



More than Meets the Eye – the CPA(M-L) in NSW

Part 1: Bert and Syd

by Louisa L.

The breadth of the work of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) has never been readily apparent to those looking on. But there's more than meets the eye.

For several decades after its formation in 1964, the CPA (M-L) worked in a hostile environment in Sydney where the old CPA, dissolved in 1991, was strongest.

Khrushchev's poisonous "secret speech" to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 caused huge divisions in the Australian party (after initial but superficial condemnation) and in progressive forces across the world. Till then, the

Comintern, the international organisation of communist parties run by the Soviet Party, had the final say in the Australian Party, even though it lacked detailed knowledge of Australian conditions.

International relations between parties had not been understood in those years, when the Soviet Union was under constant and brutal attack from united capitalist forces.

Much of these inter party relations are analysed in E.F. Hill's work, particularly in the posthumously published *Communism in Australia, Reflections and Recollections*² which makes a much more dispassionate appraisal of



Comrade E.F Hill (L) with Comrade Bert Chandler (C) and well-known Australian author Thomas Keneally (R)

² *Communism in Australia, Reflections and Recollections*, E.F Hill:
<http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/australia/hill-last/index.htm>



events.

The essence of communism was the battleground. While triggered by the international split, the struggle against revisionism was key. Core principles of Marxism-Leninism had to be studied and implemented in Australia's circumstances. Just as Russian conditions were unique in 1917, so are each country's.

In Sydney, parties that followed Trotsky's lead, miniscule before 1956, were growing by the 1960s. The old CPA, with its increasingly relaxed attitude to organisation and a New Left liberalism in the face of corporate power, was relatively large. Some struggled against liberalism within the CPA, but study of Marxism in Australian conditions was often superficial. Its mainly young members often existed in a bloc, with little direct contact with the wider community beyond those who called themselves 'left'.

The greatest strength of these parties was in Sydney.

Painting targets

In a recent book, *The Far Left in Australia since 1945*, the introduction to Chapter 2 on "Maoism" suggests the CPA (M-L) and its followers were "arguably the most despised grouping within the Australian Far Left".

Let's leave aside the wisdom of an avowedly left critique using the term "far left", which certainly paints a target on any groups so named, especially when politicians and media talk of "extremists like Antifa".

Beyond that, the term of "despised" gives the idea of something below human condemnation, as if we should have been grouped with paedophiles and those in power who covered up their activities.

This is despite the contending parties or groups still bearing the names "communist", "socialist" or "left" cooperating in the 1980s at such events as the 1989 Fightback Conference in Melbourne, which saw presentations from almost all of those

parties. In Sydney it led to some united efforts against nationwide attacks on the working class.

Bert

Only a small section of our members have ever made their membership fully public. There were times in the old party when not revealing membership was very important. Witness Bert Chandler.

Bert had both acclamation from the people and attack from their enemies. Few now know his name.

Written records about Bert begin in 1932 when he was prominent in the Australian Labor Party in country NSW. As Lithgow Mayor in 1937 Bert was "responsible for the most progressive works in the history of that municipality". (*Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advocate*, 1 June 1939)

The Advocate said he was deeply involved in cultural, political and welfare issues, as diverse as the Show Committee, hospital board, Horticultural Society and as an "active organiser for the relief of distress amongst the unemployed". This foreshadowed the broad community connections of our later member.

By 1937 he was on NSW ALP's Central Executive.

He remained with the ALP when the Communist Party was illegal between June 1940 and late 1942, able to work and speak freely.

In May 1943, as General Secretary of the NSW Labor Party, he told the Wollongong May Day rally that "there must be a complete organisation of the people" in order to defeat fascism. (*South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, Friday 7 May 1943)

In all likelihood he had been already a member of the CPA for some years, but in 1945 he publicly joined, moving straight on to the Central Committee. By 1947 he was CPA electoral Campaign Director.

Cold war, hot water

The Cold War poured heat on dissidents. In 1953



Bert was one of three men charged with sedition, under Section 24D of the Commonwealth Crimes Act, after raids on suburban homes and the Communist Party's offices.

The Crown Prosecutor raged, quoting this sentence, "The monarchy is a useful weapon to protect the system, to stifle class-consciousness, foster class-collaboration, and paralyse working-class action for social change." (*Illawarra Daily Mercury*, Thursday 20 Aug 1953) Shock horror!

The prosecution failed. For Bert, who ran the Party's publishing business (making money by sales of the racing paper 'Trot Guide') they tried again. Bert was hauled before the 1954-55 Royal Commission on Espionage, nicknamed the 'Sharpley Commission' after a communist renegade or spy, Cecil Sharpley.

Bert was undeterred. In 1964 he took a leading role in the new party led by Hill. With him he brought his wide connections with everyday people and communists across the state, his organisational skills and his courage. By then he was working at the state-owned Small Arms Factory.

A comrade who worked closely with him when he managed Sydney's East Wind Bookshop from the late 1960s said, "He was single-minded in his struggle to make socialism a reality in Australia. He never veered from his course. But no one is perfect. He could be too demanding." Remarking that was hardly surprising given the hard times he lived through, the comrade said he was a "wonderful man. I loved him. He made history in Australia".

To this writer, he was kind, gentle and ethical, a communist measured in his words and actions. He was the meeting point of a web of people across the state.

Syd

During the anti-Japanese war, the Party developed close links and members among the Sydney Chinese. These links were cemented during the 1938 *Dalfram* struggle at Port Kembla,

when then Attorney General and later Prime Minister Bob Menzies earned the nickname "Pig Iron Bob" for trying to force waterside workers to load pig iron bound for Japan.

It followed the 1938 massacre of up to 300,000 thousand Chinese people by invading Japanese troops in Nanjing. Workers also warned our pig iron could return as bombs.

The Chinese community was galvanized, and their staunchest allies were the communists. When wharfies led by Ted Roach refused to load pig iron bound for Japan onto the *Dalfram*, the Sydney Chinese community largely supplied them with food, straight from the markets. (Rupert Lockwood, *War on the Waterfront*)

Syd Clare was an active member of the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) in Sydney. The dispute influenced him, as it did all waterside workers in Australia.

Syd appeared in the WWF film *The Hungry Mile* leading striking workers off a ship. He joined the CPA (M-L) at its foundation in 1964. He was not the only WWF or Seaman's Union member to join, including in Port Kembla. But they were definitely in the minority.

The old party which controlled the union, worked to box in members of the CPA (M-L). The public membership of the old party meant they were all well known, both to the bosses and the union officials. At times there were immediate physical threats. This is not to sling mud, as the split was bitterly felt on both sides, but just a statement of fact.

Some of our WWF members and supporters were of Chinese and Aboriginal heritage, and worked more freely in the Australia-China Friendship Society, where Syd was NSW Branch President for many years, or in the Chinese Youth League. A frequent visitor to China, Syd and the Society were devoted to the Gung Ho Industrial Cooperatives movement (the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives) and raised considerable funds in support of their work.



Towards the future

A larger group operated, under similar conditions to the waterfront, in the building industry, especially in the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF). They formed the bulk of the group that supported the takeover of the NSW BLF by the Federal organisation, with support from every state organisation.

Full time union officials can remain true to the people, but in a soup of numbers' games and jockeying for position, faced daily with compromises with capitalism, it's much harder. Unions are part of capitalism. Our Party members in the building industry and elsewhere learned to focus both on the big issues and on quiet work, behind the scenes, with no flags flying.

Leadership comes from the masses to the masses, in a never-ending cycle. Those who separate themselves from everyday people, those with egos, motivated by individualism, can never fully serve the people. (Mao Zedong, *Some questions concerning methods of leadership*)

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When he became NSW BLF President in 1974 Johnny McNamara remained a rank and filer. Others also remained on the job. Their leadership came from listening to and learning from their workmates.

The state played on divisions which saw the BLF deregistered and destroyed in NSW.

The key NSW BLF leader overestimated his own capacity and the union's strength, acting as if it were a revolutionary party capable of taking on the whole state apparatus.

Through the 80s and early 90s, as organisers were arrested day after day, the Building Workers Industrial union, dominated by the Socialist Party of Australia, poached BLF members. (There was discontent within SPA about this and

eventually a group led by BWIU leader Pat Clancy left the SPA.)

Everything exists in particular contexts, from the past, within the present and into the future.

There was and is much more for the Party and its members to learn.



More than Meets the Eye – the CPA (M-L) in NSW

Part 2: Vietnam, State Forces, and an East Wind

by Louisa L.

The Vietnam Moratoriums brought politics to the fore among workers and students. Though outnumbered, Party members were involved in leadership through Worker Student Alliance. Despite ‘Maoist’ labels, WSA was regarded respectfully within the leadership. It went out of its way to leaflet factories and talk with workers as well as students. Students were the main, but not exclusive, targets for most other groups.

WSA emphasised the need to see the war as part of US imperialism’s attempts to broaden its empire especially in Asia, through a series of wars and coups. Unlike other groups, it organised and propagandised for independence.

Our members and supporters were deeply involved in the leadership of the Draft Resisters Union (DRU) here, especially in its later stages. One had already joined the list of those jailed around the time of the huge Moratoriums in 1970. Through till Whitlam’s election in

December 1972, a coordinated plan by the growing band of those refusing to register for so-called National Service was rolled out. At every appearance by Liberal politicians, another resister would stand, give his name and address, and demand to be arrested.

This had a profound impact every time it happened. I still remember the collective intake of air as my quiet and serious friend Steve from school days, sitting next to me but without a word, suddenly stood to confront Attorney General Ivor Greenwood. He was not arrested, though secret police were very evident. There were too many brave young men like him. Jails would overflow and suburban outrage with it.

Memories of times past are imbued with their spirit. And so it is with this article. It carries the marks of its birth.

Working class leadership was critical. When workers stopped work to stop the war, it rocked



People march against the Vietnam War in Sydney 1971



foundations.

In contrast, young university students are prone to adventurism. The Party's militancy drew in young supporters who, like this writer from 1975, often lacked working class discipline. The actions that grew from this are covered in numerous books and articles. NSW based pieces almost always come down one-sidedly condemning "Maoist" adventurism.

But would the same writers condemn the adventures of the DRU's pirate radio station, illegally broadcasting at night, with balloons hoisting the antennae and careful watch kept for tracking police? All the while, many hundreds of resisters waited their turn, hid or had spectacular escapes.

During the Vietnam War and soon after, Worker Student Alliance worked with the Anti-Bases Action Coalition against the U.S. military bases that increasingly littered the continent, before the latter merged into the Campaign Against Foreign Military Bases in Australia, CAFMBA. The Party took the initiative in all three, but they had wider membership.

CAFMBA operated from the late 60s to mid-70s. This alphabetic mouthful, which was easier to pronounce than it looked, was small, and joined bigger events aimed at US imperialism, organised from Melbourne and Adelaide. Here, its members, some of them ex-draft resisters took part in the 1974 Long March, a bus and vehicle convoy to Northwest Cape in Western Australia.

As the convoy arrived at towns across Australia, leaflets, megaphone diplomacy, street theatre and quiet conversations greeted locals. It was the first, but not the last time street theatre made an appearance in the work of our members and supporters through the 70s.

Things were heating up, on many fronts.

The State and Revolution

The Vietnam War and the Moratoriums educated many people about the ruthlessness of the state overseas, and locally where police removed

identifying numbers before committing deliberate organised violence.

Sydney police were also notoriously corrupt and brutal. In cahoots with major crooks they ran crime. Everything from illegal gambling, drugs and prostitution to who could hold stalls at Paddy's Markets, then the major fruit and veg market. Murder was their game, so bashing a few protesters was an afternoon picnic.

For some like this writer, either you cried and hid, or decided to resist, because it was clear the police were overwhelmingly outnumbered by the people. There were instances which particularly shocked contemptuous police. In 1972 Gay Liberation's young men and women fought furiously as police tried to make arrests. This was not what Sydney coppers expected! They had bashed and murdered and blackmailed queers with impunity. Then an International Women's Day march outside Bidura Girls' "Home" in Glebe made sure those that police attempted to arrest were freed none too gently.

Several young blokes in or close to the Party in Sydney were casually sexist and homophobic. They copped furious flak from a majority of young members and supporters, some of whom had been involved in the battles with police against the same attitudes. The so-called universal "he" in E.F. Hill's writing was also criticised.

In April 1975 the Vietnam War ended. The world's mightiest power had been defeated. The masses, with good leadership, had made history. People sensed this collective power. We were all asking big questions.

An East Wind

From the early 1960s, the East Wind Bookshop was managed by Bert Chandler in Pitt Street, Sydney, then part of Chinatown. It was the Party's public face. Paperback editions of communist classics for a dollar or less brought legions of young people to the shop, including this writer who as a schoolgirl bought *The Communist Manifesto*, little thinking how important it would be in her life.



Bobby Da Fong, not of Chinese heritage, was nicknamed for his summer and winter thongs, made a reluctant living as a tattooist, often persuading potential customers against getting one. His heart was with the revolution and hour upon hour he slogged in the East Wind Bookshop, with another comrade who gave up PhD study (pre fee-free university courses, a rare event for the son of Jewish refugees) to devote himself to the movement against war in Vietnam. Both set up openly Marxist-Leninist stalls, as well as supporting WSA and the Moratoriums outside factories and at universities.

Wharfie Jimmy Dabron joined them at East Wind most afternoons after lugging cargo all day, to lug boxes and bags of books. Because the turnover was so high, there was plenty to do. Jim was kind, tough, calm, generous and a deep political listener and thinker with long years of working class experience. He had lots to teach, but was

always learning.

This was unlike many of us young people, focused on a revolution or coup round the corner, studying the Marxist classics and Australia, but also caught up with frenetic activity, too often thinking we knew it all.

By the mid-1970s the bookshop increasingly held Australian political economy and history books, including a groundbreaking but largely forgotten book, *The Black Resistance*, which used the sources of British colonial invaders, to expose not only massacres but a continent-wide guerilla war holding hostage the invader's desire for safety and total control, for around a decade or even longer in each area it attempted to occupy. Authors Barry York and Fergus Robinson saw it as "An introduction to the history of the Aborigine's struggle against British Colonialism" and dedicated it to "those brave men and women



Participants of the Long March to North West Cape US military base in 1974



who died defending their country.”

In the acknowledgements, they wrote, “A special debt is owed to the political inspiration provided in *Australia’s Revolution* by E.F. Hill.”³

ASIO & Co

Of course, the East Wind (and later Australian Independence Bookshop) was bugged by ASIO. This contributor remembers well a comment on the outcome of a series of medical tests she’d made there being repeated by “a member of the public” as she handed out leaflets for the July 4 protest of 1975. It was meant as a threat. We know you and what you are doing. There were many other examples. People with no political involvement were followed, simply because they visited what were “known houses” of communist activity. This could be based on just one suspected communist living in a big university share house with numerous visitors.

In the ‘70s, a number of the political Special Branch of NSW Police specifically targeted activists associated with the Party. Attempts to arrest some were accompanied by “Gotcha!” which proved premature, as our supporters never went without a struggle! Even family members had their home phones tapped, on the off chance that some commo skullduggery might occur in residences not lived in for years by said Maoist baddies. (This well before the scandals were uncovered that saw Premier Bob Carr disband Special Branch and promise its files would be available to all those featured in them. But not it seems to at least one Party member whose partner applied with her signature as a surprise birthday present.) By the ‘80s, Special Branch members would regularly visit the shop

and trawl its shelves. We knew them. They knew us.

Nazis and their mates preferred to visit when only an old and frail Bert or, in later years a youngish female, were alone. Bravery is not their strong suite. They had a particular hatred for “Maoists” who, when they gathered to jeer at one May Day parade (unlike those on the ALP-dominated podium) quietly made sure they never had the gall to turn up again.

(Like Covid, capitalist conditions eventually suited and bred them. The first leaflet distributed in 1976 by National Action, now Australia First, declared it wanted “the sound of Maoists ripping off their Eureka bumper stickers to be deafening”. We immediately knew we were on a winner.)

Eventually the shop’s name changed to the Australian Independence Bookshop. By then it held Sydney’s largest collection of First Peoples’ books outside Black Books, run by Aboriginal cooperative college Tranby. The Australian Independence Bookshop, had a regular flow of First Peoples, workers and students through it.

Paul Keating’s ‘recession we had to have’, combined with the effect on Australian people’s reflection after the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union, the temporary preeminence of the USA and the shutting down of the remnants of the old Communist Party of Australia, saw the bookshop move from Haymarket and eventually close. This was not long after the Socialist Party of Australia’s bookshop, five doors down also closed.

We had long since buried our hatchets, if not our quite different ideologies and ways of organising.

³ *Australia’s Revolution: The Struggle for a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party*, E.F Hill:

<https://www.efhill.com/s/Australias-Revolution-On-the-Struggle-for-a-Marxist-Leninist-Communist-Party.pdf>



More than Meets the Eye – the CPA (M-L) in NSW

Part 3: Whitlam, Uncle Sam, and the People

by Louisa L.

In 1974 Sydney, ten years after the party was formed, an already heated atmosphere was overlaid by venom with the takeover by the federal Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) of its NSW branch. A recent Vanguard article, [‘Munday and Gallagher, two lives in working class struggle’](#), covers that period and pays tribute to both antagonists in that dispute.

From the beginning, the Party was known for its militancy and the BLF continued to be, as it was under Jack Munday’s leadership, a lightning rod for young activists. But it was soon overshadowed by more immediate battles.

Whitlam

On July 4, 1975 Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and other dignitaries were farewelling Marshall Green, U.S. Ambassador at a posh Wentworth Hotel party. Green arrived after Whitlam’s election to interstate protests led by our activists pointing out he was a hatchet man, a CIA coup-master. Indonesia, where up to two million people were massacred just ten years earlier (and the first time the USA used Islamist forces to wield weapons) was his career highlight.

This was an intense time. Through the 60s and 70s Sydney was a major Australian destination for refugees from murderous CIA-coups in South America. The most recent was Chile, just three years before our protest.

Campaign Against Foreign Military Bases in Australia leaflets warned Green had almost certainly set up mechanisms for the overthrow of the Whitlam Government. Yet some then and now ridicule our Party’s concern with the forces of the imperialist state and our consequent determination to be immersed with the masses, like Mao Zedong’s “fish in a sea of people”.



Mass protest against the dismissal of the Whitlam government in Sydney, November 1975

Ironically, the youngest of us were, like other left groups, behaving as a left bloc. Events would soon change that.

Whitlam’s overthrow saw massive protests and birth of organisations, including People for Australian Independence. It had no snappy title but launched the following year taking over where Worker Student Alliance left off, it captured the vibe of the moment. Hundreds of Eureka flags were screen printed in a Darlinghurst flat. Thousands of ‘Independence for Australia’ badges and tens of thousands of leaflets were grabbed by eager protesters. Independence made perfect sense. An unelected representative of a foreign government had sacked Australia’s elected government.

Party members and supporters devoured Marxist-Leninist classics in small study groups and branches. Our collective lens focused on their application in Australia. So, when young members of the old CPA eventually tried to counter the Eureka flag’s popularity with a badge, impaling out of context Marx’s words ‘Workers have no country’ (originally ‘working



men have no country') we shook our heads. Didn't they remember the old party's Eureka Youth League the decade before our Party's ejection from it? There was arrogance on both sides.

If other left groups called us bourgeois nationalists, the facts and the people showed otherwise.

CIA

These days CIA involvement in the bloodless coup against the Whitlam Government is well known to activists, but in the early years after it, that was definitely not the case. Our comrades did much of the early research to join the CIA dots.

Students for Australian Independence leaflets, distributed in early 1976 charted the similarities to the lead-up to the Chilean coup and outlined Governor General Sir John Kerr's service to the CIA. Unlike Chile, the army never got off grey alert, as Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) President Hawke, himself tainted with CIA connections, stood down trade unions immediately.

Yet we were more critical than most protesters, seeing Whitlam's wage indexation, for example, as disarming the people, because workers no longer had to organise collectively for wage increases. As time passed indexation was indeed whittled away till it was scrapped.

Like every left group of the time we were sectarian, but we refused to separate ourselves from the masses of everyday people by raising indexation inappropriately to attack a much-loved leader.

NSW University was the most working class university and the one where our supporters were strongest. When Whitlam, the toppled hero, visited early in 1976 he was met with the two questions he was due to answer the very day he was sacked, "What's at Pine Gap?" and "Is Richard Stallings a CIA agent?" Whitlam refused to answer the first, and in fact may not have

known. While Pine Gap paraded as a joint military base, it has always been US run for a peppercorn rent, today outsourced to US war corporations like Raytheon Industries. Whitlam answered the second affirmatively, about key Pine Gap operative Stallings, who rented his Canberra home from his good mate Doug Anthony, then Country Party leader.

By then we were already on the trail of that other CIA man, the Governor General.

Sir John

Sir John Kerr was an easy target, rotten on so many levels before he sacked Whitlam. Legal counsel against equal pay for Aboriginal workers in the Territory, the judge who jailed Clarrie O'Shea in 1969, with clear links to the CIA...

We tracked his moves through the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Vice Regal column. Everywhere he went, we, our mates and anyone else we could let know turned up, sometimes in busloads, roaring. The Royal Motor Yacht Club, opening something-or-other, anywhere he thought he could feel safe among his adopted class. Didn't matter. We hunted and hounded him, the protests growing. Some members of the larger and less militant Citizens for Democracy, in which CPA(M-L) members were also involved, joined as protests grew. Till Kerr went overseas and stayed there, returning to be buried in a secret grave with no state honours.

Politics is not about individuals, though they have their importance. But public pressure built through the year largely because of the protests we led, till general anger overflowed again on the first anniversary, Remembrance Day, 1976. The working class and its allies remembered. The ALP took charge.

But our street theatre from the edge as the crowd grew was pointed. A bosses' cop. A CIA agent. A capitalist fat cat. Uncle Sam. And the people.



More than Meets the Eye – the CPA (M-L) in NSW

Part 4: No Surrender

by Louisa L.

On February 20, 1976, less than three months after Whitlam was sacked, a small notice announced that US Vice President Nelson Rockefeller would be visiting Canberra and Sydney. The head of one of the largest US imperialist conglomerates as well as VP, he was giving royal assent to his new colony.

In Sydney he would celebrate with the misnamed “Australian-American Association”. In reality the American name preceded the Aussie one, showing who had first place in the relationship. Set up in New York by Murdoch empire founder, Sir Keith Murdoch in 1948, it was an agent for economic and cultural imperialism, among other things offering lucrative cultural and academic scholarships for hand-picked recipients. Nearly 50 years later it operates with impunity and five-star ratings, while the Chinese-funded equivalent, the much smaller Confucius Association, causes widespread gnashing of teeth, as a danger to democracy.

The AAA’s online 2020 gala honours Kathy Warden CEO and President of war corporation Northrop Grumman.

The other Rockefeller guest was the United States Chamber of Commerce, AmCham for short. Now with offices in five Australian capital cities, it describes itself as “Australia’s largest and most prestigious international business organisation” and “the voice of international business interests”. Back in ’76 we exposed AmCham and AAA as undermining our independence. Things have not improved!

Like latter day reality TV, in 1976 we had 38 days to organise. We plastered the suburbs with screen printed posters inviting people to the first meeting of the Mobilisation Against Rockefeller

(MAR). Interstate groups were contacted. A Vietnam vet (a former commissioned officer) and his wife joined. He told us how he and the men under his command painted up army vehicles and planes at night four years earlier: ‘Vote for Whitlam and be home by Christmas’. There were English and American accents, including Tex, who soon launched the CYIA (Committee of Yanks for an Independent Australia). Dogmatic and humorless? Hardly. Tex was involved in an independence show on community station 2SER and helped work on the newspaper, National Southern Cross.

It was a wide reach, to match Rockefeller’s economic empire. According to the first verse of our street theatre’s reworked Christmas carol,

‘Old King Rockefeller bagged all our best resources

Then he sent to CIA to muster up his forces

E-ssso, Pan Am, White Wings too, Co-olgate Palmolive

Then he grabbed uranium, for atomic fu-u-el’.

Of course. The timing of Whitlam’s sacking also involved a US corporate court case over failure to supply uranium, blocked by his government and the will of the people.

Five days before his Sydney visit, MAR and Campaign Against Foreign Military Bases in Australia almost filled a thousand seat venue at NSW Uni with four bands. This was in tune with our emphasis on cultural independence through numerous other concerts, bush dances and events over years, like internationalist Afrika Nights which members helped organise alongside the Pan Africanist Congress and Black Consciousness members, and those fighting for



Detail from an MAR and CAFCA fundraiser before the Rockefeller protest by Kings Cross artist Maurie

Eritrean liberation. A packed Sydney Town Hall concert with People for Australian Independence and Citizens for Democracy was hosted by Bryan Brown. These events breathed the history none of us learned at school.

So, on Wednesday March 31, 1976 a thousand people turned up to protest.

We were keen to get close to the Wentworth Hotel, perhaps through the front doors, by dividing into two marches. What a debacle! Only two people knew the not so grand plan. Police let loose with boots and fists. On Elizabeth Street they broke a woman's ribs before arresting her and a number of others. Regrouping in Hyde Park, it was left to others to announce legal assistance. We had made no preparations for that. It was an important lesson in looking after people and on focusing long term work alongside everyday people, rather than just the fireworks of big events. We began by fundraising for those arrested.

Work

This spectacular stuff paled in comparison to most comrades' labours.

Helen Hambley exemplified this long-term work. Despite debilitating asthma, she dedicated much of her life as a communist to work with First Peoples. By the 1990s, in her eighties and stuck in

Sydney, she still knew First Peoples around the continent. When 'Bran Nue Day' toured from Broome, at interval the whole Seymour Centre turned as this pint-sized 'granny' roared the name of the drummer, her 'godson'. He rushed down, tales of family and friends overflowing. She never boasted. You won't find her in the history books, but she travelled often alone to remote places, sometimes illegally visiting people on missions assisting them to get organised.

Through the 70s into the present day, members and supporters continue their daily efforts. On the buses and railways, in hospitals and schools, in factories and academia and the public service, on wharves and driving trucks, their work was and remains quieter, longer-term, deeper, slower and powerful.

Nurses, both members and supporters, drove the Party's national struggle to protect Medibank, underpinning its strength, one of many struggles we directly helped organise.

The Party encouraged young students to become workers. Union militancy was not universal in the late 70s. Some of us found ourselves under attack at work. One was expelled from his job as a bus conductor three times, but workmates came to his rescue. Often workers understood solidarity far better than union officials. Our educational backgrounds in largely migrant workplaces, meant we could effectively voice grievances. Sometimes it was a small issue, delayed arrival of safety gloves, that lit a fire of action. It was a time when lessons came thick and fast.

For this writer, four years on a metal industry process line gave infinitely more than I gave back, including lifelong friendships. It underpinned a real understanding of the web of relationships, collective wisdom and discipline, strategy and tactics that had till then been words on a page. It taught me to ask questions and listen, to rely on the people for strength, to sense when they were ready to act. After being unsuccessfully sacked for the fourth time in four years, I knew my time was nearly up. I did a Dip Ed and headed into teaching, profoundly changed. It didn't mean I



always followed these lessons, or didn't make mistakes, but at least I had a fighting chance.

The collective ideological leadership of the Party – in study, in discussions, in *Vanguard* (the longest continuously published left paper in Australia), the *Australian Communist* and in Ted Hill's prodigious output above his full-time legal practice defending workers – showed these small battles in their wider context.

Errors

Rather than left blocs criticised by Hill and the Central Committee, the mistake of younger members and supporters from the mid-80s, was that we had no independent presence beyond the party publications and public spokespeople after People for Australian Independence's successor, Australian Independence Movement, folded.

Only those who do nothing make no mistakes. But this was a serious one, particularly for a party that lauded Mao Zedong's *The Question of Independence and Initiative in the United Front*, which warned that when working with others, although concessions could be made, both independence and initiative must be maintained. Beyond our workplaces, we were often subsumed in the united front.

There were other mistakes too. During the Whitlam period, the imperialist power of the Soviet Union, bearing a fake socialist façade that shamed its heritage, grew around the world. Research, at the suggestion of communist veteran Bert Chandler, exposed its moves into Australia.

Few knew that Khemlani loans affair (the final excuse to ditch Whitlam) involved millions from the Moscow Narodny Bank. In Wolloomooloo, it partnered with shady slum landlord and developer Sid Londish. Other 'development' deals included Queensland's Fortitude Valley. Like its US counterpart, the KGB was busy building favourable connections in unions and the ALP generally.

This was important research, showing superpower contention as a great mover in politics then as now, with a rising China.

But in Sydney our young members and supporters (unlike many others in the Party) greatly overestimated the power of the new superpower, often seeing it as more dangerous than a weakened US imperialism. While Boris Detentevich rightly joined Uncle Sam in guerrilla theatre, wielding giant missiles, facts spoke for themselves. US imperialism was still numero uno here. It held state power.

Industry or community

From the early '80s through to the late '90s, the Party's chairperson, Bruce Cornwall, and other members and supporters were instrumental in the Peace Squadron which, alongside Paddlers for Peace took to Sydney Harbour each time US warships sailed in. The focus on the enemy was sharp. In 1983, the NSW Government banned nuclear powered ships.

US policy was to neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear arms, so the Paddlers and Squadron treated all US ships as potentially nuclear armed. Eventual Greens MLC Ian Cohen was famed for his surfboard bow-ride from a US aircraft carrier. One of our loosely defined mob was less shimmering in 1988. He climbed up an accommodating aircraft carrier sewage pipe, stepped on board with "G'day mate!" to an African American Naval Officer in regimental finery, who offered his white-gloved hand to our friend's poo covered one, and shook it.

Bruce and others spent decades in working with numerous church and left political groups in the peace movement, including the 400,000 strong Sydney Walk Against the War before the US invasion of Iraq. Others took leading roles in the latter on behalf of their unions.

Industrial issues also held our attention, including the destruction of the Builders' Laborers Federation (BLF). There were many picket lines, small and large that drew our support or in which



we marched alongside workmates.

The oral history, *No Surrender*, charted the historic three-month strike and occupation of Sydney Harbour's Cockatoo Island Dockyard in 1989. It honoured the occupiers and strikers who were unable to win the industrial support from the ALP-dominated union movement that would have ensured victory. It drew connections to the bigger struggle for independence and reflected the many hours the author spent on the island in support during the struggle and with the occupiers afterwards.

Community struggles were, and continue to be, numerous and diverse, including small ones that won against offshore sandmining, or gaining East Timorese families refugee status, against hospital closures in Sydney and regional NSW or rapacious overdevelopment. There are too many to list.

No one will do it for you

The majority of our work has been below the surface of huge events, in the day to day slog of jobs away from media spotlights. Some of us have been deeply involved on state union executives, while maintaining full time work in schools, hospitals and construction sites. We work together and individually to draw together corporate connections, like Rupert Murdoch's hunt for multi-billion-dollar profits from schools, or that overthrew the corrupt leadership of the Heath Services Union and helped keep hospitals in public hands.

We have been at the heart of actions that hit national front pages or were barely a blimp in local ones.

In unions, we focus on rank and file organisation, pushing for the most militant positions possible in often narrow opportunities, so our workmates can gain a few scraps from the capitalist table, but also learn how to fight effectively to get out from under the US imperialist thumb. We work hard in trade unions, but we try not to succumb to trade union politics.

In connections with First Peoples' struggles we expose the danger of divisive corporate plans that might otherwise be hidden and stand with them when their enemies try to smash and destroy. First Peoples will lead their own battles, but they are not alone.

We work quietly in numerous community struggles, building webs of connection despite weaknesses rising from the capitalist stew in which we all live. We aspire to something better than individualism and ego. We trust the Peoples of this continent and its islands, for only with them can imperialism be overthrown.

History did not end with the rise of US imperialism as the sole superpower, despite the proclamations of its pet historians. Another dangerous superpower has risen. Yet people still stand in defiance.

After 100 years of struggle for the classless society of communism in Australia, we are all better placed to move forward, not because we have made no mistakes, but because we accept their inevitability, analysing and learning from them, enriched by them, as we are by what we have done well.

If you don't write your own history, no one will do it for you. So, these four articles focus on the role of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) in Sydney and in NSW. But we have to be truthful. We are not the only ones struggling for a better future. There is no sense in point scoring or mud-slinging, to distinguish this or that group from the other. The Peoples of this continent and its islands need leadership. They want a unified and strong response to the destruction, by war or climate change or mounting attacks under Covid's cover. It is the people versus imperialism.

To the huge and dangerous forces that face us all, we speak our defiance.

With the people we raise collective banners. Our actions speak two words – **no surrender**.