with the ruck
On the open road today,
Not with the tepid “footpath sneak”
Or with the wise who stop away.
A straggling, tame procession, perhaps,
A butt for burgess scorn;
Its flags are ragged sentiments,
And its music’s still unborn.
Though none respectable are here,
And trim officials ban.
Our duty, Jack, is not with them,
But here with hope and Man.

The Labour Day date was moved from May to the second Monday in March in some parts of Australia after World War II. Since 1948, Labour Day is celebrated, but also the international solidarity of labour. In fact, Queensland unionists, until now, were almost alone in celebrating Labour Day on or around May Day, as most other states still time their celebrations to coincide with anniversaries of eight-hour day victories.

Labour Day, like Anzac Day, is a day when we remember the sacrifices our forebears made — the mateship, the loyalty and the determination to build and protect the freedom and rights we now enjoy. Both are also occasions when we recognise the ongoing struggles of today and thank those standing beside us in the fray. Today, we celebrate those workers and union delegates who stand alongside their mates and colleagues to preserve and better the working conditions of all Australians. For like Anzac Day, Labour Day is — above and beyond its historical significance — a day in which all Australians can celebrate our egalitarian society, our innate sense of fairness and equity, and our willingness to campaign side by side for a better world.

It is the day we celebrate the winding back of the exploitation and oppressive working hours that were the norm in the early nineteenth century during the Industrial Revolution. It is a day we remember the efforts of the labour movement which brought us the eight hour day and over the ensuing decades of struggle such basic advances as minimum wage levels, safety in the workplace and the right — a brief return to the industrial relations Dark Ages during the Howard era to — bargain as a collective.

For Labour Day is not a celebration of militant trade unionism. It is not a cong-a-line of left-wing ratbags winding their way through the streets chanting slogans calling for the downfall of capitalism. Labour Day, particularly in today’s world — where ordinary hard-working people are increasingly left bleeding on the economic roadside from collateral damage inflicted by the global recession — it is about family, freedom, and a fair go. It is about empowerment in a world where individuals still too often have little control over their own destiny when it comes to the workplace.

So celebrate Labour Day. Celebrate trade unions, freedom of association, vigorous debate and working families. For that is the sum of us.

INFORMATION
ROCKHAMPTON: Monday 2 May 2016
9.00 am to 2.00 pm
Cnr River & Gregory Sts, Mackay

*Ipswich marchers are this year invited to attend the Brisbane march and festivities. Marchers are provided with drinks, food, music, events and rides! It is a fantastic family day out!