

Affirming the centrality of class

A PROLETARIAN LIFE by Audrey Blake. Kibble Books, Victoria, 1984. \$7.95, paperback, 171 pages.



**Reviewed by
Kath Olive**

Audrey seems to have anticipated that there would be some surprise at the title she has chosen — *A Proletarian Life*.

This is not an autobiography. We are shown those events in Audrey's infancy, childhood and youth which she perceives as having the main significance in shaping her adult development. We see something of her life in the youth movement and the Communist Party, and some major events in which she was a leading participant. And we do little more than glimpse personal relationships. Thus, it is not so much the account of a life as of the shaping of a person, a picture of an era as it affected the author and was affected by her.

But why "Proletarian"? Audrey asks, "since it is not the most popular of terms these days". She answers in part:

I chose it because I wanted to turn away from the fashionable Left thesis of the death of 'class' as a concept for today. I wanted to affirm the centrality of class, to counter the decline of the Left amongst the workforce, to challenge anti-socialist marxism and an anti-Soviet socialism, and to confront a politics without a subject, the goal of which is no longer the socialist transformation of society, but merely a renovation of liberal capitalism.

And further,

The young unemployed today prefigure, so we are told, a massive permanent army of workers with no work to do. And so I chose 'Proletarian', raising the flag, so to speak. Equally, the word speaks of the ideas of internationalism, solidarity, peace and socialism.

I have quoted this at some length because it is the cornerstone of the book. In much of the discussion around the future of the Communist

Party and the "relevance" of socialism in today's Australia, one often feels that socialism itself is being jettisoned along with what are perceived as its mistakes. Whether one agrees with Audrey's approach to the present and future development of socialist theory and practice, one must surely welcome her re-exploration of fundamental marxist analysis, and her unequivocal declaration for the socialist future.

In the 1970s, there was a strong idea among the younger comrades that everything that went on before 1968 was irrelevant, stalinist and counter-revolutionary. Those who had struggled in a previous era were of no importance. The feeling of rejection to us was very strong, and Audrey's book is excellent in this regard. It doesn't only, or even mainly, enumerate struggles and events. It deals with ideological evolution, and brings to life, in the context of Australian conditions, the correctness of Marx's contention that the present and future rest on the experiences of the past — a lesson that still needs to be learnt by many of the young people who are attracted to the left.

In the '40s and '50s, it was common to ascribe political proficiency in women to the influence of the men with whom they were associated. Thus, Audrey was held by many to be a "gramophone", a mouthpiece for Jack Blake, a purveyor of his ideas. (This attitude merged with the more generalised view that, in Queensland and in Victoria, all the leading comrades were reflections of the two charismatic leaders, Jack Henry and Jack Blake. This was equally a travesty of the truth.)



A demonstration against war and fascism (Melbourne, circa 1939).

The calumny of this view of Audrey is shown clearly in *A Proletarian Life*. She is revealed as an independent and creative socialist thinker and theoretician, one of the few women on the left in Australia to engage consistently in serious contribution to socialist theory. To me, this book is significant for this fact as much as for the not inconsiderable input into socialist theory it actually achieves.

The Audrey that those of us who worked with her knew, a confident and very competent organiser and activist, is not so evident here, but comes through in her account of the Youth Festival for Peace and Friendship, of which she was the originator, architect and executor. It was one of the most important, most intense and most successful battles of the Australian labour movement.

The strong tendency in the Communist Party and on the left to rubbish the past and those who built it received a welcome check at the Sixtieth Anniversary CPA History Conference in Melbourne in 1980. From this, Audrey reprints one of her contributions, in which, as throughout the book, the application of the marxist dialectical method of analysis is evident. The emphasis is not simply on "learning lessons" from the past, but on interpreting past struggles, past methods, past relationships and past theories in terms of their influence and contribution to present and future socialist theory and practice.

To women of our generation and political history of activity in the youth movement in the 1930s and 1940s, Audrey's attitude to the modern women's movement is one with which we can identify. In those two decades especially, as she points out, young women in the youth movement enjoyed great scope and opportunity to become leaders at state and national level, both in the youth organisations and, by virtue of their prominence there, in the Communist Party. That this was not the general situation for women in the party became apparent only when we moved away from youth activity.

During the period of World War II, when so many of the male party leaders went into the armed forces, women of necessity moved into many of the party's leading positions, to the sotto voce, and often not so muted, mutterings about "petticoat rule". The benign experience of our early youthful years was a valuable source of able women activists as well as an important demonstration that a leadership composed mainly of women was at least as effective as that dominated by men.

I found this book rich in material to provoke thought — on the need for a youth movement of the left in today's conditions; on the influence of Jewish comrades and culture in shaping Audrey's development, and on similar influences in North

Queensland from the Southern European migrants; and on Audrey's first-hand experiences of the Stalin terror and the conditioning which made her, and us, repudiate what later became obvious conclusions.

For me, one thing missing from the book was the fun and enjoyment we had from the movement then, but the optimism certainly comes through. We had a tremendous sense of purpose and fulfilment in those days. It is easy to scoff at these things, and to point out with truth that the purpose and fulfilment were due to the stalinist conviction that we were absolutely right. To regain the sense of commitment and purpose without dogma is, to my mind, one of the problems of attracting young people to socialism today.

Finishing the book, one sees that Audrey's was indeed "a proletarian life", and Audrey emerges not only as proletarian in background and experience, but as that much rarer thing, a proletarian scholar and intellectual.

I hope her book is widely read, particularly by younger people on and approachign the left. It should stimulate interest in the forthcoming film "Red Matildas", of whom she is one.

Give the book to someone for Christmas, or even sooner.

Kath Olive worked with Audrey Blake in the youth movement in the 1930s and '40s and has remained an active communist.