

A brief history of Australian unionism and the role of the Communist Party



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A brief history of Australian Unionism

Since their inception around 150 years ago, trade unions have been the primary organisations of the Australian working class. The strength of unions has varied over the years but they have remained a pivotal force in the struggle of workers to achieve an improvement of their living and working conditions and rights.

The Beginnings

Australian trade unions started to form in the 1850s. Prior to this there were a number of trade societies but most did not last. Australia's earliest unions came into existence under the influence of the British Chartists and the early British trade unions. They were based on crafts rather than on industries. The convict system, with its bonded labour, delayed the development of trade unions up to the middle of the century. When the transportation of convict labour ceased in the 1840s, trade unions started to develop. This reflected the developing economic and class relationships, which were capitalist in character.

As is well-known the White settlement of Australia was originally established as a British penal colony. The officer corp was given land, the land of the Aboriginal people. They also received the use of unpaid convict labour. Free land handed out by the administration and slave labour also provided by the colony's administration, implanted capitalist production relations from the very beginning of White settlement.

During the 19th century Australia's economy was based almost entirely on agriculture, particularly wheat and the grazing of sheep. Infrastructure - houses, schools, hospitals and other institutions, port facilities, roads and later, railways were also built.

The Australian states were established as separate British colonies with the various States under the direct control and administration of the British parliament. Australia was seen by British governments as a supplier of foodstuffs and wool for the spinning mills of England.

The 1850s was the period of the Australian gold rushes of which the most famous is that of Ballarat. Gold provided capital for a rising Australian bourgeoisie while the goldfields collected together that band of miners who staged the Eureka Stockade. The Stockade was Australia's only armed rebellion. The gold miners refused to pay the hated licencing fee which the troopers (police) attempted to collect by making armed raids on the diggings of the gold miners. The miners demanded that there should be "no taxation without representation".

The Eureka Stockade was a high-water mark in the struggle for some measure of democracy and popular representation in governments. Adult male franchise was one of the results of the Eureka Stockade and its leader, Peter Lalor, became a member of parliament in Victoria. However, women were excluded from the franchise and plural voting, property qualifications, the weighting of electorates to achieve the result desired by the ruling classes persisted until well into the 20th century.

"The tradition of militant struggle created at Eureka has played a valuable role in helping to mould the Australian workers into 'a class for themselves'." (E.W. Campbell, *History of the Australian Labour Movement* 1945, p.14)

In 1855 the members of the Early Closing Association met in Melbourne and raised the question of a reduction of hours of work. Historian Manning Clark said of this period: "The leaders and teachers of the working classes were not sustained by any vision of a better society or by any conviction that the cause of all the moral infamy and degradation of mankind lay in the private ownership of property or the profit motive ... their first task was to win more time for leisure ..." (Manning Clark *History of Australia*, p.273)

One of the earliest trade unions was the Operative Stonemasons Society. Its leaders were not revolutionaries as they were often represented to be by the owners of private property at that time. A meeting of mem-

bers resolved that an eight-hour day must be introduced and in April 1856 the building contractor capitulated. Other trade unions soon followed this example. A shortage of labour during the gold rush period created the circumstances in which the trade unions were able to win reasonable wages for that time and Australia became the first country in the world to establish an 8-hour working day.

But the working class and the trade unions were not the only developing social force. The colonial bourgeoisie steadily increased its power and became restive with the control imposed by the British aristocracy.

The next main development of the Australian trade union movement was the formation of unions of workers in the bush. The main ones were the miners, timberworkers and shearers. In the 1870s and 1880s, Trades and Labour Councils were formed as the concept of unionism spread throughout the country.

The unions of the time were accused by the employers of wishing to “foment a bloody revolution”, although it is clear that their completely spontaneous nature was always going to prevent that course of action. The Australian unions like their British counterparts were isolated from socialist ideas. This isolation ensured that the Australian trade union movement would remain spontaneous in character. Although the “Communist Manifesto” had been published in 1853, the works of Marx and Engels were unknown in Australia at that time.

Early Socialism

The first attempts to fuse socialist politics with the economism of the early trade unions came from Will Lane in the mid-1880s. Lane was a utopian socialist. He achieved some success in convincing some union bodies to adopt a socialist objective but his gains were to be lost after the strikes of the early 1890s.

The first celebration of May Day took place in Barcaldine in Queensland in 1891 reflecting the militancy of the shearers at that time.

A strike wave took place in the 1890-94 period. “The price of wool was

falling in 1892” says the lyric from Reedy River. Pastoralists demanded that the shearers accept “freedom of contract”, a demand resisted by the Shearers’ Union. The unionists said that the freedom of a single employee to negotiate with a company was not freedom at all. Unions of workers in the mining, rural and shipping industries were also waging campaigns for higher wages and better working conditions.

But the strikes of that period were defeated. The police and troopers were called out and union leaders jailed. This defeat led the trade unions to look towards politics as the means to solve the dilemmas of the workers. The argument behind the shift towards a political solution was simple. The trade unions had been defeated because the employing class controlled the state machine, police, troopers and the courts. Therefore, the trade union movement had to elect its own members of parliament to make laws in the interests of workers and trade unions.

The formation of the Labor Party

The Labor Party (ALP) was formed in the early 1890s on this background of trade union struggles and their defeat at the hands of the state machine acting in the interests of the employers.

The formation of the ALP coincided with the campaign for Federation and this was a foremost plank in the new Party’s policies. Another top policy item was the preservation of White Australia. Others were the formation of a Commonwealth Bank, old age pensions, navigation laws, abolition of State Legislative Councils, the abolition of State Governors, civil equality of men and women, uniform marriage laws and protection. The Party also called for a “Citizen’s Defence Force with compulsory military training”.

The formation of the Labor Party was greeted with great enthusiasm among working people. Norman Makin who was for many years the Labor Party’s representative in the Federal Parliament from Hindmarsh SA, wrote under the heading, “*A New Era Dawns*” that “trade unionists found that they could not obtain all they believed they were justified in demanding by the means they had ordinarily adopted. They recognised that if they were to definitely and permanently improve the position of Labor it would have to be accomplished by statute.” (Norman Makin. *A Progressive Democracy* p 2).

He went on: “To protect the people from the ravages of commercialism and finance, and to secure to them the full advantage of their labor, is a

cardinal principle of the Labor Party...”

But this turn to politics was not to venture further than trade union politics. The early call for a new society were not fulfilled. Although a number of important reforms were introduced the plank of the Labor Party’s platform which called for “the collective ownership of monopolies” was not attempted.

Labour historian E W Campbell wrote:

“Instead of developing as a Socialist Workers’ Party the ALP developed as a liberal bourgeois party, carrying out in Australia the measures enacted by the Liberal Capitalist parties in older countries.”

And:

“Labor politicians and their supporters among the reformist trade union officials seek to preserve and strengthen the fundamental characteristic of the ALP. They vigorously oppose Socialism and endeavour to subordinate all forms of working class struggle to the purely parliamentary.” (Introduction to LL. Sharkey’s *Notes on the History of the Australian Communist Party* 1944, p.10)

Lenin also wrote about this in *What is to be Done* published in 1902, about 10 years after the formation of the ALP. He described trade union politics as:

“ ... the common striving of all workers to secure from the government measures for the alleviation of the distress characteristic of their position, but which do not abolish that position, that is, which do not remove the subjection of labour to capital.” (V.I. Lenin, LCW. *What is to be Done* Vol. 5 p.387)

Writing specifically about the situation in Australia in 1913, Lenin said:

“The Australian Labor Party does not even call itself a socialist party. Actually it is a liberal-bourgeois party, while the so-called Liberals in Australia are really conservatives.

“Australia is a young British colony. Capitalism in Australia is still quite youthful. The country is only just taking shape as an independent state. The leaders of the Australian Labor Party are trade union officials, everywhere the most moderate and ‘capital-serving’ element, and in Aus-

tralia, altogether peaceable, purely liberal.

“In Australia the Labor Party has done what in other countries was done by the Liberals, namely, introduced a uniform tariff for the whole country, a uniform educational law, a uniform land tax and uniform factory legislation.

“Naturally, when Australia is finally developed and consolidated as an independent capitalist state, the condition of the workers will change, as also with the liberal Labor Party, which will make way for a socialist workers’ party.” (V.I. Lenin, *LCW* Vol.19, p 216-217)

Not much has changed in the Labor Party’s views and actions in more than 100 years since its formation. Time and again workers have been disappointed as Labor governments limit their activities to reforms within the capitalist system. More recently the Labor Party leadership has moved more and more to the right. This is reflected in their adoption of the same “economic rationalist” policies as have been implemented by conservative or liberal governments.

The experience of the Labor Party in office, its limited reforms which did not liberate the working people from the exploitation imposed by the capitalist system, began to strengthen the idea that the Labor Party did not offer a solution to the pressing problems continuously faced by workers. Socialist ideas became more widespread.

An aspect of this disillusionment was the formation and growth in the 1914-1919 period of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). It attracted militant workers and trade unionists and strongly promoted the class struggle. The IWW played a role in some important events and took a good position around a number of issues, including opposition to the First World War. It opposed the conscription of citizens for military service. At the same time, the IWW rejected participation in parliaments in any form, believing that the only correct working class tactic was industrial struggle.

The formation of the Communist Party

A number of changes marked Australia’s social and economic life in the first two decades of the 20th century. Federation took place in 1901 and

a Federal parliament was established in Canberra. The first step in the establishment of a modern steel industry occurred when the BHP was registered in 1912. (A steel industry had been originally put forward as a public enterprise but it was a Labor Government that decided to hand the project over to private enterprise). By 1918 lead, zinc and copper production had increased massively to around 210,000 tons. This increased production replaced the need for imported metals. Employment in the shipyards more than doubled during the period of the 1914-18 war. In 1913-14 manufacturing accounted for 13% of GDP. This was to rise to 16% by 1925. Manufacturing output more than doubled in value from 1910 to 1920. The massive increase in industry saw the working class grow and diversify. Other trade unions were formed as a result.

Widespread opposition to the killings and sufferings of World War I grew in many countries and was a major factor in the successful socialist Russian Revolution of 1917. "Peace, bread and land" were the main demands of the Russian people and revolutionaries. Revolutionary movements in Germany and other European countries also erupted but were defeated.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was a dramatic turning point. It demonstrated that by struggle the working people could be successful and win power and overthrow the capitalist system as well as monarchies. This experience was an influence in the formation of the Communist Party of Australia on October 30th, 1920. Communist Parties were formed in a number of other countries at this time.

The CPA was formed to fulfil the function of a socialist political party of the working class and set its sights on winning support from the workers to be able carry on the noble fight for a socialist society along the lines envisaged by Marx, Engels and Lenin.

In its first Manifesto to the working people of Australia issued on December 3rd 1920, the newly formed Communist Party said:

"We hold it as a fundamental principle that it is only by the mass movement of the working class as a whole that our emancipation can be won - we Communists contend that if the workers are well organised for the

express purpose of the overthrow of the capitalist system, they can do so during one of these periodical crises [of capitalism].”

The Communist Party of Australia from its first days attached special significance to the role of the trade unions because they are the main mass organisations of the working class in Australia. This has been reflected in the participation of CPA members in their respective trade unions and the attention played by Party organisations at all levels to questions of trade union activity and organisation throughout the Party’s history.

The path of Marx, Engels and Lenin

In 1866 Karl Marx, in a resolution to the International Workingmen’s Association, made some fundamental points that remain relevant today. He stated that “they [the trade unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction.

And “They must carefully look after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions. (Marx and Engels Collected Works, Instructions for the delegates of the provisional general council. The different questions. Vol 20, p185.)

Marx however realised that the trade unions were not enough to win the battle against the forces of capital.

In another resolution (1871) to the International Workingmen’s Association Marx wrote:

“That this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end - the abolition of classes;

That the combination of forces which the working class has already effected by its economical struggles ought at the same time to serve as a lever for its struggles against the political power of the landlords and capi

talists ...That in the militant state of the working class, its economical movement and its political action are indissolubly united.”

(Marx and Engels Collected Works, Resolutions of the conference of delegates of the International Working Men’s Association, Vol 22, p.427)

The need for and importance of the political struggle was a view also held firmly by Lenin. He wrote in *What is to be Done*:

“Social-Democracy(1) leads the struggle of the working class not only for better terms for the sale of labour power, but also for the abolition of the social system which compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich. Social-Democracy represents the working class not in the latter’s relation to only a given group of employers, but in its relation to all classes of modern society, to the state as an organized political force. Hence, it follows that Social - Democrats not only must not confine themselves entirely to the economic struggle; they must not even allow the organization of economic exposures to become the predominant part of their activities. We must actively take up the political education of the working class and the development of its political consciousness.” (V.I. Lenin, LCW, *What is to be Done* Vol. 5, p.400)

Writing on the significance of the formation of the Communist Party in Australia, Sharkey wrote:

“The formation of the Communist Party was one of the decisive revolutionary acts of the Australian working class.” (L.L.Sharkey, *An Outline of Party History* 1944, P.17)

The CPA and trade unions

The Party immediately set its sights on the struggle in support of its trade union program and, in a few years, had achieved a great deal.

“The Party delegates led important trade union conferences and had the Party’s right to affiliation to the labor Party recognised at the NSW Labor Party Conference in 1923, and participated in the strikes and unemployed struggles of the time. It strongly influenced the NSW Labor Coun

(1) The Party of the Russian communists was initially called the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. It was only in 1920 and after the Russian Revolution that its name was changed to Communist Party.

cil and various trade union organisations. It initiated and led the fight for the establishment of the ACTU and its growing influence brought about the adoption of the 'socialisation' objective of the ALP." (L.L.Sharkey, *An Outline of Party History* 1944, P.18).

The influence of the Communist Party and the early socialist ideas of the Labor Party can be seen in a resolution adopted by the ACTU on unemployment as the Great Depression of the 1930s broke: The resolution declared: "Unemployment arises out of and is inherent in the capitalist system, which is based on production for profit and not on human needs. Only the socialisation of industry (ie means of production, distribution and exchange) can remove the cause of unemployment."

As can be seen the fledgling Party achieved some incredible successes and had a remarkable impact upon the labour movement in a very short time. The right-wing of the NSW ALP were determined to stop the growth of the Party and a bitter struggle was waged against the communists. Despite the affiliation decision, the right-wing removed CPA founding members, Jock Garden and Howie from the Executive. An anti-Communist pledge also prevented them attending future ALP conferences as trade union delegates and campaigns were waged against the communists in the trade unions. The extreme right-wing of the Labor Party has never changed its spots. There has been a continuous thread of implacable anti-communism from the 1920s, to the expulsion of the progressive NSW Branch of the Labor Party in the 1940s, to the formation of the Industrial Groups in the 1950s. (The Industrial Groups were formed under the leadership of BA Santamaria, a Catholic cleric. See more p 19)

The position of the extreme right-wing was, once again, expressed in a recent statement to the NSW Parliament by NSW Treasurer Egan. When debating allegations of fraud in connection with Macquarie University Student Representative Council elections and the claim made in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that a "unity ticket" had operated between the Liberal Party and rightwing Labor said: "I do not like unity tickets, but if it is a unity ticket against the comms, I am fully in favour of it ... if Young Labor and the Young Liberals are in cahoots to defeat the comms, I wish them both well." (NSW *Government Hansard* 17/11/2000)

The Party's attitude to trade unions

The communists have always regarded the trade unions as the biggest and most active organisations of the working class. Furthermore, the scope of trade union activities extends not only to the issues of wages, hours and working conditions but to social, democratic, political and solidarity questions as well.

This is reflected in the Constitutions of the Communist Party over many years. In dealing with the responsibilities of members it states: "To join and help build the trade union, farmer or professional organisation and seek to play a leading role in those organisations based upon the Party Program and policies and by these means, to expand the influence of the Party in such organisations and to win their support for Party policies."

Many CPA members have played leading roles in Australian trade unions, including the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Australia's peak union body.

The necessity for the communists to raise the level of the economic struggle to that of political consciousness has remained a cornerstone of the thinking and the activity of members of the Communist Party throughout the Party's existence.

Period of capitalist stability

Capitalism entered a boom period of its cyclical process between the years 1924-29. The international revolutionary wave following the Russian Revolution receded. It was a difficult period for the Party.

Despite this the Party continued to play a positive role in support of British seafarers and the workers during the 1926 British General Strike. It sent support to the British miners who had continued to strike for a lengthy period.

The Party also paid considerable attention to a campaign devoted to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. This organisation sought an international federation of workers from the Pacific countries and placed much emphasis on support for the struggle of the Indian people for national independence.

Between 1927-1929 a big campaign was carried out against the class collaborationist policy of “industrial peace” that was put forward by some trade union leaders and Labor Party politicians. Work was also undertaken around the great miners’ lockout of 1929-1930.

However, reformist illusions grew up among some of the Party’s leaders during this period of capitalist boom and a liquidationist trend emerged. Some argued that a communist party was no longer necessary and policies were adopted which isolated the Party from the working class movement.

These views were advanced by the then Secretary of the CPA, Jack Kavanagh. In 1926 he declared that “a communist could only take office in a union when the majority of union members accepted communism and even then, must return to work after two years.” (L.L.Sharkey, *An Outline of Party History* 1944, P.20)

New leadership elected

A new leadership was elected at the 1929 Congress of the Party and immediately set about re-establishing ties with the masses that had been eroded by the Kavanagh leadership.

The Great Depression broke towards the end of 1929. The Scullin Labor Government was in office Federally together with a number of State Labor Governments. It was Labor Governments which introduced the notorious “Premier’s Plan” cutting wages across the board by 10 per cent and social welfare by 12 per cent.

The new Central Committee immediately sent representatives to the coalfields and set about organising the miners against the anti-worker policies of the Scullin Labor Government and trade union officials who failed to support the needs of the workers. A strike struggle at that time was lost but the energetic work undertaken by the Party laid the foundation for many years of loyal support for the Party by militant coalminers and led the Party to a strong position of influence in the miners’ organisations.

The Party, which now had stronger ties with the mass movement in the period after the depression, achieved much success. It played leading

roles in strike struggles of the miners, seafarers and the sugar workers, achieving notable success in the coalfields leading the struggle for the miners program. It played a leading role in the formation and struggle of organisations of unemployed workers.

In the course of these struggles, the Party experienced unprecedented growth:

“The Party at last had become a factor of considerable importance in the national life of Australia during the ten years from 1930-1940.”
(L.L.Sharkey, *An Outline of Party History* 1944, P.29)

The victory of Nazism in Germany in 1933 together with the economic crisis led to a changed position for the Party. Its main slogan - “Against Fascism and War” - reflected this new priority. “The Party strove for a People’s Front movement as the key organisation against fascism and war.” (L.L.Sharkey, *An Outline of Party History* 1944, P.28)

World War II

Party policy and tactics must alter with the specific conditions of the times and this was the case during the period when the defeat of fascism became the top priority.

Sharkey’s report to the 13th Party Congress held in 1942 states:
“The Party called upon the workers to combat the inefficiency, mismanagement and often corruption associated with capitalist control of industry, and that the Unions, shop committees and production committees should make the battle for the weapons to beat fascism a primary concern. Strikes should be confined only to situations that constituted a basic challenge to the labour movement; negotiations and other measures should be utilised for the solution of the ordinary grievances and problems that continuously occur.”

This call was not made at the expense of the workers, however, and calls for increased wages for lower paid workers were still sought.

Sharkey's report continues:

“There can be no doubt that the Party was instrumental in preventing widespread chaos in the war industries, and in assuring greater production, as well as frustrating the efforts of the reactionaries within and without the labour movement to destroy the Labor Government and weaken the working class.”

It is interesting to note that under normal circumstances of capitalist production, calls from the Party to increase productivity are non-existent. This is one example of the Party's ability to apply its Marxist-Leninist ideology in a creative way when circumstances change.

During the period from June 1940 to December 1942, the Party was banned by the Federal Government using regulations issued under the National Security Act. Illegality did not succeed in reducing the Party's activities, however.

“...throughout the whole period of its illegality, the Party functioned with hardly less efficiency than under lawful conditions and, indeed, more systematically and energetically in many instances because of the enhanced dedication of its members.” (Edgar Ross, *Of Storm and Struggle* 1982 p.81)

During this period it was illegal for Party members to speak at public meetings organised by the Party. It was left in many instances to communist trade union leaders to become the voice of communism in Australia. This development was a major reason why the Communist Party of Australia became associated so strongly with the trade unions.

Post-war unionism

The Second World War brought considerable industrialisation in Australia. By 1945-1946 one third of the industrial workforce was employed in manufacturing. For the first time chemicals and aircraft were being produced and production of ships and machine tools was greatly expanded. These events brought an expansion of the industrial working class.

Resolutions of the 1945 Congress of the CPA held just after the conclu-

sion of WW II, called for campaigns around many issues. Some of the programmatic demands have not yet been achieved and they remain valid today. Others were achieved and have benefited the Australian working people for many years. The essential need for unions to campaign politically for progressive post-war gains was stressed at this Congress as was the need for the union movement to win support from other progressive forces in the cities and in the country. This call very much reflected the Party's efforts to achieve a united front against the capitalist class and the necessity to form an alliance with the small working farmers in the countryside.

The struggle for a 40-hour week was in the forefront of calls for Party activity in the unions arising from this Party Congress. Communists played a proud role in many unions where this demand was achieved and also in subsequent struggles in which the 35-hour week was won, although these battles were to occur much later. The 35-hour week was won on the waterfront in 1972. For coal miners it was achieved some years earlier.

The Congress resolution also makes reference to what is an extremely important element of communist activity in the union movement - the formation of Shop Committees. The call for the extension and improvement of their activity and the need for their close links with the "machinery of the unions" is still relevant today. Many successes by the union movement have resulted from the effectiveness with which communists organised the workers on the job in conjunction with progressive and communist union leaderships.

Another point of emphasis was the need to overhaul the compulsory system of arbitration. The Congress resolution states, "As the Trade Union Movement advances, compulsory arbitration is more and more revealed as a system that operates against the interests of the working class."

Within three years, at the 1948 Congress, many of the demands and aims of the 1945 Congress could be reported on in a positive light. The most notable achievement being success in the struggle to win the 40-hour week. The Party immediately set its sights on the task of winning the 30-hour week.

The Cold War which had already been launched by the Western powers by the time of the 15th Congress (1948) led to the adoption of a much

more outward looking policy with regards to the main trade union tasks. Top of the agenda were efforts to combat attempts to undermine and split the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), as well as the development of international Trade Union ties. Particular emphasis was given to regional trade union movements such as those of Indonesia, India, Malaya and the Pacific.

Common to every period are the endless campaigns to combat the anti-union laws which the Australian ruling class never tires of advancing. This feature of activity by the trade union movement is likely to continue as long as capitalism itself exists.

The CPA's 1948 Congress was no exception in this respect. Much attention was again given to the organisation of the workers at the job level and to another most important feature, the building of workplace Party branches.

To this day there is emphasis on the Party building branches in the workplace and within industry and it is a policy that can only serve to strengthen the Party and its influence among workers.

At the Party's 1948 Congress attention was given to the improvement and extension of the militant trade union press. The publication of newspapers and magazines is now a feature of the work of most trade unions.

The 1949 coal strike

One of the most significant post-war strike actions was the 1949 miners strike. It occurred just four years after the end of WW II. The miners had made a tremendous contribution to Australia's war effort and had been given promises of better things in the post-war period. The strike began in June 1949 and lasted a month and a half.

It arose from the legitimate industrial demands of the Miners' Federation. Their demands included the 35-hour week and the establishment of Long Service Leave as an industry award as well as the rejection of industry rationalisation measures which the union asserted, would have and did, cost thousands of jobs.

Instead of dealing with the issues raised by the miners, the Chifley Labor government was quick to portray the strike as a battle between the communists and the Labor government. It was subsequently revealed that Chifley had stated in Cabinet that “The Reds must be taught a lesson.” For the government, it was a political issue and the raising of the communist bogey was a tactic by the Labor right to weaken the strike front and cause division among the miners as well as put the public off side.

The Labor government brought in the troops to work the open cut mines and from this point in the words of Chifley “Its boots and all now”. At least eight communist trade union leaders were gaoled during the period of the strike and the miners were defeated although subsequently, many of their industrial demands, which were the cause of the strike, were conceded.

Edgar Ross in his book *Of Storm and Struggle* commented: “True, members of the Communist Party, including myself, occupied important positions in helping to work out tactics and the Party itself saw the clash, when it came, as providing an opportunity for it to display its concepts and leadership, while testing the rival ideology of the Labor Party, that of reformism. That’s the grain of truth in the charge of ‘communist inspiration’. But it is only a grain”. (Edgar Ross, *Of Storm and Struggle* 1982 p.102)

The Party’s two main leaders, Sharkey and Dixon were both away during the strike, Sharkey was in jail and Dixon overseas.

“Upon his return to Australia, Dixon was shocked by the fact that the general strike had occurred and was sharply critical of the way the struggle had been conducted.” (*Ibid.* p.108)

“However, the cause of the defeat of the miners in 1949 was not the policies or mistakes of the unions, but the anti-working class attitude taken by the top Rightwing ALP leaders.” (L L Sharkey, *The Trade Unions*, 1959 edition p.49)

“The main lessons of the strike, emphasised by the communists, are still valid - the demonstration of the power of the state when challenged, a challenge almost inevitable when a basic industry is involved, and the exercise of that power to suppress the workers and defeat their unions by a government dominated by reformist ideology.” (Edgar Ross, *Of Storm and Struggle*. 1982 p.107)

The Cold War

The fifties, as well as being known for Cold War repression of communists that reflected the state of international politics, also saw a consolidation of the monopoly position of many of the big companies.

“A survey of Australia’s major manufacturing industries in 1957-58, showed that 14 enjoyed monopoly or near-monopoly trading conditions.” (The Macquarie, *Book of Events 1983*. p.183)

Included among these companies were BHP, CSR, ICI, ACI and BH Associated Smelters. This state of affairs would continue throughout the sixties and seventies and the process of take-overs and mergers is still occurring today.

The Party had to meet this and other challenges throughout the 1950s. Right-wing Labor forces in the form of the Industrial Groups, had infiltrated the Labor Party and spent much time and effort in infiltrating the union movement as well. They became known as the “Groupers”. Their main aim was to defeat the strong influence of communists and progressive leftwing Labor forces in the trade union movement and to “subordinate the working class to the needs of monopoly capital.” (L.L. Sharkey, *The Trade Unions*, 1959 edition p.50)

“The Catholic Social Movement had been formed with one central aim - to fight Communism in the Trade Unions.” (Mr. B A Santamaria, *Courier Mail*, Brisbane 25 April 1956).

They would ultimately fail but the actions of the “Groupers” did succeed in a number of unions in unseating communist and left labour trade union leaders. Some unions, such as the Australian Workers’ Union banned communists from holding positions in the organisation. It was not until 1955 that the Industrial groups were defeated within the ALP. They subsequently formed the National Civic Council (NCC) and the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) which, by giving their electoral preferences to the Liberal Party, kept the Labor Party out of government for many years.

A number of communist activists and trade union leaders were to experience state suppression during this period and some were jailed. Sedi

tion, contempt of court, even criticism of the Arbitration Court, were used as a means to suppress and gaol communists during this period.

Attempts to ban the Communist Party

In October 1950 the Menzies Government went to war against the Communist Party and introduced the Communist Party Dissolution Act. The Party and 10 trade unions subsequently challenged the Act. The Waterside Workers' Federation employed Dr. H.V.Evatt, then Deputy Labor leader, to act as counsel. In March 1951 Dr. Evatt won a High Court injunction against the Act which was ruled to be unconstitutional.

This did not stop Menzies however. He was determined to see an end to the CPA. The Menzies Government introduced a Bill to amend the Constitution to give him power to outlaw the Communist Party and override the decision of the High Court.

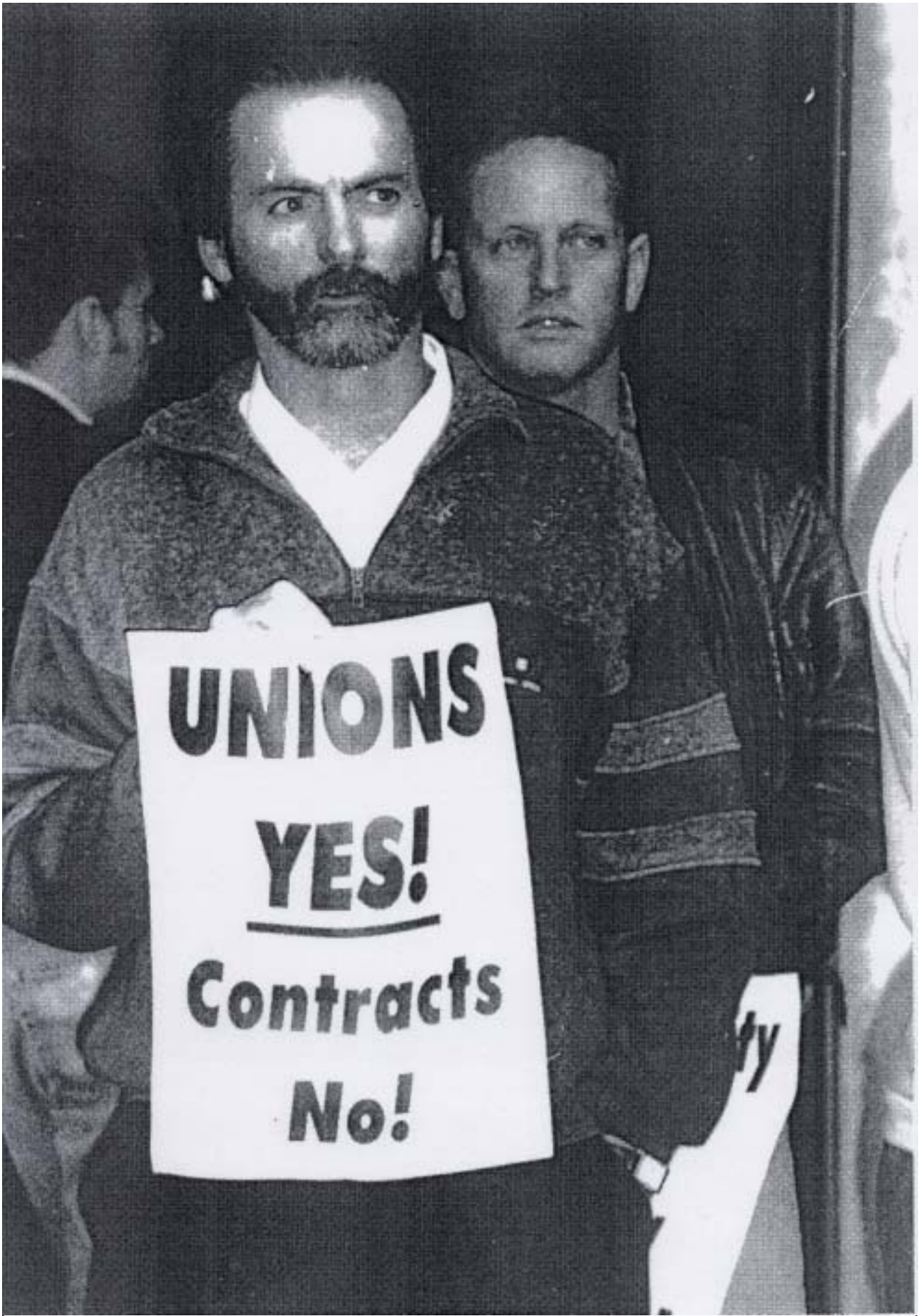
Labor Party leader Ben Chifley, who had attacked the Communists in the 1949 coal strike, did not support the Bill. When he died, Dr H V Evatt became Labor Party leader. Dr Evatt fought an outstanding fight against the legislation although the Labor Party was severely divided on the issue. The ALP's right-wing and the Groupers in the trade union movement were outright supporters of the attempts to ban the Communist Party.

A tremendous campaign developed across Australia. "Vote NO!" committees sprang up in communities, trade unions, Labor Party branches and universities. It was one of the broadest campaigns ever seen in Australia.

On September 22 1951, after a 21-month struggle, the attempts to ban the Communist Party of Australia proved fruitless when the Menzies Government suffered defeat in the referendum. It was a struggle to preserve democratic rights as many understood that the banning of the Communist Party would be the forerunner of bans on other opposition organisations. The victory was an example of the effectiveness of the united front.

United Front

Throughout the whole period the Communist Party of Australia did not





Jim Healy

One of Australia's most outstanding trade union leaders. He built the Waterside Workers' Federation into a powerful and militant union which won many conditions for its members. He was a very successful unifier of different political forces. He was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia.



The slogan "MUA here to stay" rang out across Australia during the 1998 MUA dispute. The conspiracy of Peter Reith and John Howard to smash the Maritime Union of Australia was defeated by MUA solidarity and the mass solidarity of other trade unions and the community.



The fight for jobs and permanent employment is a continuing one. Unions have to battle against the attempts of employers to break strike struggles by introducing scab labour.

One of the many leaflets published during the Coal strike of 1949 when the Chifley Government introduced the Army as scabs into the miners to break the strike.





An international campaign against Rio Tinto, one of the world's largest mining transnational corporations, has been joined by workers and trade unions from a number of countries. It is a great example of the workers from many countries joining hands to fight a rapacious employer.

turn its back on the principle of the united front and always welcomed joint action with those members of the ALP who took a position in defence of the real interests of the working class. This remains the position today. Unfortunately there are now fewer members of the ALP who will openly co-operate, let alone join an alliance with the communists. The rightward shift of the ALP, particularly since the 1980s, which marks the adoption of “economic rationalist” policies by the Labor Party leadership, has seen a position develop whereby the ALP has adopted and implemented many policies which are similar to those of the conservative parties.

Despite the attempts of all the reactionary forces, the activity of communists in the trade unions was not dampened. The 1954 and 1956 waterfront strikes were a prime example of this. They were led by prominent communist trade union leader, Jim Healy, and a significant body of communist and left Labor rank and file activists. The strikes were also supported by the ACTU. Those strikes were a resounding success and are an example of trade union involvement not only on economic issues facing workers but also in defence of their political interests as well.

There were several steel strikes in this period, led by Party comrades E Thornton and L.J. McPhillips against the BHP. They also ended in a victory for the Ironworkers Union. Communist Party activity and leadership led to the unionisation of the BHP steelworks at Newcastle and severely curtailed the efforts of BHP to erode the conditions of its workers.

The 1950s, with the Cold War at its peak, were to be difficult years. However the Party maintained its organisation and its unity and was to remain a significant force in the Australian trade union movement.

During this period the Party held several positions on the ACTU Executive but was never in a majority. This position continued into the 1960s. The Party campaigned for strong fighting unions and for an application of the united front. There were numerous policy initiatives and action to ensure that job organisation was strengthened and that the members were involved in the affairs of the union.

The position and responsibility of the communists in the trade unions was put in the following way in 1963:

“Every Party member who works should be an active trade unionist who helps strengthen the union for its task of improving the workers’ conditions. The Communists prove in practice that they are militant and skilful fighters for unionism in action against the employers. They believe that, besides industrial issues, the unions have to concern themselves with broader political questions - the fight to prevent war and safeguard peace; opposition to monopoly domination; united action with other sections of the community for common objectives; defence of democratic rights as they affect unionism and as they affect all citizens” (L Aarons *Labour Movement at the Crossroads*, CPA publication, 1963 p.38)

Many great battles were to be fought throughout the sixties including splendid actions by communists and many others against the Vietnam War. There were many struggles against the “pains and penalties” imposed upon many unions under repressive industrial legislation. This culminated in massive industrial action in support of the gaoled Victorian Tramways union leader, Clarrie O’Shea, in 1968. His union refused to pay fines imposed by the Arbitration Court but after five days of massive, nation-wide struggle, Clarrie O’Shea was released and the government’s penal provisions became inoperative.

In the 1960s, a series of splits developed in the communist movement that were to have serious consequences for the Communist Party.

Two main splits occurred. The first took place when a group of Party members broke away in 1963 and formed the Maoist CPA (M-L). The second occurred in 1971 when the Socialist Party of Australia (SPA) was formed. These splits reflected serious differences in the communist movement, not only in Australia, but in many other countries as well. Towards the end of the 1970s, the then leadership of the Communist Party lost faith in the working class and advanced the theory that students and academics had replaced the working class as the revolutionary section of society. Following this line of thinking the Party leadership dismantled the considerable number of Party workplace organisations. They abandoned support for Marxism, which they declared, was out of date and that a revolutionary Party was now irrelevant. These ideas eventually led to the liquidation of the former CPA in 1991.

The Socialist Party of Australia

The SPA from its inception took up the banner of Marxism-Leninism and continued the policy of the united front in the trade union movement. Many trade union activists and trade union officials joined the SPA at that time. It remained a strong force in the trade union movement and carried on the good work of the CPA in the trade unions in earlier periods.

The SPA maintained an extremely firm position on matters of class struggle and the role of the communists in the trade unions. Its members played leading roles in many trade union organisations and on the ACTU. It was particularly strong on the waterfront, among seafarers, enginedrivers and in building unions.

The SPA regarded the trade unions as the biggest and most powerful and active organisations of the working class. A resolution adopted by the Party said:

“The scope of trade union activities extends beyond the hours and wages questions although these remain essential issues if trade unions are to look after the interests of their members. Social, democratic, political and solidarity issues of various kinds have been taken up. The SPA supports the extension of trade union activities to include issues of national and international politics, the peace struggle, health, education, housing and so on, in fact, all issues that affect the lives of working people.”
(*Resolution* adopted by the 4th Congress of the SPA 1981 p 21)

On the question of the relationship between trade unions and members of the Communist Party the Party holds the view that it is the responsibility of communists to strengthen the trade union of which they are a member and help strengthen the trade union movement as a whole. They are called upon to be good unionists, loyal, to know the awards and enterprise agreements, help strengthen the leadership of the trade union and to help build and take part in job committees and act as union delegates. They must help to distribute union and Party literature to workers and so on. They must always stand up and fight for the interests and needs of the workers.

In 1983 a significant agreement between the ALP and the ACTU was adopted — the Accord. The SPA was critical of this agreement. It said:

“The commitment of the trade unions to the Accord meant a radical turn-around on a number of fundamental economic and political questions. The argument that wage increases led to job losses was accepted as was the argument that higher profits would lead to more investments and hence jobs. Adoption of the Accord marked the beginning of a period of class collaboration and retreat by the labour movement”. (*Program of the Socialist Party of Australia* 1992 p.20)

The SPA remained a strong critic of the various Accords adopted by the Labor Party and the trade unions over the next ten years.

“The fact of the matter is that the concepts contained within the Accord and necessary actions flowing from those concepts are deliberately and consciously intended to maintain, strengthen and guarantee the continuation of the capitalist system”. (*The Accord and its Consequences*, Jack McPhillips, 1985 p.6)

During the period of the Accords the ACTU vigorously pursued a policy of trade union amalgamations. Throughout its whole history up to this point, trade unions had been based on crafts rather than industries. This meant that many different and often conflicting unions were to be found in any one large workshop or industry. Communists have always supported the amalgamation of unions but have put the view that all unions should be based on particular industries — industrial unionism. This means that all workers in a particular industry whether employed in transport, clerical, metal, building, mining, etc, occupations, should combine in one union.

Unfortunately, the amalgamations that took place under ACTU leadership were not based on the industrial principle but were often based on particular political interests. Some became conglomerates rather than industry unions. Although this form of amalgamation led to many inner union conflicts, it represents a step forward and can lead to the eventual strengthening of the trade union movement overall.

The early 1980s were to prove an extremely difficult period for the SPA. Not all members saw eye to eye on the question of the Accords. The relationship of Communist Party members working as members or leaders of trade unions became another main issue. These differences were

lead a number of trade union leaders and members to leave the Party in 1984. This unfortunate development had a weakening affect upon the SPA.

Some alleged that the Party (officers) sought to “impose” Party policies on the trade unions and to “interfere” in their internal affairs. There was also a tendency to pose one form of activity against another, that is, Party work and trade union work. However, the majority rejected the accusations of “interference” and attempts to “impose”. There was no evidence to support this claim.

The SPA has always regarded the trade unions as independent organisations of the working class which unite the workers in a particular craft or industry irrespective of political persuasion. They have their own organisational structure and leaderships and make their own decisions.

The SPA not only regards the trade unions as independent organisations but insists upon this being respected. They must not be treated as though they were branches of the Party.

Both the Party and trade unions are working class organisations and they should not be posed against each other. Policy differences may always arise but these should be treated as differences between fraternal organisations, not by confrontation or rivalry.

From Socialist Party to Communist Party of Australia

In 1996 at its 8th Congress the SPA resumed the name, Communist Party of Australia. The former CPA had liquidated itself in 1991. This name change was taken as a re-affirmation of the SPA’s commitment to communism and Marxism-Leninism and has been widely accepted within the Trade Union Movement.

The resolution dealing with the change of name said: “The Communist Party was held in high regard in earlier times for its struggles on behalf of the Australian working class, for its commitment to a peaceful world and its dedicated fight to ban nuclear weapons tests and to eliminate nuclear weapons completely. The Communist Party of Australia forged a deserved reputation as a Party committed to internationalism. Communists also

fought strenuously for the national independence of Australia and made an unparalleled contribution to culture and the arts in Australia. The Communist Party formerly maintained a firm commitment to Marxism-Leninism...

“In taking the name ‘Communist’, the members of the Socialist Party of Australia pledge to live up to those high standards...”

The Party is now in the process of rebuilding its influence in the trade union movement. It has achieved some successes but the Party is still not as strong as it was in earlier times. The Party paper, *The Guardian*, however, is widely distributed and receives much praise from trade unions for its partisan reporting of trade union related issues and the struggles of the working class. Several Party organisations are also responsible for the distribution of bulletins and newsletters in workplaces and individual unions.

What is expected of communist trade union activists?

A high level of responsibility, commitment and competence is expected of communists working as trade union activists.

“In order to equip themselves as not only the best theoretical and political leaders of the trade unions, but also as the best practical trade unionists, militants must master the awards, as they cover their industry or factory, they must know the rule book of the union and its organisation, history, customs and practices. Only in this way can they become the best trade unionists.” (L.L. Sharkey, *The Trade Unions*, 1959 edition, p.14)

Sharkey’s comments remain relevant although today, communist unionists must pay attention to their Enterprise Agreements as well as the Award. They must at all times make certain that they remain financial and have a good knowledge of meeting procedure. They must win the trust of their workmates.

“Comrades in unions must study the conditions and problems of union members and draw up programs of demands...”

“Speaking in the union is also an art. We do not want to bore the workers

with long and windy speeches or go over their heads by being too theoretical.” (*Ibid* p.14)

As can be seen, there is much work needed to become a good communist union worker.

The goal of the communists within the union is the never-ending task of raising the level of consciousness of workers from a purely trade union understanding to a socialist understanding. Without achieving this, much good work over many years may bring only limited results.

The effective integration of Party work in an industry or workplace can be best achieved by the formation of workplace or industry Party branches. A large portion of the success achieved by communists in the trade unions is due to this type of organisation. There has not yet been a recovery from the 1960’s when the then revisionist leadership of the CPA deliberately disbanded many workplace branches.

The class struggle

In all countries society remains divided into classes. Australia is no exception. There are two main classes, the exploiting class and the exploited class, the capitalist class and the working class, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The struggle between these two classes is incessant. The forms of struggle vary from time to time and its intensity depends on the conditions, the time and place.

The class struggle is the main means by which things change in society. The class struggle is nothing new, in fact it was not even new in the time of Karl Marx as stated in this letter from Marx to J. Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852.

“... no credit is due to me for discovering either the existence of classes in modern society nor yet the struggle between them ...

What I did that was new was to prove:

- 1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production;
- 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat;

3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.” (Karl Marx - Frederick Engels, *Selected Letters*, Foreign Languages Press Peking, 1977 p.18)

The class struggle is one of the main forces of change from the old and outdated capitalist mode of production to the new and more progressive system of socialism. It is this same struggle that enables workers to win improved working conditions, wages, rights, security of employment, job safety and health regulations, etc.

Reforms and Reformism

Reforms, meaning changes, take place in all societies continuously. By reforms is meant changes which make small adjustments but which do not alter the fundamental nature of society. Reforms have usually been regarded as progressive changes, which are to the advantage of the working people of a society, but they can also be to the detriment of the working people. The Howard Government talks about reforms, such as reforms of the taxation system. But changes initiated by the conservative forces disadvantage the working class.

Communists and other progressive forces are in favour of reforms, which benefit the working people even though they do not result in a change in the social system. They are in the forefront of the struggle for better working conditions, trade union rights, better wages, equality for women, the rights of the Aboriginal people, and many other improvements that can be made by struggle now.

The ruling class often introduces reforms to side-track the struggles of the trade union movement. They will make some small concessions if by making such gestures, they can bring an end to militant action by workers. Marxists call for a struggle in support of reforms as a means to bring pressure to bear on capital and as a means of creating more favourable conditions in which to continue the struggle for socialism.

The ideology of reformism however, is a different matter. Reformists believe that society can be improved only by reforms and limit themselves to reforms. They reject any fundamental change in society from

capitalism to socialism. Societies are changed by both reforms and by revolutions, but the reformists limit themselves solely to reforms. In practice this means perpetuating the existing capitalist system for the foreseeable future.

As has been mentioned the dominant ideology within the Australian trade union movement is that of reformism. Communists see that attempts to reform capitalism into a system that is advantageous to the workers, are fruitless. The system of capitalism, basing itself on the private appropriation of socially produced wealth, is fundamentally unfair to the vast masses of the people.

When something is rotten to the core, when its underlying principles are those which create massive social inequity and untold misery around the world, when its very basis is the exploitation of one by another, it is obvious that tinkering around the edges will not solve the problem at the very heart of the system.

No reform of capitalism by the many and varied social democratic governments that have held office has ever succeeded in solving the problems of the working class, and never will. Not one reformist government has ever achieved anything nearing socialism.

Arising out of reformist ideology is the illusion that there are common interests between the worker and the capitalist. Bob Hawke, as Prime Minister argued that if only the employers and the workers and their unions, together with the government would sit down around a table, they could achieve outcomes that were favourable to all concerned.

Reflecting this viewpoint a bulletin issued by the Labour Resource Centre for the Western Suburbs Shop Stewards Committee wrote in January 1985: "Our work shows there are real possibilities for workers to be involved in drawing up and negotiating planning agreements with their company ... Anything less will lead to needless and bitter industrial dispute ... Right from the word go, we have looked towards closer cooperation with employers."

However, by 1990, seven years after the Accord was introduced the

Financial Review (7/3/90) wrote: “The Federal Treasurer, Mr Keating, has moved to formalise and make respectable the underlying objective of the Prices and Incomes Accord, which the Government has always been coy about stating: that it is a consensus for creating record corporate profits ... Now a Labor Treasurer is boasting that his greatest achievement has been to cut workers’ wages, reduce the wage share of the economy and to lift the profit share to record levels.”

The Prices and Incomes Accord was reformist thinking in action and ended up with workers being worse off which, in turn, has led to a substantial weakening of the whole trade union movement.

One of the greatest challenges for communist trade unionists has been the battle to overcome reformist ideology and to win an understanding of the different needs of the working people, on the one hand, and the employing class on the other.

Recognising the many practical examples of the role that the class struggle has played in changing society the Communist Party of Australia continues to fight strongly against occurrences of class collaboration and strives to bring an understanding of the reality of the class struggle and that workers and employers have opposing interests.

Rank and File Activity and on the job organisations

Another feature of the activity of communists in the trade unions is the emphasis placed upon the involvement of the rank and file in the affairs of the union. Throughout its history the CPA has sought to develop the system of shop stewards committees or rank and file union committees and to integrate their activity into the structures of respective unions.

This emphasis is not to exclude the role of good class based leadership. The fact is, unions are at their strongest when the relationship between militant class based leadership and the rank and file is strong and effective. There is a unity between the two that should not be ignored. One cannot properly function without the other. They can never effectively exist without each other because a weakening of the union will result.

An unfortunate aspect of the operation of some right-wing dominated

unions is the non-recognition of the necessity for on the job organisation. This lack of recognition accompanied with an adherence to capitalist ideology presents grave problems for workers on the job.

The necessity for on the job organisation under these circumstances can be the main contributing factor enabling workers to combat attacks upon their working conditions. It can be said that the organisation of workers at a job level is paramount under any circumstance.

Job organisation, when not integrated into the machinery of the union, may not be as fully effective for the union but it remains the means to organise and educate workers in the struggle whenever employers attempt to take away workers' conditions and rights.

Right -wing leaderships that fail to see the enormous benefits and strengths that integrating rank and file organisation into the structures of the union brings about do the union movement a great disservice.

The separation of rank and file organisation and activity from "official" union business sends a very negative message to the workers and can create the seeds of anti-union sentiment among workers.

Every effort must be made by class conscious workers to see that there is a place within the union for rank and file activity and organisation. Union leaderships that deny such a role must be pressured to change their views but in doing so care must be taken by the workers not to swing to the right themselves by calling for solutions such as resigning union membership or not paying union dues.

Strikes

The right to strike remains a fundamental right of workers in the incessant struggle between workers and employers. Anti-union industrial legislation and adherence to class collaborationist policies has seen a decline in the use of the strike as an industrial and political weapon. Strikes are, as Engels put it "...the school of war of the working men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided.... and as schools of war they are unexcelled."

There is a great need for strike action to be well thought out and considered. Strike aims have to be adopted and the means to achieve those aims worked out. The strengths and weaknesses of the opposing employer organisations have to be known as well as the possibility of solidarity actions by other unions. To lose a strike struggle because of poor leadership or planning will have a detrimental effect on the workers and their union. They will be encouraged by a success and disappointed by a failure.

It is true to say that strikes are the main fighting weapon of the unions. “The communist approach to strikes of workers includes the concept of strikes as weapons in the major political struggles of workers” and “... ‘industrial action’ by workers is an imperative of the class struggle and thoroughly validated for that purpose.” (*Communists and the Trade Unions*, Jack McPhillips, 1981, p.66)

Examples of strike actions in Australia which have pursued political objectives include the many actions to defeat anti-trade union legislation, opposition to the Vietnam war, actions at the time of the sacking of the Whitlam government and solidarity actions with workers in other countries.

“Political strikes are a higher form of struggle than economic strikes. Such strikes challenge the Government, the State, the rule of the capitalist class. One of our chief trade union tasks is the politicisation of strikes.

“Strikes are also important in that they reveal the class-lineup to the more backward workers. The bourgeoisie, its press and politicians, most of the clerics all unite to fight the strikers with every possible weapon. The law, the police, even the army are used to crush the workers. The reformists oppose the strikers and thus expose themselves. The hypocritical mask is off. In a flash, the real character of the capitalist state is revealed to the masses.” (L L Sharkey, *The Trade Unions*, 1959 edition, p.30)

The Arbitration System

A Royal Commission on strikes in 1891 stated “that a great many disputes originate in ignorance, in mutual misunderstanding, in unfounded suspicions, in exaggerated alarms, and very much is gained if all these

disturbing accessories can be got rid of and the controversy can be narrowed down to its simple issue” (*Select Documents in Australian History*, Manning Clark, p. 626)

The Royal Commission’s limitation of disputes to “its simple issue” was actually an attempt to direct the class struggle into safe and legal channels. It recognised the existence of the class struggle when it recorded the makeup of the Board of Conciliation. All members except the chairman (who was obviously thought to be independent and above classes) would come from “the two bodies of employers and employed. They will inevitably have the bias of their class, and will feel some responsibility towards their associates for upholding their class interests”, said the Royal Commissioners. (*Ibid.* p.628)

In relation to the class struggle between capital and labour “the liberals from the bourgeois parties and the reformists from the labor party put forward arbitration and conciliation as the solution to such antagonism.” (*A Short History of Australia*, Manning Clark, p162)

The parliaments of Victoria and NSW in 1891 and 1892 introduced voluntary arbitration. It was introduced in South Australia in 1894. In 1901 NSW went on to legislate for compulsory arbitration.

Since its initiation, arbitration has become a cornerstone in the thinking and activities of the vast majority of the trade unions. And while “Communists, at various levels of the trade unions, and in official publications and other writings have been, and still are, amongst those who condemn the functioning and the decisions of the arbitration tribunals ... Communists have not made abolition of arbitration a main or central issue in their programmatic proposals.” (*Communists and the Trade Unions*, Jack McPhillips, 1981, p.58-59)

“They (communists) have recognised that in a capitalist society, and in relation to many disputes, some form of arbitration can serve purposes useful to workers even though limited in scope and also that the Acts covering the arbitration system contain provisions giving essential legal status to unions as organisations and legalising wage rates and other working conditions.” (*Ibid.* P 59)

Communists have given main emphasis to exposing the capitalist system and to the removal of anti-trade union laws and penal provisions. It is these laws and provisions that inhibit the effectiveness of unions and restrict the scope of action to achieve a betterment of the position of their members and workers generally. Communists have taken the view that it is the right of unions and workers to “take any form of action they consider necessary in defence and advancement of living standards and working conditions, against main reliance on processes of arbitration” (Ibid. p.59)

“In April 1949 Jack McPhillips, then an official of the Ironworkers’ Union, was gaoled for a month for advising a meeting of shop stewards that their industrial strength would be decisive in determining the outcome of an Arbitration Court hearing.” (Edgar Ross, *Of Storm and Struggle*. 1982, p.112)

This statement recognises the primacy of the class struggle in determining outcomes for workers over an adherence to legal procedures carried out under the auspices of the capitalist state. Reliance on the Arbitration system alone was to fall prey to the trap set by the employers, the capitalist mass media and right-wing Labor leaders.

“Reformist class collaboration expresses itself in the adherence of the unions, in Australia and New Zealand, to legalism - to the arbitration system. The function of the compulsory arbitration is to prevent strike struggles and to enforce acceptance, by law, of a low standard of living.” (L L Sharkey, *The Trade Unions*, 1959 edition, p.19)

Peter Reith’s current Workplace Relations Act (1996) has seen the ability of unions to influence the Industrial Relations Commission with industrial action severely curtailed. Laws that in effect ban industrial action outside of extremely limited parameters have been responsible for this. In addition, the ability of the Industrial Relations Commission to decide on many matters has been substantially reduced.

The union movement is battling against this assault of the reactionary Liberal/National Government. Their anti-union laws and the relegation of awards present a grave danger to the union movement. A struggle to remove these laws is essential. It is also vitally important at this time to maintain and extend the award system.

Throughout its history the Communist Party has never rejected negotiation between unions and industry employers but always reserved the right of workers and their unions to take appropriate action where necessary. Today, with the advent of enterprise bargaining and the destruction, for the most part, of Awards as a result of the employer and government offensive, the possibility of achieving good outcomes for workers has been dramatically reduced.

For trade union policies to be implemented today, requires a working class assault on the anti-union laws which are preventing, or more accurately holding back, the unions from taking the necessary action to defend and extend the rights of workers, their living standards and working conditions.

The ACTU

“The Communist Party was instrumental in the establishment of the Australian Council of Trade Unions.” (L L Sharkey, *The Trade Unions*, 1959 edition, p.35)

The Party had proposed a national trade union centre along the lines of the British and Russian examples and the proposition received widespread support. The ACTU was set up in 1927.

It is of great importance that the ACTU has remained as a single trade union centre which unites all Unions irrespective of political persuasion. This contrasts with the situation in many other countries where a number of different trade union centres based on political or religious affiliations exist and result in the working class being divided.

The ACTU leadership has varied during its existence, sometimes giving strong support to workers while on other occasions, depending on the leadership, neglecting or even betraying the workers.

Reformist politics have dominated the ACTU throughout its entire history. This state of affairs has led to the ACTU being a far less effective force than its potential would allow with a leadership basing itself on the class

struggle and socialism. This however is not an argument for splitting the ACTU or setting up a rival centre.

It remains an extremely important body and the task is to work to strengthen its leadership so that it becomes a consistent and militant leader of the working class. Throughout its history, militants and communists have had some success in having progressive policies adopted and consequently influencing the entire trade union movement in a positive way.

“The real fight is obviously to end reformist control of the ACTU, just as this is the real need in a number of important unions and labour councils”. (L L Sharkey, *The Trade Unions*, 1959 edition, p.35)

International Solidarity

The solidarity between workers of different nations is an aspect of trade unionism that is of much importance. There have been many instances of workers supporting international strikes and causes. Some unions have been more active around these questions than others. Wherever communists have played a leading role in a union, attention to this question has always been given a high priority. This is no surprise, because Internationalism is an important part of communist ideology. However, even before the formation of the Communist Party, Australian trade unions made financial collections to support the struggles of overseas workers.

The “Hands off Russia” campaign following the Russian revolution of 1917 and the wars of intervention by the western imperialist powers in the 1920s was one such campaign. The NSW Labor Council had welcomed the Russian Revolution. It said in a resolution: “We rejoice in the revolution in Russia and congratulate the people of that country on their efforts to abolish despotic power and class privilege, and urge the workers of other lands where similar conditions exist to follow their example with the same magnificent courage and determination.”

Later, the “Hands off China” campaign supported the struggles of the Chinese people to win their independence and exposed the British imperialist attempts to maintain their colonial domination.

Trade unions provided assistance to British seamen who had left their ships in Australian ports and assisted British workers during the general strike of 1926. British miners were similarly assisted during that period.

Work stoppages in a number of enterprises took place around the Party's campaign opposing the electrocution of Sacco and Vanzetti in the United States.

Communist trade unionists helped Indonesian refugees who came to Australia during the Japanese occupation of their country. The attempt of the Dutch colonialists to re-impose their control following the defeat of the Japanese was thwarted by Australia's waterfront unions who acted with the support of the Chifley Labor Government. All Dutch ships carrying troops to Indonesia were tied up as a result of their action.

Many unions took action against the war in Vietnam and in many instances these actions occurred under the leadership of communists. Unionists in their thousands took part in street demonstrations opposing conscription and Australia's participation in that war.

Opposition to apartheid was another issue receiving widespread support from the trade unions. More recently there have been campaigns in support of the Cuban people against the US imperialist blockade of that country.

International solidarity however, is not a one-way street and significant solidarity support was extended to wharfies in 1998 when Patrick Stevedores illegally locked them out.

If there had not been such a long history of support for international causes and campaigns over many years the international support for the cause of the wharfies may not have been so overwhelming.

International solidarity is a strong weapon in the hands of the working class and it is an area that communists will continue to give the attention that it deserves.

The International Trade Union Movement

The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) was founded on July 15, 1920 “when agreement was reached between the Russian unions, the Italian Federation of Labor, Spanish, Yugoslav and Bulgarian trade unions after discussions by delegates in Moscow.” (Issue.201, *The Red Leader*, July 17 1935). It held its inaugural conference in mid-1921.

Following on from the Versailles Treaty, which concluded WW I, and the establishment of the League of Nations, social-democratic led trade unions set up the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). This organisation pursued class collaborationist policies. The RILU, on the other hand, consistently adhered to a policy of class struggle and internationalism.

Following WW II and the defeat of fascism, a united international trade union body called the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) was set up. It was founded in place of both the Red International of Labour Unions and the International Federation of Trade Unions. The WFTU was a truly all embracing organisation.

In the late 1940s the WFTU was split. It was the period of the Cold War and intense anti-communism in a number of countries. The representatives of some western trade unions in a breakaway move formed the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949.

The WFTU pursues a policy of class struggle and its affiliates embraces over 400 million members. A number of Australian unions maintain friendly relations with the WFTU.

The affiliates of the ICFTU cover over 125 million members. Its leadership is still strongly influenced by social-democratic ideas.

Several of the Trade Union Internationals (TUIs) affiliated to the ICFTU played positive and helpful roles in Australian struggles. The International Transport Federation (ITF) contributed significantly during the 1998 Maritime Union lockout by Patrick Stevedores. The International Confederation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) has contributed positively to the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union's (CFMEU) Rio Tinto campaign.

The World Confederation of Labour (WCL) is a smaller international body which is religiously based and represents 26 million members.

The ever-increasing dominance of the Transnational Corporations in the affairs of every country and their vicious attacks on the workers everywhere, underlines the need for a program of joint activity between the three major international trade union bodies.

The WFTU has made a number of proposals for joint action by the three trade union international bodies and for their eventual unification. It is to be hoped that before too long, steps in this direction are taken and positive developments occur and an all-embracing trade union international like the WFTU in its early days can again be established.

Conclusion

It is not possible in this short pamphlet to point to every trade union action or to the contribution made by trade union activists in the 150-year history of the trade unionism in Australia or to the many contributions by members of the CPA in its 80-year history. Much has been achieved.

Trade union activities have not only been directed to the needs of workers. Their actions have also had a considerable influence in many areas of society. Calls for an Australian owned shipping line, green bans, support for community organisations and solidarity with farmers are just some other areas that have been given attention by trade unions. The solidarity and support expressed to the workers of the world at various times of hardship and struggle have helped many workers from other lands and on many occasions has resulted in gains for the movements receiving that support. Communist trade union activists have contributed to these achievements.

The trade unions are not the only arena of struggle for communists. The struggle for socialism must be fought out on the basis of the whole of society.

It is certain that the class struggle will continue in our society. Reaction-

ary forces bent on the destruction of the union movement will continue to pedal their lies and perform their foul deeds and we should expect nothing else. The right-wing reformist forces will continue to collaborate with the class enemy. The Communist Party of Australia will continue to play a role in the trade union movement and treat that work with the seriousness that it deserves. It will continue to work for an improvement in the position of the workers and will cooperate with others who support the demands of the working people and recognise the reality of the class struggle. It will continue to advocate a socialist position and fight to win the workers to a recognition of the need to move on from the capitalist system -- a view that has been strongly held by many trade union activists and is at the centre of the existence of the Communist Party.

“Outside the class struggle, socialism is either a hollow phrase or a naive dream”, wrote Lenin. (*Petty Bourgeois and Proletarian Socialism, LCW. Vol.9 p.443*)

The same applies to effective trade unionism.

