INTERVIEW WITH LENIN

INTRODUCTION:

This document purports to be an account of a meeting between Lenin and two representatives of the Communist Party of Australia in Moscow on December 1, 1922 during the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. As far as is known it is the only report of the discussion and it therefore has considerable significance. A member of the Tribune collective sorting through the papers of the late Alec Robertson, (Tribune editor 1964-74), discovered it more or less by chance.

Nothing is known about how the original document came to be written or its history between 1922 and 1976 when it was discovered. However, W.P. Earsman's name is typed at the end and some corrections have been made with a fountain pen. In 1922 W.P. Earsman was a member of the Executive Committee (ECCI) and Australian representative at the Comintern. There seems no strong reason to doubt its authenticity.

Of the three participants in the discussion, Lenin hardly needs any introduction. However, it is worth noting that, at the time of the discussion, he was a very sick man. After a period of ill-health Lenin suffered the first of several strokes in May 1922. He was partially incapacitated and lost the power of speech. Nevertheless, he made a great effort to recover and, after convalescing in Gorki, returned to Moscow in October 1922, was able to work part-time, and participated briefly in the Fourth Congress of the Comintern. Unfortunately, the illness (arterio-sclerosis) was progressive and Lenin's health deteriorated. Thus on November 25 his physicians prescribed absolute rest.

Shortly after the meeting with the Australians, Lenin had a second more severe stroke, but he was able, at the end of December and in early January to dictate his famous Testament. His health continued to deteriorate and he died on January 21, 1924.

W.P. (Bill) Earsman, the author of the report, was a major figure in the formation of the Communist Party of Australia and its first secretary. He was a delegate to the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921. After returning briefly to Australia he became the Australian representative at the Comintern and a member of the ECCI.(1)

The third person mentioned was J.S (Jock) Garden, secretary of the New South Wales Labor Council, 1918-37, first chairman of the Communist Party, delegate to the Fourth Congress of the Comintern and Australian delegate to the Second Congress of the Red International of Trade Unions (RITU-Profintern).

As to the substance of the report, perhaps the first thing to note is the passage of time. There seems now to be a funny mixture of realism and naivete about the discussion. Some of the views expressed may seem quaint, even exaggerated. But there is also much of interest and topical relevance.

The most pertinent question is why Lenin, supposedly under doctors' orders to have a complete rest, should have sought out two fairly obscure people to talk about the political situation in a country which remained a self-governing colony. There is no completely satisfactory answer to this question and to a
large extent one is guessing, but a probability (which tends to be confirmed by the internal evidence) is the significance which the Communist International leadership, and Lenin in particular, had come to attach to the united front.

Proceeding both from Russian internal affairs and international events in the first half of 1921 - Kronstadt, NEP, the March action in Germany, the Anglo-Soviet Treaty, etc., - the Comintern, first at the Third Congress but very explicitly at the ECCI meeting at the end of 1921, launched a new united front policy which emphasised the need to develop the unity of the working class, in both political and trade union action. Already Trotsky, at the Third Congress, had sought out Earsman to offer help in negotiations on which Earsman was engaged. Earsman's accounts of the radicalisation in Australia and the leftward swing of the unions had surprised Comintern leaders.

One major strand in the Communist Party in Australia developed from the trade unionists who had formed the leftwing of the Labor Party. Earsman and Garden, in their persons, represented the merging of the two closest trends; both were unionists, Earsman - half-socialist half-syndicalist, non-Labor Party; Garden - Labor Party and industrial unionist. They shared a good deal of common ground distinct, on the one hand, from the doctrinaire socialists, on the other, from the ex-IWWs. In the early struggles inside the CPA, the Earsman-Garden trend had formed an alliance with the ex-IWWs to defeat the doctrinaire socialists.

Lenin's approach is evident from his preoccupation with the Labor Party, his surprise at the adoption of the Socialist Objective, his emphasis on work with the Labor Party masses, his behest not to make "the mistake of attacking the Labor Party in general" and his stress on the trade unions as "the most important organisation of the working class".

As for the Communist Party his points are still topical; the need for a mass party winning the confidence of the workers; and the danger of empty revolutionary rhetoric. Perhaps Earsman attributed more to Lenin than his actual words. As an Australian revolutionary, Earsman probably over-stated Lenin's view about Australia's importance, although social reforms in Australia and Labor governments in the early twentieth century did provoke the interests of socialists from many countries, including the Bolsheviks.

- Roger Coates.

FOOTNOTES


3. This is apparently a reference to the Socialist Objective adopted at the Commonwealth Conference of the Australian Labor Party in October 1921.

4) The NSW Labor Council had affiliated with the RITU in 1922 after hearing a report of its president, J. Howie, who attended the founding Congress in July 1921. Howie actually officially represented a majority of Australian unionists at the Congress.

5) The congress, which met in June 1921, formulated the Socialist Objective for submission to the Labor Party.

6) The Pan-Pacific Congress proposal led to some sort of concerted action with Asian unionists in 1926 and 1927.

THE INTERVIEW WITH LENIN

It was in the evening of Dec. 1 1922, it was a very cold day with 9 inches of snow and freezing 20 degrees below zero when I saw Comrade Lenin.

It had been a very hard and weary day at the Conference and after dinner I laid down to have a rest before going to the Profintern [sic] Conference. (2) I had just got settled and was beginning to fall off to sleep, when the telephone rang. I rose to answer it, cursing every body in general and wishing all the telephones were abolished from the rooms. On lifting the receiver however I was soon all attention, because it was Comrade Lenin requesting me to go to him at 7 o'clock that evening. Comrade Garden was lying down and
I asked permission for him to accompany me, this was granted.

At 7 that evening we were at the Kremlin and went right upstairs to “The Old man’s” room, this is the pet name Lenin is known by in official circles. He came forward and welcomed us, we drew our chairs close up to him and immediately got to business. On our inquiring as to his health Lenin replied “That he was alright now and was beginning to feel quite himself again, but still felt a little weak and soon got tired after he had done any work. I cannot go on for more than 4 hours at a time and then I must have a rest, and not even read anything, I am longing to go back to my work again and see things for myself.”

To look at him, he appeared to me to be the old Lenin that I had met last year, except that I am meeting him on this occasion under different circumstances which were that I was not in the office but in his own room, which gave the atmosphere more of a friendly talk than a business one. In fact it was an opportunity that few people had given to them, and I can assure you that I fully appreciated it, because I saw Lenin in another role which I have not seen described by others.

Lenin set off by saying “Tell me all about Australia its development, internally and its connections with other countries, you know I have read nothing for nearly a year, and seen very few people and this tonight is a real feast for me.”

I briefly outlined the development during the war, its influence and its effects on the country, I told him of the political parties and particularly the A.L.P. He was very surprised at its programme and asked many questions how the situation had been brought about. When it had been examined, he smiled and said “I am very certain that if our party got to work with the masses in the Labor Party they will find very, very good material suitable for membership of the Communist Party, but do not make the mistake of attacking the Labor Party in general. Rember the masses make up the Labor Party and they are always good. You must be sure to divide the BOURGEOIS LABOR LEADERS from the masses and your criticism should be aimed at isolating those leaders from the masses. The Communist Party has to work with the masses and mould their political opinions, and at no time should we antagonise the masses. If we are the real leaders, we must prove it by always being with them in all their struggles.”

Again Lenin was surprised at the rapid economic development, particularly the mass production in agriculture, he thought was wonderful. Then he asked about the Trade Unions and Comrade Garden gave him all the information and facts. He was pleased at the high percentage of workers organised and the development of Industrial Unionism, but the best piece of news was the fact that the N.S.W. Labor Council was affiliated to the R.I.L.U. (4) Lenin thought that this was a real achievement for so small a party as ours and told Comrade Garden that it was magnificent. “Keep your eyes on the Unions, they are the most important organisation of the working class, great care is required in this work because one is very apt to become a Labor Unionist and not a Communist.” His next inquiries were about the navy, the army and the police, we gave him as much information as we could, (without giving away any government secrets).

Then I proceeded to tell him of the recent developments, and the attention the country was receiving from the American capitalists. How they were investing money in many industries, such as Meat, Mining and Coal; buying up land and securing leases of all lands. I also told him of Teodore’s experiences attempting to borrow money, how he went to the American financiers and secured some millions after the London financiers had refused him. For two minutes Lenin sat looking at me with absolute astonishment on his face, then bending forward and looking hard at me, he said “This is the most startling thing I have ever heard of. All my life and in all my experience I have only known one consistent thing and that is the absolute solidarity of the capitalist class, and here in far away Australia you have even broken down that for a minute. Hah! We must find some means of expropriating these kind benevolent American capitalists”.

The next question we dealt with was the All Australian Congress of Trades Unions and its work, especially the resolution dealing with the Pan Pacific Congress,(5) Lenin said, “That is a very fine idea but you have set yourselves a much bigger task than you recognise. It will take a great deal of work to accomplish this successfully, and it will take longer than you realise. The opposition of the Labor Party combined with the prejudice of the workers in the far East, arising out of your policy of
“WHITE AUSTRALIA” will be some of the difficulties you will have to contend with. Nevertheless it is something worth setting out to accomplish and will have a very big influence amongst the workers of all countries.” (6)

The next problem was, The Relationship of Australia to the “Mother Country”, and whether Australia must wait the success of the workers in Britain, before our time of Revolution would arrive. Lenin replied “That is a very big question and very many things will have to be taken into consideration, the army, the navy and the police and what chance there is of having them with us. Next your chance of getting control of the Air Service, and remember that is more important than the other departments. Then there is poisonous gas which must be kept in mind. After taking all this into consideration, you must turn your attention to the question of attacks from the outside. The chances of sending a British army from India, or one from Japan acting in conjunction with Britain. That must be fully considered and your chances against holding out in the face of such a development. The position in Australia is a dangerous one for such a small party and every effort must be made to become a mass party. You must get the confidence of the workers in sympathy with you. Your food supplies must be borne in mind because this is the first step towards real success. With this well in hand you will be able to handle the masses and prevent them from becoming a mob, once you lose control then all is lost. Have no mercy for the bourgeoisie if they stand in the way. Wipe them out, but not with tears in your eyes because sympathy is lost on these gentry. They must be disarmed and suppressed at all costs.

“The position in Australia is a dangerous one for such a small party and every effort must be made to become a mass party. You must get the confidence of the workers even if you have to take a step backward in your propaganda. Do not frighten the mass with empty talk about revolution and do not unnecessary arouse the bourgeoisie’s suspicions. Do not forget what happened in South Africa, there is an object lesson for you. The bourgeoisie were aroused there, and they simply provoked the workers, who fell into the trap and were slaughtered, I hope the Australian worker will learn much from this lesson.” Lenin continued “Australia is important because we all know it as the land of bourgeois political experiments if a successful socialist revolution was carried out there, that would be the last straw of the Labor Bourgeois Politician smashed. Not only this, but it would have a great significance in the Eastern and Western world, more than even the Russian Revolution I think had. But understand before any efforts are made to seize power that you have the right PSYCHOLOGICAL moment; this is paramount. If we had had acted on the 6th or the 8th of Nov. we would have been smashed but our time was right, your position is a difficult one but go ahead and convey to all our comrades in Australia and New Zealand my best wishes. You have awakened my attention to fresh problems in the Western world and Australia and I will not forget them. I will get our party to give some attention to the question and get all the information I can while I am resting.” The conversation lasted nearly 2 hours and Lenin spoke without a translator, he was very loathe to let us go but we saw he was tiring therefore it was better to go. I might add that we were among the very few whom Lenin sent for, practically no delegates saw him this year, he was only one day at the Congress and then it was only for an hour. The following day the Sunday the 2nd of Dec., before I was up the telephone rang and on going to it, I found it was the Secretary of Lenin asking when I was going away, and not to go before coming to see him again, this I tried to do but it was not possible because he had gone to the country for a few days. Lenin though not well is far from being dead, his brain is as clear as before and the only difference I saw in him was that he was a little more patient than previously, but this could be accounted for in the fact that on this occasion I was speaking to him off duty and in his own room not his office.

W.P. EARSMAN