case, he had shown no public interest in establishing what diseases were affecting cane cutters. He had not been in Ingham before.

Now he claimed that the Italian cutter had typhus. The cutter lost the case.

A deputation went to the AWU to argue that if this cutter had typhus, then the union should do something about typhus as an industrial disease. Again, the union made a negative response.

Although there was a Labor government in office at the time, and there were many such cases, any gains that cane cutters made were despite, and against opposition from, CSR, the AWU, big farmers and rats. Success came only when the rank and file became active and able to unite the many nationalities making up the workforce on the canefields. The driving force for this was the Communist Party.

— George Bliss.

* The demand to burn cane developed after it was recognised that this was the only way to prevent Weil’s disease. The virus was spread by rats urinating on wet ground or cane stalks.

Reviews:

Socialism & Australian Labor


The interwar period poses particular problems for anyone seeking to understand the history of the Australian left. At the end of the First World War we have the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Communist International. Over the next few years the monarchies of Europe collapsed, working-class movements reached for power and movements of colonial liberation sprang up. At the end of the 1920s there was the most severe capitalist crisis in history. During the 1930s the fight against fascism mobilised a broad range of progressives.
sectarian hostility towards those closest to the left.

Yet to say this is merely to record the historical contours of the period. There are further tasks of analysis. The institutional and ideological effects of patterns established at this time were of lasting significance and need to be analysed. There are major episodes of resistance to be investigated. The emergence of militant forces rebuilding the unions in the wastelands of the 1930s or of the generation of intellectuals radicalised in that period should be traced.

Frank Farrell's decision is to concentrate on the influence of the left on the broader labor movement and, in particular, to consider its effects on Australian labor's attitude to international issues. He draws attention to a number of aspects: the Hands Off Russia campaign at the end of the First World War, support for international martyrs like Sacco and Vanzetti, attempts by the left to combat Australia's racist immigration rules, the anti-fascist campaigns of the 1930s. He also draws attention to some organisations of importance, especially the Pan-Pacific Trade Union movement. The book has material to work with of considerable dramatic value and it includes more than forty illustrations.

However, there are major problems created by Farrell's organisation of the book. His discussion of the impact of the left on the organised labor movement requires an understanding of the history of both. In the first two chapters of the book and then, in subsequent passages, Farrell provides an account of the development of the left. Unfortunately, it is an account which concentrates on institutions and doctrines at the expense of the larger historical forces. He narrates more than he explains. A bewildering number of groups and grouplets pass before us (there are more than fifty abbreviations) at a rapid pace. Farrell loses the opportunity to put flesh and blood on this organisational skeleton by not breathing life into the leading characters who were indeed a colorful lot. Biographical information is generally restricted to captions attached to the illustrations. But if the presentation of the left is schematic, the treatment of the environment in which it operated is even more threadbare. Neither the Australian Labor Party nor the trade union movement are properly explained.

What is really required in order to understand the successes and failures of the left is an account of the Australian economy, workforce and social patterns. It needs to be explained that the Australian economy up to the First World War was based on primary industries with much of the workforce employed on a contractual basis; the extractive and service sector, with both craft and unskilled labor, was located in the coastal cities. Industrialisation began in the twentieth century on the basis of tariff protection, state regulation of industrial relations and a relatively high standard of living for Australian workers. The political and industrial practice of the Australian working class was thus strongly attached to a populist and interventionist tradition which was subject to assault from the right in the inter-war period. There were possibilities for the left to crystallise discontent but it was much more difficult to break the institutional mould.

The recurrent theme of Farrell's story, the left's alternation between doctrinaire hostility of the Labor Party and trade unions and opportunist compromise with its more progressive sections, have to be understood in this context. By fragmenting his study into a serial examination of issues and campaigns, Farrell robs his research of explanatory power.

This is a book that students of Australian labor history will consult for well-researched material on the international issues of the inter-war period. Not all will accept its interpretations. His discussion of the White Australia Policy, for example, leans over backwards to justify on tactical grounds apologists for racism in the labor movement. His treatment of the subject of violence in the unemployed movements of the 1930s is so concerned to preserve an even-handed and reasonable tone as to almost lose sight of the circumstances of the victims — and in these as well as other passages he should have given us some particular case studies and used some contemporary and oral material. What it does best is to survey; it is least successful as an interpretation.

I am convinced that the vital task is to turn back to the essential basis of the Communist Party, the trade unions. We cannot understand the growth of the Party in the 1930s unless we grasp how the militants worked out a viable strategy of leadership. Especially in the maritime, mining and metal industries, their achievements were enormous. I am not suggesting that we should celebrate them uncritically. There were very real difficulties — of opportunism and inflexibility, of economism and doctrinaire excess — and there were specific circumstances that operated in their time that do not operate today. But when all allowances are made, these elements were crucial to Farrell's story and they remain crucial today.