In the popular imagination the state of Queensland is now the "Deep North". It is regarded by many "southerners" as a bastion of provincialism and unswerving reaction where antipathy towards leftist or even liberal viewpoints becomes more pronounced as one heads into the Tropics. It appears as if it’s always been so.

Like all mythologies, this view of Queensland has a certain basis in reality. The Bjelke-Petersen government is reactionary and it actively fosters a nasty type of provincialism whose primary function is to disguise its sell-out to transnational capital. Some, perhaps quite a few, Queenslanders, also share the government’s views. But the pervasiveness of this mythology also rests on prejudice and a widespread ignorance of Queensland history.

How many Australians, indeed how many Queenslanders, today know that the stretch of Queensland from Mackay to Cairns was once "The Red North"? As a "southerner", that is, an inhabitant of the south-eastern corner of the state — and also a history student at the University of Queensland in the early 1970s, I certainly never had an inkling of the outstanding anti-fascist campaigns and industrial struggles waged in the north in the 1930s and '40s.

It was only through later contact with the "Old Left" in Brisbane that I heard tales of "The Red North" and I must confess that I was sometimes inclined to relegate these accounts to the realm of leftwing mythology. This view changed with the publication of material around the time of the Communists and the Labour Movement Conference in 1980.* However, it was not until I obtained a copy of Diane Menghetti’s recently published book, *The Red North*, that I could fully appreciate the extent to which North

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The Red North: The Popular Front in North Queensland by Diane Menghetti, History Department, James Cook University, 1981. 227 pp. $5 from the History Department or $7.50 from bookshops.
Queensland in the 1930s and '40s led the rest of Australia in its commitment to internationalism, and the strength and breadth of its working-class organisations.

Menghetti's book focuses on the communist-led "Red Front" in the period 1935 to 1940. The North Queensland Communist Party actually achieved its greatest strength and influence later in the 1940s but, as The Red North makes clear, its successes in that decade are impossible to understand without a thorough analysis of how communists worked in the northern region of Queensland in the 1930s.

The "bolshevisation" of the CPA in the late 1920s and early '30s had had a devastating impact on the fledgling North Queensland organisation. Ted Tripp, the local communist leader, was purged and the adoption of a rigid "social fascist" line towards the Australian Labor Party (ALP) had decimated or extinguished a number of CPA branches. The "social fascist" line was relaxed after Hitler came to power in 1933 and communists were able to win increasing support for their militancy in the mines and on the canefields. Under the capable leadership of Jack Henry, a cane-cutter, and Fred Paterson, a barrister, the CPA in North Queensland was in the process of recovering by the mid-1930s. However, its rapid growth from 1935 was the result of more complex factors: greater opportunities for industrial militancy; a conservative state Labor government and an even more conservative leadership in the Australian Workers' Union, both remote from the realities of life in the north; the presence of large migrant groupings which became increasingly active in response to the rise of fascism in Europe; the evolution of a distinctively "indigenous" style of political work; and the creative application of a "united front" policy.

The decision to form a "united front" of the working class was not formally taken by the Queensland branch of the CPA until January 1936. This decision, of course, was very much in keeping with the declaration of the Comintern the previous year to subordinate world communist activities to the fight against international fascism. As Menghetti points out, this "new line was scarcely more appropriate to Australian conditions than its predecessor; neither 'revolutionary conditions' nor 'fascist threat' provided an adequate description of the realities of the political situation in this country." (p.21)

However, it did allow Party policy and trade union policy to be determined more or less nationally and, most importantly, stressed the necessity of co-operating with social democratic forces. In any case, communists in North Queensland had started to build a "united front" well before the policy was formally initiated. They were also in the process of extending this to a "popular front" which included "intellectuals", "working farmers" and small shop-keepers.

**Turning point — 1935 sugar strike**

The real turning point was the Weil's Disease strike of 1935 which has been immortalised in Jean Devanny's novel Sugar Heaven. Weil's Disease was the popular name given to fevers caused by three varieties of leptospirae which were prevalent in northern sugar areas in the 1930s. The virus was spread by rats urinating on wet ground or cane stalks, and sometimes proved fatal. Burning the cane before harvesting was the only known method of preventing its spread. However, burning was opposed by canegrowers on the grounds that the sugar content of the cane was reduced and that some stands would be lost completely if not harvested immediately after the burn — despite a clause in the sugar workers' award which specified lower rates for workers harvesting burnt cane.

At the beginning of the 1935 crushing season, the Australian Workers' Union had won an agreement to burn the cane in the Ingham district only. In all other areas, cane was to be burnt only on the written order of a health inspector. Fear of Weil's disease was intense and heightened by the discovery of infected rats in the Cairns and Innisfail districts. The sugar workers were mostly seasonal workers, not afraid to take militant action for short-term gains. Meetings,
initially called by communists in the industry, quickly voted to declare all unburnt cane "black". Within a few weeks, more than 2,000 cutters and 1,000 mill-hands had struck. Menghetti argues that the efficiency and speed with which the separate districts were organised suggests that "the Communist Party had orchestrated the strike in advance of the season". (p.34) The Brisbane Trades and Labor Council certainly thought so, for it passed a resolution condemning the Communist Party for its tactics, and the rightwing leadership of the AWU, of course, opposed the action.

It was a bitter strike lasting for two months: the industrial court ordered secret ballots and cancelled all cane-cutting agreements in the Mourilyan area; the AWU used strong-arm tactics; 150 police were sent up from Brisbane; striking cutters were evicted from their quarters and scab labour was widely employed. The strike was defeated though, in July 1936, a general order for burning the cane before harvesting was handed down by the industrial court. Nevertheless, as Menghetti shows, the strike was, in many senses, a victory for the working class. The struggle was an extremely broad one involving entire communities in the north. It drew in normally apolitical groups like women and migrants, and even won the support of many small shop-keepers and a number of the smaller growers who were, themselves, often former cutters.

Italian workers

The AWU refused to provide relief and its policy was to divide strikers into the smallest possible groups and then conduct secret ballots. Communists, in contrast, stressed rank-and-file control, unity of the four mill areas and were prominent in organising relief kitchens and accommodation. And, unlike the AWU which regarded the sizeable numbers of Italian workers as communist dupes who could not understand the issues or "our language", Communist Party members recognised Italians as fellow workers whose rights had to be respected. Communist activists always ensured that leaflets were available in Italian and that Italian workers addressed meetings as well as translating speeches. Meanwhile, the AWU still upheld its 1930 "preference agreement" with the Australian Sugar Producers' Association and the Queensland Cane Growers' Council which allowed migrant workers to compose no more than 25 percent of mill workers and cutters.

Menghetti argues that it was in the relief kitchens that the differences between the approaches of the AWU and CPA became most apparent. Relief committees were set up in all local centres and sought the broadest possible support — from the shop-keepers, small farmers (often Italian in origin), the miners of Collinsville and the "progressive" section of the Queensland public. Women became active on relief committees organising entertainment (the men did the cooking) and Italian migrants were, for the first time, involved both socially and politically. Italian gang cooks ran the Mourilyan relief kitchen and the novelist Jean Devanny reports that the militant cooks "harangued" the men in Italian as they ate. The taste of Italian food was not, however, nearly so novel as the "almost unprecedented sight of Australian girls with Italian men". (p.57)

Despite isolation, poor educational standards and the apathy of the ALP, communists and anti-fascists were able to use the skills and support they had gained during the strike to mount a powerful solidarity campaign when the Spanish war broke out in 1936. Of the twenty-one branches of the Spanish Relief Committee set up throughout Australia, sixteen were in North Queensland; of the twenty-eight Australians who went to fight in Spain, nine were from the region. Despite low wages and widespread unemployment, large sums were raised to aid the Spanish Republicans. Support for the campaign was so strong that in Ingham only two families were reported as having refused to donate. The broader anti-fascist movement, which waxed and waned "down south", was similarly energetic in North Queensland. The first Australian anti-fascist demonstration in Australia, in fact, occurred
in the tiny sugar town of Halifax in 1925. After 1935, anti-fascist migrants, including anarchists, achieved "a new level of cooperation" with the Communist Party which, in turn, increasingly won Italians, Yugoslavs and Spaniards to its ranks. (p.85) Italian anti-fascist clubs in northern towns affiliated nationally and by 1939 were numerous and strong enough to hold a co-ordinating conference in Townsville.

Women's movement

The Weil's Disease strike of 1935 gave, perhaps, an even more dramatic fillip to the women's movement in North Queensland. Menghetti argues that its strength and independence was somewhat of a paradox since "neither local Party members nor the northern community in general were more liberal in their attitudes towards women than other Australians". (p.95) She suggests a number of explanations for this (including Jack Henry's "shyness of women" (p.96) but only a few seem pertinent. The movement's founders were the wives of strikers who themselves had taken the initiative in 1935 in Innisfail to form the first Women's Progress Club; there was no "directive from the District Committee". (p.96) The burgeoning women's movement was also strongly influenced by Jean Devanny, a militant feminist and communist "with some standing in the southern Party" (p.96) and it may also have benefited from the more relaxed, less authoritarian attitudes to organisation in the north.

After Jean Devanny's tour in 1935 (on behalf of the Movement Against War and Fascism), Women's Progress Clubs proliferated throughout the region. Officially, "non-sectarian" and "non-party", they were nevertheless heavily influenced by communists or the wives of communists. After 1937, the Clubs sent delegates to the annual District Conferences of the CPA and their activities often reflected CPA policies. Politically, Menghetti says, the Clubs were a "fairly typical front" (p.100) but displayed "an unusual degree of independence for a contemporary women's organisation". (p.101) They interspersed their political activities with both feminist agitation and "traditional pursuits" — hospital visiting, exhibitions of horticulture and handicraft, and arranging social functions. This approach was so successful in Collinsville that representatives of the Ladies Home League and the Ladies Hospital Guild were out in force for the arrival of J.B. Miles, the CPA National Secretary, in July 1936. The Collinsville Country Women's Association (CWA) sent a representative to CPA conferences, and in 1942 the Gladstone CWA circulated a petition calling on the federal government to lift the ban on the Communist Party.

At least among working-class people, such activities gradually eroded the image of the Communist Party as "sinister and foreign". (p.109) The CPA was the driving force behind the Unemployed Workers' Union and helped provide much of the practical assistance which enabled working people to survive the Depression. Menghetti asserts that another important factor in weakening the "Red Bogey" in the north was "the unusually extensive social life of the Party". (pp.115-116) Dances, balls, card parties, picnics, bazaars and discussion groups provided entertainment throughout the region — though some of these activities (such as the Spanish Relief Queen competition) may now seem ideologically suspect.

Crucial in promoting the work of the CPA was the large number of local bulletins and, after May 1937, the North Queensland Guardian, edited by Fred Paterson. The paper adopted a consciously broad approach: it omitted the ritualistic hammer and sickle from its banner; it sought (and obtained) advertisements from local shop-keepers; it stressed the compatibility of Christianity and communism; and it included "Turf News", a children's column and a women's section as well as covering international, national and local events.

By the late 1930s, North Queensland was the biggest "red" area outside the Sydney district. Its electoral support increased, the CPA often
working closely with the ALP in contesting elections. As early as 1936, Fred Paterson won 81.1 percent of the state vote in Collinsville but it was not until 1939 that he was elected to the Townsville Council and, at the same time, Jim Henderson became a councillor for the Collinsville Division of the Wagaratta Shire. (In 1944 Fred Paterson became the Member of Parliament for Bowen, the first and only Australian communist to win such a distinction.)

Later in 1939, the communist-led "Red Front" suffered a sharp and sudden demise upon the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland: not even the well-integrated North Queensland Party could withstand two such shocks in the international situation. The position was exacerbated in 1940 when the Menzies government banned the Communist Party. A number of Italian communists were interned and Menghetti remarks that "the story of the internees and the political violence they faced in the camps, and of the hostility of local communities towards their wives and children who struggled to maintain the family farms, has yet to be told". (p.162)

After the German invasion of the USSR, support for the CPA grew again. Nevertheless, anti-fascist migrants remained in internment camps and the North Queensland Guardian was never again published. Menghetti's excellent account ends there: the spectacular growth of the CPA and the "Red Front" in North Queensland after the lifting of the ban in December 1942 remains untold. It is to be hoped that Menghetti — or another student from James Cook University — will continue the work.

The Red North is, I believe, one of the most important books ever to be published about Australian communist history. Unfortunately, it will not be as widely read as it deserves because of James Cook University's limited distribution system. This is a great shame for so much of the experience of the "Red Front" is politically pertinent today. The Red North avoids the institutional approach of Alastair Davidson's The Communist Party of Australia and Robin Gollan's Revolutionaries and Reformists, and gives the best account, so far, of how communists worked and lived in their own communities. The book is not without one or two problems, of course. It concentrates on the sugar-growing areas to the neglect of the mining communities of Collinsville and Scotsville, and contains a few errors, for example, the foundation date of the Union of Australian Women is given as the later war years and the terms "united front" and "popular front" are used interchangeably. Greater use of the actual words of the communists interviewed for the book would have made for a more lively text and it is a pity that the research (originally undertaken for an honours thesis) wasn't supplemented by interviews with North Queensland communists living "down south", for example, Ted Bacon, George Bliss, Alice Hughes, Dick Annear and Albert Robinson (who died in 1980).

The Red North also raises more questions than it can possibly answer. Why was the "popular front" so popular in North Queensland as opposed to other parts of Australia? Why did the Communist Party there achieve a degree of "naturalisation" and integration unheard of in the rest of the nation? What caused the disintegration of the "popular front" and the CPA in the north in the early 1950s? Why is there only one branch of the Communist Party north of Brisbane now when the Cairns district alone had seventy during the war years? What happened to all those North Queensland communists, those "useful people", as Menghetti calls them? (p.165) Have they been obliterated from history as cleanly as Fred Paterson's name was removed from the Townsville park built in his honour in 1944? Menghetti concludes that the "Red Front" was likely to have produced "more substantial long-term gains for the community than for the Party" — and this, of course, is how it should be. She reminds us, too, somewhat sadly, of Jack Henry's words: "It was not lost; no, nothing is ever lost". (p.166)