

The CPA in the Thirties by Dick Dixon

The 9th Conference of the Communist Party of Australia assembled in Sydney on January 10, 1930, at a time of big economic and political changes which gave rise to many new problems for the revolutionary movement. The collapse of share prices on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929 marked the end of the economic boom of US capitalism. Economic crisis spread rapidly in the United States and throughout the capitalist world. By March 1930, there were already 200,000 unemployed in Australia. With the onset of the capitalist crisis a majority of people turned to the Labor Party for a way out and Labor governments were elected in the Federal sphere and in all State parliaments with the exception of Queensland. But they were unable to find solutions and were soon discredited. By the middle of 1932 the wheel had taken its full turn and they had all been defeated.

In the new Central Committee which the 9th Conference of the Party elected, only L.L. Sharkey, H. Moxon and E.J. Docker had some previous CC experience. Newly elected members included Jean Thompson, active in the women's movement, Joe Shelley, a German migrant, J. Loughran, an Irishman who was in charge of the workers' bookshop, W. Orr from Lithgow, and R. Dixon. Of the members of the retiring Central Committee who had opposed the new line of the Party, E. Higgins then the editor of **Workers' Weekly**, was the only one to be elected, but he began to

withdraw from activity almost immediately, and played very little part in the Party thereafter. Among those who lost their positions were Tom Wright and Norman Jeffrey. These comrades were both re-elected to the Central Committee a few years later and went on to make big contributions to the work of the Party and its leadership. The new Central Committee elected L.L. Sharkey as Party president. Although he had no previous journalistic experience he had also to take on editorship of the **Workers' Weekly**. H. Moxon was elected general secretary. He had played an important part in the struggle against the old rightwing leadership, but lacked qualities essential in a general secretary, and most importantly was unable to build a collective and united leadership to strengthen party unity as a whole. Moxon intrigued against other leading party members causing divisions in the leadership. He wanted to carry on the struggle against the old leadership instead of involving them in activity and winning them to support the general line of the Party. These and some extreme leftist mistakes led to him being relieved of his position early in 1931. J.B. Miles was brought from Brisbane to live and work in Sydney and at the 10th Congress in April 1931 he was elected general secretary.

The 9th Party Conference carried a series of resolutions on future work including the need to build Party membership, establish party organisation in factories, suburbs and towns, and to reorganise the structure of the Party. It decided to contest parliamentary elections with communist candidates and to establish the independence of the Party in its policy, leadership and activity in all fields. It also took decisions to combat the activities of rightwing

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A group of workers supporting Lang in 1932.

Labor and trade union leaders, to develop independent organisation and leadership of the workers in trade unions, industries and among the unemployed.

The most immediate and pressing question for the new Central Committee however was the situation in the coalfields. The northern miners had been locked out since March 1929 when they rejected a coal owners' ultimatum for a 12½ per cent wage cut. The NSW Tory Barron government in an effort to break the miners' resistance to the coal owners' demands decided to open up and work some northern mines with scab labor and just prior to Xmas 1929, scabs were put into the Rothbury mine. The government sent a strong force of armed police to protect the scabs and

the miners decided to picket. The reformist leaders of their union and also coalfields Labor Party politicians tried to play it down, urging the miners to confine themselves to peaceful forms of protest. On the morning of the Rothbury opening, the miners demonstrated in force at the pithead. The police attacked with batons and then opened fire on the demonstrators. One worker, Norm Brown was killed and six others wounded. This shooting down of the miners caused great anger among workers and gave rise to a powerful spontaneous protest movement right across Australia. Meetings and demonstrations were held and protests lodged condemning the police savagery and the position of the NSW Tory government. In Sydney, thousands of workers marched on Parliament House in

condemnation of the Barron government. They were met by police attacks, baton charges which resulted in injuries to many of those present, and widespread arrests. In the northern coalfields, tension was very high.

The new Central Committee discussed the mining crisis with party members from the fields including Bill Orr and Charlie Nelson from the western coalfields. It was decided to step up the campaign to achieve a cessation of coal production in all minefields throughout Australia. When the northern miners were locked out the plan of the reformist officials was to confine the dispute to the north. Coalfields in the south and west, in Queensland and Victoria, continued to work flat out, producing sufficient coal for the needs of industry and for other requirements. The Party view was that this reformist tactic could have only one result - the undermining of the morale of the northern miners, and their defeat.

The Party believed that the only way to bring the dispute to a satisfactory end for the miners was to wage an all-out struggle, to stop production in all coal mines. It was also considered necessary to move past the reformist leadership of the union. The Party called for the setting up of rank and file organisation and leadership in the minefields, at the pitheads, with the aim of taking the leadership of the struggle out of the hands of the reformists. The new Central Committee also decided to send party activists to the northern fields where the struggle was extremely sharp. Among those who went north were E.J. Docker, J. Shelley, W. Orr, H. Huggett, N. Jeffrey, W. Laidler, T. McCowley and some others.

After the Rothbury shooting, police repression in the north increased; demonstrations were attacked and broken up; meetings were prohibited; homes were raided in search of explosives and weapons; many miners were arrested, mostly on trumped up charges. Under Party influence, the miners decided to form a Labor Defence Army to protect the organisations of the workers, their meetings and demonstrations. Each member of the Labor Defence Army took a solemn oath "To protect the working class against armed and other aggression of our capitalist class enemy, to resolve that we will never allow ourselves or our children to be used in capitalist war against the workers of other countries."

One of the first tasks of the Labor Defence Army was to protect a women's demonstration in Cessnock. The Communist Party had decided to hold a public meeting in a hall in Cessnock on January 12. The miners' wives announced their intention to defy the police ban on processions and to march through Cessnock streets to attend this meeting. The Labor Defence Army therefore decided that they would also march in order to help protect the demonstration. More than 4,000 attended the meeting; the police did not attempt to suppress the demonstration of women, or to ban the meeting.

On January 8, Joe Shelley was arrested and jailed after addressing a Party public meeting in Kurri Kurri. He was charged with "incitement to crime", the police claiming that he had advised miners how to make milk-tin bombs for use against the Rothbury scabs. Party members and militant workers were set upon and persecuted by the police and many were jailed.

In Sydney at this time, the International Class War Prisoners' Aid organised a rally of some 30,000 people in the Sydney Domain to protest against the police repression on the coalfields and to organise legal aid for those arrested, and assistance for the families of imprisoned workers. The Sydney meeting was symptomatic of the widespread opposition to the attacks of the Barron government and police on miners.

The Federal Labor Party, at the 1929 elections, had promised to secure an end to the northern dispute on the pre-stoppage terms. After a few feeble efforts, however, the Scullin government abandoned the miners. The Party campaign for an all-out policy won support in the coalfields but not sufficient support to stop the production of coal throughout Australia. As the tension in the north declined, the Miners' Union officials resumed their efforts to get the miners to retreat. In April, mass meetings of the miners rejected the plea to return to work. At the end of May, however, after 15 months of lockout, the reformist leaders were successful and there was a majority vote to return to work on the coalowners' terms.

A positive feature of the miners' struggle was the strong growth of the Party's influence and prestige in all of the coalfields, leading to an increase in Party membership in the north especially, but also in the western and

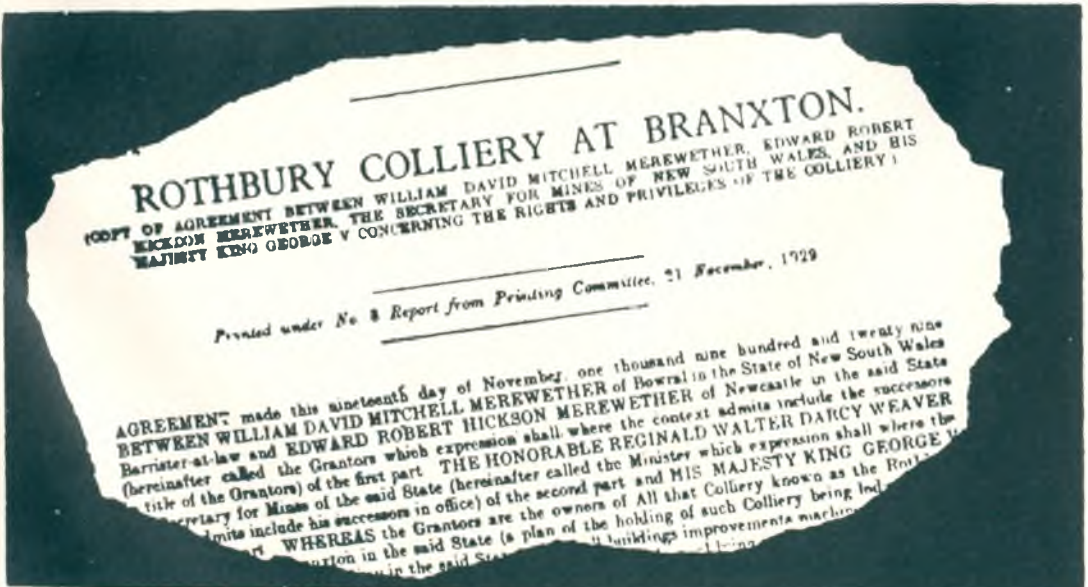
southern coalfields. Bill Orr who was a capable organiser and propagandist, played a big part in the miners' struggle, and he emerged as the most prominent figure on the left in the Miners' Federation. Two and a half years later, at the miners' elections for federal positions in the union in December 1933, Orr was elected general secretary of the Federation, defeating his reformist opponent by more than 1,000 votes, and then several months later, Nelson was elected general president.

At the beginning of March 1930, a leading member of the Communist Party of the United States arrived in Australia. He was known in this country as Herbert Moore, in the United States as H. Wicks. It will be useful here to relate some information about Moore that I gleaned from members of the CPUSA whom I met subsequent to Moore's visit here. Following the 6th Congress of the Communist International in 1928, the US Communist Party was deeply divided on the perspectives and decisions of the World Congress as they related to the United States. The general secretary of the United States Communist Party, Lovestone, was opposed to the line of the Comintern claiming that the decisions were inapplicable to the United States. William Z. Foster, on the other hand, supported the Comintern decisions.

Herbert Moore, I understand, was in the Lovestone camp. The differences in the American Party came before the 6th Convention of the CPUSA in March 1929. The delegates were divided, they could not reach agreement and so it was unanimously decided to seek a discussion on the issues with the Communist International. A large delegation representative of both views in the American Party went to Moscow. Among those present at the discussion apart from the US delegation and the Comintern representatives, were Stalin and Bukharin from the CPSU, and also communist leaders from France, Germany, Britain, China, Czechoslovakia and Canada.

Lovestone advanced his view that United States capitalism filled an "exceptional" position in the world, which would enable it to avoid economic crisis. In his view the prosperity and economic boom then prevailing in the United States would continue. That was in May 1929. Five months later, in October, share prices on the New York Stock Exchange collapsed signalling the fact that the boom was over; prosperity gave way to economic crisis in the United States.

The Comintern discussion on the American question ended with the rejection of Lovestone's views and it reaffirmed the validity of the 6th Congress decisions on economic



Copy of the government takeover of the Rothbury colliery, 1929.

crisis and the sharpening class struggle in the capitalist countries. When Lovestone returned to the United States and when the facts and the discussion with the other communist parties were made known, a great majority of United States communists rejected his views also. Moore, who was present at the Comintern discussion, did not immediately return to the United States but remained in Moscow for some time working in the Anglo-American section of the Comintern representing the American Party.

When he was due to return to the US, the Comintern proposed that he visit Australia and work with the Australian Party for a period of time and later return to the United States. He arrived here early in March 1930 and returned to the United States about April 1931 following the 10th Congress of the Australian Communist Party. If Moore adopted a rightist position in the United States, he certainly showed no signs of that tendency here. Our Central Committee was on a leftist line at the time and Moore's approach coincided and in some respects contributed to strengthening our left stance. He wrote regularly for the **Workers' Weekly** during his stay here in which he expounded his views on Party policy and the Australian situation. Moore made mistakes in his estimation of the Labor Party. This was understandable. In the United States, the working class never succeeded in developing a mass labor party as in Australia and Britain, nor a social-democratic party as exists in various countries of Europe. He knew these parties therefore only in their historical or theoretical sense. He also made mistakes on the trade union question, partly, I think, because of his US background where the trade union situation is different to that in Australia and partly from his attempt to introduce Comintern and Red International of Labor Union's tactics. I will refer to these questions in detail later.

One of the most persistent criticisms of the work of the Australian Communist Party in the early 1930s was our use of the term 'social fascism' in characterising the leaders of the Labor Party and reformist trade union officials, and 'left social fascism' to describe those on the left in the labor movement. It is necessary to say at this point that we ourselves were the first to criticise the use of these terms. We did this in an effort to correct leftist mistakes in the Party. Our criticism has since been followed up by remarks by others which do not always

reveal any clear understanding of the problem. The term 'social fascism' had its origin in the Comintern - indeed it can be traced back to Stalin. Prior to the 6th Congress of the Comintern in 1928, Stalin spoke of fascism as the "militant organisation of the bourgeoisie based on support of social democracy". He described social democracy and fascism as 'twins'. It was not long after Stalin's remarks that Comintern publicists began to use the phrase 'social fascism' to describe social democratic leaders and this term began to be used widely by sections of the Comintern.

The use of the term 'social fascism' however was not the main problem arising from Stalin's remarks. His characterisation of fascism virtually identified the bourgeois democratic form of capitalist class rule with fascism. His statement on social democracy which depended on the system of bourgeois democracy and grew up in it could only mean that they had no role to play in the struggle against fascism. The rise of fascism in Germany and Hitler's destruction of the bourgeois democratic system, and of the social-democratic party and trade unions of Germany, as well as of the Communist Party, was to demonstrate how mistaken Stalin's views were on bourgeois democracy and fascism.

At the 7th Congress of the Communist International in 1935, Dimitrov put forward a different view of fascism. He characterised fascism in power as the open, terrorist dictatorship of finance capital. He called upon the Communist Parties to resolutely come out in defence of democratic freedom, of the liberties of the people in the struggle against fascism and urged the building of the united front with the social democratic masses, leaders and organisations.

Dimitrov's report came much too late for the German Communist Party; already it had been crushed. But it raised important new perspectives for the communist parties and the working people in the struggle against fascism and against the way that was then developing.

The use, or more correctly, the misuse of the term 'social fascist' here in Australia was essentially the mistake of our Party. It became a term of abuse of our opponents. It is necessary, however, to look at the conditions and circumstances of our struggle in which we made this mistake and we will deal with that in a future article.