tradition. Above all, the author is concerned with the definite historical conditions that gave rise to concepts such as "dictatorship of the proletariat", rather than treating them as abstract principles or eternal truths.

Medvedev's exposition of the above historical issues will be refreshing to more than one generation of Australian leftists. This includes those who grew up with an uncritical acceptance of the rather sterile official accounts of Soviet history and also those who grew up during the Cold War and subsequent periods when the great contribution of the Soviet people to the socialist cause was obscured both by Western propaganda and actions of the Soviet leadership.

Less satisfying, perhaps, is the final chapter on "Communists and Social Democrats in the West". Not that one could argue much with his criticisms of Social-Democratic parties or the ingrained sectarianism of many communist parties in the West.

Communists and Social Democrats

But Roy Medvedev has never travelled outside the USSR and lacks first-hand experience of advanced capitalist countries. And in the USSR, reliable information on the outside world as well as open debate are often lacking. For example, following the imposition of martial law in Poland, polemics ensued on a range of issues between the CPSU and the Italian Communist Party. The actual views of the PCI were not published in the USSR, and unless access could be gained to PCI documents, the Soviet citizen had only distorted accounts and quotes torn out of context to go on.

Thus, the reader may find that Medvedev is not so authentic in this last chapter, resorting to even-handed criticism of both Communists and Social Democrats and lacking, to some extent, an appreciation of elements of a viable socialist strategy for advanced capitalist societies.

His knowledge of "eurocommunism", of PCI debate on a "third way", or of the emphasis on democracy for many Western communist parties appears incomplete. But, having said that, it must be added that Medvedev's critique is vastly superior to the naive views of some other Soviet "dissidents" and the official blinkered view.

There is another heartening aspect of this book. One gets the impression from the number of sources quoted that Medvedev is able to draw on the resources of a number of other people involved in the field of history and contemporary politics. If this impression is correct, it indicates that there are a number of people dissatisfied with current official thinking despite the decline in the number speaking out.

The existence of frustrated Soviet historians would not be surprising in view of the restrictions placed on research and discussion. For instance, the very name of Khruzhchov, who was the most prominent Soviet leader from soon after Stalin's death in 1953 right up to 1964, cannot be mentioned. Some years ago, an officially commissioned history of the collectivisation of agriculture was prepared by a group of scholars — only to be scrapped at the last moment (it was already set in type according to some) by an edict from above.

Unfortunately, the tendency has been for historians and others to comply with official requirements for the sake of their careers. But if my hunch is correct, and some are now pressing to have their views expressed in one way or another, it is a positive sign.

The words used most often these days to describe various aspects of Soviet life include "immobility", "stagnation" and even "regression". The writings of people such as Roy Medvedev induce the optimist to reflect that the October Revolution and the great struggles and achievements of the Soviet people are too vital to be always encrusted by dogma and bureaucracy.

Under the Hook

In those “silent” days before oral history had achieved even its present bastard status in Australian intellectual circles, Brian Fitzpatrick penned an article for Meanjin entitled “The origins of the people are not in the library”. Fitzpatrick could easily have exchanged the word “history” for “origins”.

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Waterside worker — Noel Counihan

Fitzpatrick, a victim of the Cold War, wrote his populist piece as a broadside against the conservative counter-revolution which was currently taking place in Australian historiography. Few listened to Fitzpatrick as, by administrative fiat, his voice was effectively excluded from the common room discourses of academe on the subject. Some time later, Wendy Lowenstein (along with a small, talented and industrious band which included Bill Wannan.
John Meredith, John Manifold and others), was collecting Australian folksongs and folklore: the threads of the people’s history. In many ways, the work that Lowenstein and company performed was as an active cultural resistance front to the rapid Americanisation of Australian material life. That battle, of course, is far from over. And *Under the Hook* is another bullet in this continuing cultural war of position.

This peregrination into the past is not meant to create the genesis of a Lowenstein legend, it is to place her work in a political and cultural context which not only makes the production of *Under the Hook* intelligible. But also to underline the stubborn fact that her practice of radical history did not fall from the skies or, more pointedly, was not imported via Sussex University or a Chicago radio station. Wendy Lowenstein was listening and talking to working people about their lives well before the current antipodean oral history cult burst upon the scene. One need only examine the back issues of *Australian Tradition* or the work, *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* which she co-edited with June Factor and the late Ian Turner, to appreciate the point that Lowenstein has paid her dues. Indeed, it was this learning by doing, this recording of the struggles, the aspirations, inspirations and tragedies of those largely written out of Australian history’s Who’s Who which led Lowenstein to begin her first major oral history project, *Weevils in the Flour*.

This massive tome was Lowenstein’s tribute to the working-class lives irrevocably scarred by the Great 1930s Depression. *Weevils* filled an enormous gap in Australian historiography. By Lowenstein’s sure and skilful hand, popular memory of the Depression was rescued from oblivion. *Weevils* established oral history in its own right — notwithstanding the angels-on-a-pinhead criticisms hurled at *Weevils* and the practice of oral history generally by some academics.

The first sample of authentic people’s history had finally arrived in the libraries. Oral history associations flourished. Oral history projects, some pedestrian and some bold in their conception, blossomed. More importantly, the critical success of *Weevils* sent Lowenstein off on another path-breaking effort — this time into the torpid wasteland of Australian local history. It was, however, to be a local history with a difference.

Unlike the plethora of inane “classless” local histories, “wage slavery” was to be the pivotal centre of Lowenstein’s new study: the remembered struggles and experiences of Melbourne’s wharfies.
Only Lowenstein’s links with, and a high standing born of activism in, Melbourne’s organised labor movement enabled her to even contemplate a remembered history of these workers. Her firm friend and co-author of *Under the Hook*, Tom Hills, made it a practical possibility. The enthusiastic co-operation of rank-and-file wharfies and the collective efforts of those whom Lowenstein and Hills acknowledged in their rousing class stand ensured that the production of *Under the Hook* would be a completed reality.

Tom Hills’ fighting proletarian spirit was a constant inspiration to the purpose, direction, tone and structure of *Under the Hook*. Lowenstein could have been shunned as a pestering interviewer, or worse, treated as a potential bosses’ pimp if it had not been for Hills’ willingness to urge workers to openly discuss their working lives. Because Hills had proven his worth in past “blues” on the waterfront, the making of *Under the Hook* was given every assistance. Had Lowenstein, armed with a tape-recorder, first appeared out of “management’s” headquarters, the Melbourne wharfies would have been as mute and as unco-operative as the cargoes they shifted. Critics of Lowenstein’s “one-class history” view, such as Peter Spearritt, have failed to realise that in the continuous class struggle between labor and capital one cannot levitate above the barricades or be on both sides simultaneously. Oral history, like all history, is not a “supraclass” phenomenon.

Bob Gollan is only partly correct when he suggests that “... This (*Under the Hook*) is not the history of Melbourne’s waterside workers ....” Judging by the past efforts of labor history and its preference for the safe, institutional ground of trade union hierarchies, Labor parties and governments, *Under the Hook* is the Melbourne wharfies’ story over 80 years. It is a local and oral history of “the Port” written in a new and exciting way, as Lowenstein and Hills assert, “from a militant working class point of view”. It is history from the bottom up. It is a repository of lived history, remembered history, rather than the cold and deadly abstractions of most history texts. Working people live and breathe in *Under the Hook*. Their personal and collective triumphs and tragedies are paramount.

Not being handicapped with a tin ear as some oral historians tend to grow when they pretend “to listen to the masses”, Lowenstein, by dint of hard yakka as a folklorist and a deep understanding of the material and emotional realities of working-class life, has captured in the pages of *Under the Hook*, the rich cadences, irrepressible humour and the indomitable collective strength of working-class language and culture. The bankrupt verbal slur of the “Ocker” millionaire John Singleton is foreign to its pages. Nor are the wharfies’ oral traditions “Orwellised”, thankfully, into “plain and simple English”. The chapters of *Under the Hook* complement each other superbly. The voices of Tom Hills, Lou Albress, Don Strang, Jim Nagel, Bert King, John Morrison, the McLeavy family, Manny Calleja, etc weave a fine mosaic of remembered struggle and experience.

But they are not the tall waterfront tales of a golden nostalgic past. For no such past exists for those whose sweat and labor secured the profit margins of the shipowners and their kind. They are the stories of workers whose many battles — be it against shipping companies’ lockouts, “kept” courts, the bull system, the police, scabs, containerisation, alcoholism, or their fight for better wages and conditions and a resolute proletarian internationalism — have hitherto gone largely unrecorded (at least in *their own words*). In these stories we learn what “sticking up for and covering your mates on the job” means. Fraternity or mateship and that much abused notion “a fair go” is shown to be an existential part of every Melbourne wharf-labourer. Only those whose own decorous lives are bereft of such qualities can afford to lampoon them.

This is not to suggest that wharfies are marble angels, for quite clearly they are not. Crime and criminals as *Under the Hook* details do exist on the wharves. However, here the very notion of crime and the working class must be called into question when a social system which perpetuates the crime that the labor of the vast majority should bolster the lives of that acute minority, the very rich. The wharfies live out Ned Kelly’s defiant aphorism, ”... Your bloody rich man’s government will never govern me!”

The effects of the booms, busts and wars in the era of late imperialism on the lives of Melbourne wharfies are faithfully recorded in *Under the Hook*. Here the political truth, “the personal is the political”, is made plain. The constant struggle to find work, to feed, clothe and shelter one's family, to love and be loved, to laugh, to stand up to the boss, to seek relief and release in the companionship of the jar occur on every page. A thorough reading of *Under the Hook* has given this reviewer a deeper appreciation of the hidden dimensions of what the phrase “down the struggling years” actually means to working people.
The deft use of personal and official photographs as well as Noel Counihan's sketches throughout the book consolidate its visual and narrative power. Whether it be coalies on their last shift smoko (p.19), Gang 255 slinging sheepskins at Prince's Pier (p.140), the trucking of bales of wool in gunny sacks (p.164) or Counihan's line drawings of wharfies shouldering the load (p.122), all poignantly complement the collective narrative of the wharfies.

Constructive rather than carping criticism can, of course, be levelled at *Under the Hook*. The number of workers interviewed for the study is too limited. The ethnic composition of the wharfies, particularly after World War II, is relatively neglected. The changing material circumstances of wharfies and their families is not rigorously analysed. The contemporary reputation of the Melbourne WWF branch as being, "rebel group" and the pervasive influence of "Maoism" on the Melbourne piers despite the recent retirement of Ted Bull is not explained. The failure to scrutinise the archives of the shipping companies and the state during the turbulent times of prolonged strikes and rapid technological change (containerisation) to assess the strategies of the ruling class and its governmental minions is somewhat surprising. So, too, is the dearth of statistical information on shipping company profits and the innumerable work-related illnesses, ailments and health hazards of the stevedoring industry. It is a simple task to point out these blindspots in *Under the Hook*. However, even to suggest these neglected areas of research conjures up the need for a veritable army of interdisciplinary research workers — something the capitalist state itself has neither done nor will ever do for any industry let alone Melbourne's waterfront.

Like *Weevils in the Flour*, *Under the Hook* stands as another monument to Lowenstein's creative efforts to rescue Australia's proletarian past. In these desperate times of staggering foreign domination, vanishing work and vanishing workers, *Under the Hook* and more popular history in a similar vein is needed if the Australian working class is to win back its country and its history. On re-reading *Under the Hook*, I am reminded of the sentiments the great German artist Kathe Kollwitz expressed in her diary:

... For me the Koenigsberg longshoremen had beauty; the Polish jimkes on their grain ships had beauty; the broad freedom of movement in the gestures of the common people had beauty. Middle class people held no appeal to me at all. Bourgeois life as a whole seemed to be pedantic. The proletariat, on the other hand, had a grandness of manner, a breadth to their lives ....

The remarkable achievement of *Under the Hook* is that it captures this proletarian beauty with infinite sensitivity.

**NOTES**

5. Some of these offerings are found in the *Oral History Association of Australia's Journal*, 1980-81 issue.
6. See "Here we stand", *Under the Hook*, pp.4-5.
10. An argument, crucial to all practising oral historians, about the pitfalls inherent in the recording of language, was raised in *History Workshop*. See Editorial, "Language and History", *History Workshop*, Issue 10, Autumn, 1980, pp. I-6.