

Foundations

The Early History of the Australian Communist Party

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Several years ago the Communist Party of Australia passed out of existence. It had been in decline for decades, and had suffered two major splits as first one group of fideists left to form the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) in 1963 and then another departed for the pro-Moscow Socialist Party of Australia in 1971. Membership sank to little more than a thousand by the early eighties, from a highpoint of more than 20,000 forty years earlier. In winding up its affairs, a Party that had always had a strong sense of its own traditions decided to arrange for the writing of a history. Along with Andrew Wells, who works in the History and Politics Department at the University of Wollongong, I agreed to undertake the task.

We were encouraged in our decision by the agreement that we should in no way be precluded from writing the history as we understood it. The trustees of the Party that used to be gave us full access to all records, and these included a massive collection of papers that were hidden in 1950, when the party faced the threat of illegality — hidden so effectively that they were not found until 1990. The extensive records of the Comintern have been microfilmed and placed in a public library. And there are so many other large deposits scattered all round the country as to require a major research project just to bring them under bibliographical control. Meanwhile the Party members whose memories reach back to the 1940s and beyond are not getting any younger. There is urgency in our work.

But beyond this, we embarked on the project because Australian communism is a crucial component of the history of the Australian labour movement and a range of left causes. There have been numerous accounts of the Party and its work, most of them marked in varying degrees by the exigencies of political strife. There is a large and growing volume of Communist memoirs, reminiscences, biography and autobiography, much of it enlarged by retrospective loosening of earlier certainties. But there is no work that provides even a reasonably comprehensive account of the party and its activities, much less an assessment of its significance. The demise of communism both as an international movement and a coherent political project makes our work at once more poignant and more challenging.

The Communist Party of Australia was formed in 1920 out of elements of the labour movement. It was a calculated intervention into the turmoil of the trade unions and the Labour Party, bringing together a fragile coalition that broke down almost immediately. It was at once indigenous and exotic. It subjected its adherents to a demanding discipline with consequences that few of its founders envisaged. The Party remained small throughout the twenties, but it established a presence in sections of the workforce from which militants came to exercise increasing influence. The mass unemployment of the depression, the international crises of the thirties, and the popular character of the anti-fascist war gave the Communist Party a presence in the

Australian left. By the late forties its active membership rivalled that of the Labor Party, its industrial members were in positions of leadership in most of the key unions, and its cultural activities had a major impact on national life. Then the onset of the cold war brought defeat and slow decline. This paper records the circumstances of its foundation.

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In an endeavour to bring about the unified action of all who stand for the emancipation of the working class by revolutionary action, we have decided to arrange a conference to be held on Saturday, 30th October, 1920, in the A.S.P. [Australian Socialist Party] Hall, Liverpool Street, City. We have much pleasure in inviting you to appoint a delegate to attend same.¹

No-one could agree just who did turn up. Those who were there could remember the spring sunshine that sparkled on Darling Harbour in inner Sydney as they made their way into their dingy waterside meeting-place. They recalled the ardour of the participants and the rancour of their disagreements. One who travelled up from Melbourne had keen memories of the incessant cough of his companion that kept him from sleep the night before, as well as the prodigious Sydney cockroaches that swarmed over their hotel bedroom. But the men and women who gathered on this Saturday morning were too habituated to such meetings to be able to distinguish the names and the faces from those that had met before and would meet again.²

Some sixty invitations to participate in the creation of the Communist Party of Australia were issued; twenty-six persons answered the call. Afterwards, as memories grew vague and the role of the founders took on a hallowed significance, lists circulated in an effort to fix precisely who they were.³ The Investigation Branch of the Attorney-General's Department had followed the preparations keenly in order to monitor such an ominous development, but its zeal so far outran its intelligence as to attach almost every dissident in Australia to the occasion.⁴ Even the minutes secretary was deficient in historical foresight: he omitted to record the names of those present.

The invitations were issued in the name of the host organization, the Australian Socialist Party, and six of its members were present. There was Arthur Reardon, its secretary. Originally from the English midlands, he worked at the Clyde Engineering Works in Sydney as a skilled blacksmith in charge of the apprentices. Emphatic in opinion, an autodidact whose reading ran from metallurgy to English literature, he was as definite and exacting in his socialist rectitude as he was in the practice of his

- 1 Roneod circular dated 22 October 1920, in Socialist Labor Party Papers (National Library of Australia [NLA] ms. 2576/4) and Hancock Papers (Mitchell Library, 772/11).
- 2 Guido Baracchi's account of the cockroaches is in his memoir, "The Twenties," Barracchi Papers (NLA ms. 5241).
- 3 That of Baracchi is held by Ann Turner, that of Norm Jeffery by John Senny. Both are former members of the Party.
- 4 Involvement in the formation of the CPA is attributed to a host of individuals who make up the Investigation Branch's Summary of Communism 1922-4 (Australian Archives [AA] 1979/199).

craft. At his right hand on this Saturday, as always, was Ray Everitt, the theoretician of the party and editor of its weekly newspaper, the *International Socialist*. And making up the 'Holy Trinity' of the ASP was Arthur's wife Marcia, a forceful speaker and writer who popularised that theory with homilies on the miseries of capitalism and the great happiness that was to come. Then there was Bob Brodney, a more recent recruit. Born Arthur Tennyson Brodzky in 1896, the son of a muckraking Melbourne journalist, he had moved with his family to San Francisco, London and New York before working his way back to Australia in 1918. Brodney had no sooner joined the ASP in 1919 than he began working as an organiser. Gifted, restless, lean and saturnine, the young newcomer had a precocious capacity to divine new possibilities where more habituated dogmatists saw only confirmation of their established convictions. His enthusiasm for this meeting overcame the caution of his comrades.⁵

The Australian Socialist Party was one of many points in a constantly shifting constellation of agitation, education and revolutionary rhetoric on the fringes of the labour movement. Such organizations formed and collapsed, merged and split, around their diagnoses of the present discontents and schemes for building on the ruins of capitalism a new social order that would replace oppression and exploitation with freedom and equality. With memberships of a few hundred at most, they sustained a demanding round of activities: production and sale of a weekly newspaper; study of socialist texts; open-air meetings; dances and socials, usually on Saturday evenings, lectures and classes on Sunday evenings. Much of their energy was spent in fierce polemics against the futility of reform, the perfidy of Labor politicians, the inadequacy of existing trade unions that only served to gild the chains of wage-slavery, and above all the errors of their socialist rivals. Since each group distinguished itself from the others by marking out its own version of socialist doctrine and socialist strategy, whose promulgation was both its primary purpose and ultimate consolation, heresy hunting was endemic. Ritual exhortations to unity broke on the unyielding rock of doctrinal rectitude. As the ASP executive explained yet another stillborn effort to bring the various socialist organizations together at the beginning of 1919: "The ASP stands for revolution. Nothing less. Revolutionists don't compromise."⁶

That the ASP was prepared to host a unity conference in October 1920 suggested some relaxation of this obduracy. The recent experience of common resistance to wartime repression was one new factor predisposing the socialist sects to suspend their differences. For while the Australian left was uncompromising on points of dogma, gladiatorial in style and vilificatory in tone, it was also capable of closing ranks against an external threat. And the Great War had strengthened that capacity. Just as the government drew no distinction between the anti-war actions of socialists, syndicalists and feminists, all of whom were subjected to censorship, surveillance, prosecution, deportation and imprisonment, so the committees that formed to assist

5 J. Normington-Rawling, "The Communist Party of Australia to 1930," Work in Progress Seminar, Australian National University (ANU), 4 May 1962; Brodney Papers (La Trobe Library), Recollections, Brodney.

6 *International Socialist*, 4 January 1919.

the victims and defend popular rights sometimes set aside doctrinal differences. Even as they met, the participants were working for the release of jailed comrades.

The War, moreover, split the Labor Party, radicalised the unions and fostered a far greater international awareness in the Australian labour movement. The collapse of the Czarist regime in Russia early in 1917, the Bolshevik seizure of power and Russia's withdrawal from the War later in the same year were followed by growing unrest among other combatants, revolution in Germany, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a profound post-war instability that affected even the victorious powers. The call of the Russian communists for the working class of all countries to follow their lead and make their own revolutions was answered by the ASP at the end of 1919, when it declared allegiance to the new Communist International.⁷

Had that been all that was involved in the establishment of a Communist Party of Australia, it would hardly have been necessary to convene this gathering ten months later. The additional socialists it gathered in were few enough — one from the small ASP branch in Brisbane, an official from the defunct Social Democratic League of New South Wales, a dissident branch of the rigidly impossibilist Socialist Labor Party, and some former members of the Victorian Socialist Party, which had recently rejected the Bolshevik model. These were mere embellishments of a more ambitious alliance.

For also present at the conference was the secretary of the New South Wales Labor Council, Jock Garden, along with a group of his lieutenants, the 'Trades Hall Reds,' who, despite their name, represented the very trade union officialdom that socialists denounced. John Smith Garden was an unlikely revolutionary. Born at Lossiemouth, on the north-east coast of Scotland, he had come to Australia as a preacher and gravitated to Labor politics. Garden brought to socialism the same fiery enthusiasm he applied to his other schemes of redemption by faith and by works, and like that other 'Lossiemouth loon,' Ramsay MacDonald, he could carry sympathizers away on flights of rhetoric; the sceptics he sought to reassure with a broad wink. From his base in the Sydney Trades Hall he threw in his lot with the scheme for One Big Union in order to unify and strengthen the industrial wing of the labour movement. Simultaneously he worked with A.C. Willis, the miners' leader, to impose union control over the Labor Party. Defeated at the 1919 state conference and expelled from the Labor Party, Garden and Willis had little success with their Industrial Socialist Labor Party. Courageous, generous, a born fixer and utterly shameless in his opportunism, Garden needed a new political base to continue the intense factional conflict that characterised the New South Wales labour movement; but if his intrigues threatened to enmesh the new Communist Party in some embarrassing alliances, he also offered an invaluable institutional support. Among the Trades Hall Reds he brought with him were Jack Howie, the recent president of the Labor Council, Jack Kilburn of the Bricklayers, A. Rutherford of the Saddlers, R. Webster of the Miscellaneous Workers and Chris Hook of the Municipal Workers.⁸

⁷ *International Socialist*, 10 January 1920.

⁸ See Bede Nairn's entry for Garden in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8, 614-7. The best treatment of the Trades Hall Reds is by Miriam Dixon, "Reformists and Revolu-

And there was another unexpected face, that of Tom Glynn, still marked by the pallor of nearly four years in jail. He was one of the twelve Sydney martyrs of the Industrial Workers of the World convicted in 1916 of seditious conspiracy for their campaign of direct action against the war. More commonly known as the Wobblies, the Industrial Workers of the World had initiated the idea of One Big Union. Unlike Garden and the Trades Hall Reds, however, they scorned the constraints of trade union officialdom for organization and action on the job in an heroic vision of participatory industrial democracy that knew no divisions of leader and led. And unlike the socialists, the Australian Wobblies, who took their lead from the Chicago-based IWW, were vehemently anti-political. Parliament was for the bosses. The workers should simply bypass it and create the structure of the new order within the shell of the old. Heroic as this project was, the Wobblies were distinguished by their reckless effrontery as the guerillas of the class war in the years leading up to and into the Great War. They cultivated a style of reckless defiance of order and respectability, a style commonly described as 'bummery' after their iconoclastic boast, "Hallelujah! I'm a bum!" In such effrontery no-one exceeded Tom Glynn. An Irishman, who was a trooper in the Boer War and a Transvaal policeman after it, Glynn had plunged into industrial agitation in South Africa. As the secretary of the Sydney branch of the IWW and one of the most articulate strategists in its anti-war agitation, he was a prime target when the Australian government suppressed the organisation late in 1916. Released from prison in August 1920 by the new Labor government of New South Wales in response to a popular campaign, he quickly set about reviving the Wobbly cause. In September he contributed a foreword to the Communist International's appeal to the IWW in which he accepted that something more than the industrial weapon was needed to combat the machinations of the capitalist class during the transition period towards a Communist social order. Industrial unionism was still an urgent necessity, but so rapidly was capitalism approaching its collapse that the "old idea" of building the new society within the shell of the old "can no longer be maintained."⁹

Two other celebrated rebels were there, Tom Walsh and Adela Pankhurst-Walsh. He was the secretary of the Seamen's Union, an Irish rebel, who as 'Sinbad the Sailor' contributed broadsides to Wobbly publications. She was the daughter of the famous English suffragette, Emily Pankhurst, and younger sister of the equally formidable Christabel and Sylvia — the younger sister who came to Australia in 1914 in the hope that she might establish her own identity only to play out their roles. Emily and Christabel turned to feminist patriotism in the war against the bestial Hun; Adela and Sylvia, who saw womanhood degraded by capitalism and militarism, turned to revolutionary internationalism. Like her mother before the war and her sister during

tionists: An Interpretation of the Relations between the Socialists and the Mass Labor Organisations in New South Wales, 1917-27," Ph.D., Australian National University (ANU), 1965, chs. 1-3.

9 *To the I.W.W. A Special Message from the Communist International* (Melbourne 1920); the foreword is dated 15 September. See generally Ian Turner, *Sydney's Burning* (Melbourne 1967); Verity Burgmann, "The Iron Heel: The Suppression of the IWW during World War I," in Sydney Labour History Group, *What Rough Beast? The State and Social Order in Australian History* (Sydney 1982), 171-91.

it, Adela became a martyr to the cause. On the platform of the Women's Peace Army and later the Victorian Socialist Party, she courted notoriety. Imprisoned for anti-war activity, she averted deportation by her marriage, while on remand, to Walsh. Again she embraced imprisonment, only to write from Pentridge Prison (Melbourne) to implore her husband: "Please let me come home ... I am afraid I can't stand any more of it." He was put away himself in the following year for organising a seamen's strike.¹⁰

The Walshes had resigned from the Victorian Socialist Party when they shifted up to Sydney for Tom to take up his union position; another leading member of the VSP was expelled for his part in the formation of the Communist Party. Carl Baker was an optometrist and a rationalist, an American with the gift of the gab who spruiked his cause on the Yarra Bank, the traditional gathering place for Melbourne socialists.¹¹ With him on the trip up from Melbourne was Guido Baracchi, the knight errant of Australian radicalism. The son of the Victorian government astronomer, educated at Melbourne Grammar and Melbourne University, he had spent some years in English socialist circles before he took up legal studies back at Melbourne in 1914. There his anti-war activities brought him a ducking in the University lake, expulsion from the University and a spell in Pentridge. A man of considerable wealth and emotional spontaneity, utterly without guile or worldly ambition, of luminous innocence — his marital and romantic arrangements were in a constant muddle — he edited the Melbourne Wobbly paper, *Industrial Solidarity*, and was a founder of the Victorian Labor College.

His partner in that educational enterprise, Bill Earsman, differed from Baracchi in almost every respect. William Paisley Earsman was a canny Scot who outlayed his emotions as shrewdly as his bawbies. He arrived in Melbourne in 1912, became active in his craft union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and an executive member of the Victorian Socialist Party. A keen enthusiast for independent working-class education, despite his own erratic spelling and syntax, with a sharp instinctive intelligence and a good conceit of himself, he persuaded some trade unions to support the initiative in 1917: Baracchi taught Marxist economics while he took classes in Industrial Strategy with a strong syndicalist emphasis.¹² In 1919 he shifted to Sydney, leaving his wife and family in Melbourne. With him went Christian Jollie-Smith, a lawyer, daughter of a Presbyterian minister and close university friend of Baracchi — she had left the Commonwealth Solicitor's Office under suspicion of passing information about deportation proceedings to Adela Pankhurst-Walsh's barrister.¹³

10 Joy Damousi, "Socialist Women in Australia, c. 1880-1918," Ph.D. thesis, ANU, 1987, ch. 7; Peter J. Morrison, "The Communist Party of Australia and the Australian Radical Tradition, 1920-1939," Ph.D., thesis, University of Adelaide, 1975, App. 3; Adela Pankhurst-Walsh to Tom Walsh, n.d. Walsh Papers (NLA ms. 2123/61).

11 He is recalled in Bob Brodneý's *Recollections*, Brodneý Papers (La Trobe ms. 10882/3); the expulsion is recorded in the minutes of the VSP, 8 November. 2 December 1920 (NLA ms. 564/1/6).

12 Ann Turner, "Independent Working Class Education in Australia, 1917-1929," M. Ed. thesis, University of Melbourne, ch. 2 and her entry in *ADB*, vol. 8, pp. 403-4.

13 *ADB*, vol. 11, pp. 641-2; the Summary of Communism (AA 1979/199, p. 103) sets out the

In Sydney they enlisted the support of Garden and the Trades Hall Reds for a New South Wales Labor College. Earsman was its secretary, Jollie-Smith his assistant; she taught English literature and grammar, he offered his lessons in Industrial Strategy. The epigones of the socialist sects were scornful of this self-appointed dominie with his two-tone shoes and Baden-Powell hat, his syndicalist sympathies and 'colossal ignorance' of the Marxist texts; but with Wobbly support and trade union backing Earsman was difficult to ignore.¹⁴

He had another vital ally in Peter Simonoff, the self-styled Soviet consul-general. Simonoff, as his name was usually spelt, was among the substantial community of Russian exiles who made their way to Australia via the Pacific in the early years of the twentieth century. There were Russian groups in both the ASP and the VSP, while their own Union of Russian Workers had branches in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and elsewhere that spanned the spectrum of the left. When many of the notables left for home upon the fall of the Czarist regime in March 1917, Simonoff assumed leadership. With the Bolshevik seizure of power at the end of the year, he moved to Melbourne to establish a consulate. That the Australian government refused it recognition and then jailed him for six months for defying its prohibition on public appearances only augmented his prestige in radical circles. Impatient to establish an Australian communist party, he shifted his base of operations to Sydney and opened an impressive office in Rawson Place, by the Central Railway Station. Those who had known him when he was always on his uppers found him suspiciously flush with funds: one compatriot remarked with astonishment that he now drank in saloon bars.¹⁵ His self-importance grew also as he scouted the possible options. The ASP might seem to have best claims, given its declaration of adherence to the Communist International, but writing under the pseudonym 'P. Finn' in August 1920, Simonoff declared it inflexible, too dogmatic, too remote from the masses. He had decided to assemble an alternative political formation whose broker was to be Earsman.¹⁶

Their scheme was hatched in secrecy, though rumours abounded at the time and some details emerged afterwards in unguarded boast and angry recrimination. The account that Earsman constructed for the Congress of the Communist International in the following year invested the sequential steps with the precision of a meticulously planned clandestine operation:

In 1920 a small group of revolutionaries decided to establish the Communist Party of Australia, which they did as a secret organisation. We got to work among the trade unions and formed a number of groups, whose main object was the spreading of Communist principles and the white-anting of these unions. From time to time we issued leaflets to the workers advising and instructing them in their every-day

circumstances of the allegation.

14 The criticism was by Ray Everitt in *International Socialist*, 26 July 1919. Earsman's letters to Baracchi of 12 and 19 August 1919 describing these manoeuvres were copied by the censor (AAA MP 95/1, 169/41/90).

15 W.P. Tuitene, interviewed by J.N. Rawling (ANU Archives N57/299)

16 Eric Fried, "The First Consul: Peter Simonoff and the Formation of the Australian Communist Party," in John McNair and Thomas Poole (eds), *Russia and the Fifth Continent: Aspects of Russian-Australian Relations* (St. Lucia 1992).

struggles with the master class. Then we sent out a manifesto and programme in keeping with the principles of the Third Communist International, and a call to form a legal Communist Party.¹⁷

This melodramatic account was calculated to impress Earsman's Russian audience, and certainly confirmed the Australian Investigation Branch's conviction that there was a controlling intelligence behind the formation of the Communist Party, constituting "the most silent, militant and dangerous" of malign infestations, one that "plants its own members in places where they in turn become 'germ cells', thus multiplying itself fission fashion — retaining its own virility while ever extending the sphere of its cankerous inoculation."¹⁸ Both versions suppress the improvisation, the blunders, the sheer messiness of the process.

The first step was to establish communist groups in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. In Melbourne Earsman's associates, Baracchi and Percy Laidler, launched a new journal, *Proletarian Review*, in June 1920 to publicize Communist principles, while Carl Hook and the Russian activist John Maruschak tried and ultimately failed to win over the VSP.

In Brisbane, where the Russian presence was stronger, the ASP branch declared itself a communist group in August 1920. Meanwhile in Sydney, Earsman, Simonoff and Jollie-Smith drew Jock Garden into their meetings as they prepared the manifesto and programme of the party that was to be. At this point Reardon and Everett of the ASP launched a preemptive strike. They obtained a copy of the draft manifesto and published it early in October with this introduction:

It was discovered blowing around the city, and the only clue as to its origin was 'The Central Executive of the Australian Communist Party'. After quoting the closing paragraph of the 'Communist Manifesto' by Marx and Engels, where in it is stated that 'The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims', the author, or authors, evidently took fright at their own audacity and run [sic] for the hollow log, before giving their name and address to the printer.¹⁹

As Reardon and Everitt anticipated, this shrewd thrust drew the authors of the document into the open. Discussions opened between them and the ASP that led almost immediately to the calling of the conference for 30 October. While the ASP issued the invitations, Garden and Earsman provided Reardon with the names and addresses of the bulk of the invitees. It was an uneasy arrangement, for neither party trusted the other, while each depended on mutual cooperation. As the most significant of the socialist groups, the ASP had the assets — most importantly premises and a printing press — and the putative claim to be an affiliate of the Communist International. The others had the wider contacts, the intangible authority of the Soviet representative in Australia, and the initiative.

17 *Communist*, 23 September 1921. Many years later Earsman presented a similar account in a letter to John Playford, 9 October 1958. Rawling Papers (ANU Archives, N57/234).

18 "The Secret Seven," Summary of Communism (AA 1979/199, pp. 132-3).

19 *International Socialist*, 2 October 1920.

The Conference passed without open breach, though the points of tension were readily apparent. Garden was elected to the chair, Earsman kept the minutes. Everitt moved that the conference accept the principles of the Communist International and pledge itself to establish “a well disciplined centralised party;” a Trades Hall Red moved the amendment “That this conference now forms a Communist Party,” and the amendment was carried. Or so the minutes recorded — Reardon’s version was that the conference agreed to take immediate steps to form a communist party. Earsman defeated Reardon as secretary in the ballot for a provisional secretary; there were just three ASP members elected to a provisional executive of twelve. Brodney and Glynn wanted to thrash out the programme and principles there and then; Earsman and Garden prevailed with their suggestion that the task be entrusted to a drafting committee. The group charged with the task — Earsman, Jollie-Smith, Tom Glynn, Bob Brodney, Ray Everitt — quickly adopted a slightly modified version of the documents the *International Socialist* had so recently derided.²⁰ On the Sunday evening they celebrated the successful formation of the new Party with a rally in the Liverpool Street Hall, where Glynn, Baker, Baracchi and Reardon were the speakers. Glynn expressed his appreciation of the ASP’s magnanimity: “contrary to all expectations, the ASP had sunk everything in the interests of that unity for which they had called the conference.” Reardon thanked Glynn for his words of praise, noting “it was altogether a new sensation to receive anything but bitter criticism.” The conference, he said, had met in “a peculiar atmosphere. Many delegates had gathered, each with the idea that the ASP sought only to reinforce itself and to sail along with little more than perhaps a change of name.” Indeed they had, but most present had something more in mind.²¹

Their manifesto and programme that was released in the following month suggests the nature of their enterprise. While appealing to the authority of the new Communist International, it still took as its starting-point the evolutionary outlook of the old Socialist International. Capitalism was a system that had “done great service to the humanity,” but had now outlived its usefulness and must give way. It had created the seeds of its own destruction in the augmentation of productive capacity, choking the owning class with wealth while denying the producing class the fruits of their labour. Meanwhile the capitalists controlled the State and used it to coerce or trick the workers into submission. Onto this familiar historical scheme and gloomy political prognosis the manifesto grafted the idea of the Communist Party as the educator, the organizer and the leader of the working class. The distinctive character of Lenin’s conception of the party was barely glimpsed (“The Communist Party is essentially a fighting organization and not a debating club”), though the need for a dictatorship of the proletariat “for the complete annihilation of the bourgeoisie as a class” is stated.

20 Minutes of Conference Called by Central Executive Committee of the ASP, 30 October 1920, Hancock Papers (Mitchell Library 772/9). Reardon’s version is repeated by J.N. Rawling in his unpublished history, “Communism Comes to Australia,” vol. 1, p. 72 (ANU Archives N57/1).

21 *International Socialist*, 6 November 1920, 22. The Communist Party of Australia, *Manifesto to the Workers of Australia*, 115 Goulburn Street, Sydney: CPA, 1920.

Nor was there any consideration of the provenance of this device, or how it might be applied in Australia. The programme of the party invoked the Bolshevik method —

Forming groups of its members in every mill, factory, workshop and field, so that it is always in a position to direct and control through its members every industrial dispute and disturbance of the workers, keeping always in mind the same end — social revolution — and trying to utilise every spontaneous action of the workers for that one end ...

— without further thought as to how such direction and control might be achieved and exercised. Instead, the manifesto is concerned to strike a balance between those old bugbears of Australian socialism and syndicalism, the industrial question and the political question. On the industrial question, it conceded to the syndicalists the desirability of industrial over craft unions since “up-to-date efficient industrial unions” would have greater revolutionary potential and assist in the future communist reconstruction. At the same time it insisted, against the syndicalists, that Communists should participate in all existing unions and seek to win office within them. On the political question, it called on Communists to participate in parliamentary elections in order to demonstrate the bankruptcy of capitalist institutions to the ‘toiling masses’. But in a concession to the anti-parliamentarians, it allowed membership to those holding contrary views “providing that they submit to party discipline.”²²

Such equivocations were hardly surprising. The success of the Bolsheviks was undoubtedly the catalyst for the formation of the new party. Its choice of name, declaration of allegiance and manifest intent are quite clear. Australian radicals had hitherto borrowed freely from other countries. The first wave of Australian socialism was discernibly British in its doctrine, language and temper, with a continental European leavening. In the first decade of the twentieth century North America became the salient influence, both through De Leonite socialism and Wobbly doctrines. Now a third wave was building. But limitations on Australian knowledge of the Russian Revolution, exacerbated by limitations on overseas travel and the importation of literature, made it difficult for the new party to do more than approximate that model.

The range of experience and temperament can be seen in those who gathered in Sydney to form the Communist Party. Of the score who can be positively identified, a little more than half were Australian-born; the others hailed from England, Scotland, Ireland, the United States, and one from Russia. Only three came from outside New South Wales for the occasion but at least half had lived for extensive periods in one or more of the other states. Most had only a few years of formal schooling, and the two with degrees were quite exceptional, but all of them, even the most scatological, cultivated a particular style of intellectual self-improvement. Their work experience covered construction, bush labouring and skilled crafts. Christian Jollie-Smith, a solicitor, and Carl Baker, the optometrist, were the only professionals, though a narrow majority held full-time organizational or agitational positions in 1920. Nearly

22 The Communist Party of Australia, *Manifestos of the Workers of Australia*, 115 Goulburn Street, Sydney: CPA, 1920.

all had had brushes with the law since 1914, and at least half a dozen had served time. They were young: Tom Walsh, born in 1871, was easily the oldest; Bob Brodney, at 24, probably the youngest. Most were still in their thirties. And they were masculine. Only three women are known to have been present, Christian Jollie-Smith, Adela Pankhurst-Walsh and Marcia Reardon, and all three had partners there as well.

The composite portrait that emerges is of a particular generational segment, restless, cosmopolitan, resourceful, impatient, tested in the crucible of combat and still keen for more. They were a manifestly political cohort, defining themselves by word and gesture in vehement rejection of the existing order, and they practised a gladiatorial style whose highest form was the challenge to formal combat by debate issued by the champion of one group to another. Yet the political culture they created and inhabited was by no means as narrowly oppositional as might be supposed. Russian musical evenings were a great drawcard at this time when the audience would thrill to the strains of “The Peasants’ Song,” “The Fairy Song” and “The Revolutionary Fighting Song.”²³ Just as the Reardons performed theatrical readings for the members of the ASP, so Brodney lectured on classical music at the Trades Hall to the piano accompaniment of Jollie-Smith.

Perhaps that type of artistic performance offers a clue to the gendered pattern of revolutionary politics. Within the socialist ranks there was a sexual division of labour. The men were the activists, speaking and practising a distinctively masculine language of virile defiance, and the woman who could engage in that arena earned an enhanced reputation as transgressive Amazons. Typically, however, the women were cast in a supportive, nurturing role, sustaining the socialist fellowship and prefiguring the higher life that was to be. When the ASP lost patience with the reformist VSP, it pronounced that it consisted of “dear old ladies of both sexes.”²⁴ Among the industrialists this division was even more pronounced. The Trades Hall Reds organized their members on the inner-city sites where men sweated and toiled, and did their deals in the pubs around the Trades Hall. The Wobblies drew their strength from the bush workers, the isolated mining communities, the waterfront and transport industries, and the fraternity of unattached men constantly on the move.

Militant activism offered a particular kind of critique and affirmed a particular kind of alternative. It valorized a single-minded dedication to the cause unencumbered by sentimental ties. When it identified the evils of capitalism, inequality, poverty, exploitation, corruption, it returned insistently to its destructive effects on family life. The very first issue of the Communist newspaper featured an article by Adela Pankhurst-Walsh on “Communism and Social Purity,” explaining how capitalism degraded sexuality and forced women into prostitution. This was a long-established theme in Australian socialism: in perhaps its formative text, *Workingman’s Paradise* (1891) William Lane explains the impossibility of true marriage and healthy procreation until the serpent is expelled from the garden and the safety of the race secured. But it took particular salience in wartime circumstances when the existing

23 *Communist*, 19 August 1921.

24 *International Socialist*, 4 January 1919.

gender order was disturbed by the departure of the young men. The 'Red Plague' was the term commonly used to denote the consequent danger of venereal disease, and a correspondence may be noted of this language of rampant infection with the language used by the Investigation Branch about Communists. These were the men of military age who didn't go overseas to fight but waged the class war at home. Male as well as female socialists advertized the insidious spread of venereal disease for which socialism and secure, companionate sexual partnership was the only reliable antidote. W.J. Thomas was a founding member of the communist group in Brisbane whose lantern-slide lectures on the subject were a great money-spinner.²⁵

The Communist Party of Australia was formed on the ebb-tide of labour unrest. Within a year the Communist International would declare that the period of revolutionary crisis was spent and a new phase of temporary capitalist stability had begun. This was certainly the case in Australia. The great general strike of 1917 had paralysed industry for three months, the maritime strike of 1919 tied up the ports for three months more; by 1920 only the Broken Hill miners were engaged in that form of industrial seige. Wartime hardships were easing as economic growth resumed. The strains that had split the Labor Party so recently had finally not shifted it from its attachment to parliamentary reform. The jagged sectarian divisions opened during the conscription referenda in 1916 and 1917 were easing. Above all, the iron heel of the militarised state had crushed the most dangerous rebels and with the return of the soldiers, whose blood sacrifice provided conservatives with a symbol of sacral nationalism, the country turned inwards, eschewing the exotic and the dissident. The period of capitalist stability was indeed temporary. Unemployment, deprivation, dissatisfaction did not disappear. But the Communist Party could no longer assume a ready response to its message of class war.

25 W.J. Thomas, *Venereal Disease: A Social Problem* (Sydney 1922).