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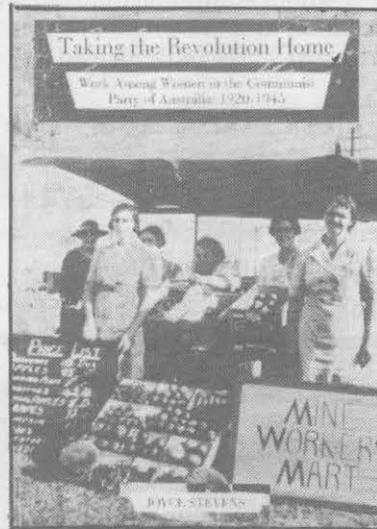
Home Truths

Joyce Stevens, *Taking the Revolution Home: Work Among Women in the Communist Party of Australia 1920-1945*, Sybylla Co-operative Press, 1987, \$15.95. Reviewed by Marilyn Lake.

When Katharine Susannah Prichard contributed her best wishes to the first edition of the new paper *Women's Cause* in 1943 she cautioned against the continuation of "feminist chauvinism" in Australia. Women should think of themselves as citizens, she said, not as women.

Her advice sprang from recognition of, and reaction against, the strong women-centred, anti-party orientation of much Australian feminism between the wars, but it was also firmly in the communist tradition. This was a tradition, as Joyce Stevens explains in her new book, which demanded that women curb all separatist tendencies in the greater interests of the men's organisations. In *Taking the Revolution Home* Joyce Stevens has provided us with a much needed study of this communist tradition, in particular of "work among women" undertaken by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) between 1920 and 1945. It is a courageous and informative study which raises important theoretical questions about the relations between socialism and feminism.

The CPA emerges in this account as the most patriarchal of organisations, its leaders unashamed masculinists who, in their preoccupation with male work places, grievances, wage standards and strategies, dismissed women as



"politically backward" and their concerns (with issues such as birth control) as trivial. As Joyce Stevens writes, class struggle bore a "male aspect" and communist politics bore "a decidedly male visage". Preoccupied with defending the male living wage, the CPA was ambivalent about married women entering the labour market. Women comrades were treated as recruiting agents whose task it was to convert other women to the cause, to win women's support for the male struggles. They were most successful in the timber and coal mining communities, wooing the wives of workers rather than women in paid work — and the union auxiliary emerged as the paradigm of women's relationship to the communist movement. It was also a form of activity which depended on the historically specific circumstances of mass housewifery.

The Communist Party encouraged activism among women but not autonomy. When Alice Holloway travelled to Spain and the Soviet Union in 1939, her trip funded

by the Australian Railways Union (ARU) auxiliaries, the ARU State Council reprimanded the auxiliaries, resolving that "before they set out on any similar project" they first consult the union. The auxiliaries were not easily controlled however. Following a spirited defence of the actions of the auxiliaries by Holloway on her return, the request was unanimously expunged from the council's minutes. Women were also very active in the Unemployed Workers Movement and in all arenas their energetic political activity resulted in public abuse, arrests, jail, sentences of hard labour.

We meet many spirited women in the pages of this history. *Taking the Revolution Home* is thus important in rendering the socialist women of the past visible. Too often it is assumed that women were drawn into politics after World War I on the conservative side. Unfortunately, communist women's emphasis on the collective rather than the individual has inadvertently maintained their historical obscurity. "I always think that the person individually is nothing," said Grace Scanlon. "You get all the strength from the women you're working with, you don't get it on your own." The transcripts of interviews with the women included in the book personalise the history and remind us how public, political activity is inextricably linked to and conditioned by "private" life.

Women were always a minority of the CPA — of the 2,800 party members at the end of 1935, for example, only 200 were women. Male comrades explained this in terms of women's "political backwardness". Women's diagnoses were rather more incisive. In the first public statement about women in the party, in 1922, Christian Jollie-Smith suggested that woman's resentment at male exploitation, "this latest resentment against all men who have lived on this toil of hers" made women reluctant to join the party, made it "twice as hard" for a woman to be a communist.

Jollie-Smith counselled nevertheless that women should forget their "personal" resentments,

that on no account should they bring "their sex war into the class war". But clearly the sex war smouldered on. The elimination of the CPA women's departments in the 1930s seems to have been the result of Comintern directives but also perhaps the outcome of a Melbourne textile struggle where, according to Jean Thompson in the *Communist Review*, there were "many weaknesses and wrong ideas ... particularly in [the women's] attitude to the men".

The history of women's experience in the Australian communist movement is instructive. Women entered the movement on

men's terms and were constrained to accept male priorities. At a time when much thought is being given to the formation of new parties and alliances on the left, it would seem to be imperative for feminists to be there at the beginning, when the goals and objectives are being set down. Perhaps then, concern with the relations of reproduction will be as integral to a socialist program and the relations of production, and the revolution at home might determine the agenda of the movement at large.

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The Good Fight

Amirah Inglis, *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*. Allen & Unwin, 1987. \$19.95. Reviewed by **Stuart Macintyre**.

This is a book that should have been written earlier, and could not have been written much later. For the remaining veterans of the Spanish Civil War are passing on, and with them their memories. The volunteers who made up the English, Scottish, Welsh and numerous other national contingents have all been memorialised in book-length accounts, but the sixty-odd Australians (the fact that the exact number is not known testifies to their neglect) had not — until Amirah Inglis remedied the deficiency.

Her reasons for doing so go back to her childhood. As a girl she followed events in Spain through the letters of her uncle, who fought as a member of the Polish contingent. In 1938 she herself attended a meeting held in Melbourne to support the Spanish fight for democracy and freedom, and contributed her savings to the collection. In this book, written fifty years later, she sets out to tell the story and reserves judgment until she has done so; but

her sympathies are never wholly absent.

Why does the Spanish Civil War remain such a poignant memory for Amirah and so many others of her generation? The answer lies partly in the nature of the events in Spain and partly in their signal importance for those on the left caught up in a global struggle against fascism. As she explains in a preliminary sketch of the "Spanish background", the protracted struggle of Spanish workers and peasants to throw off a

repressive and exploitative alliance of landowners, the Church and the army drew attention to the country. When the right refused to accept the democratic process and attempted to overthrow the republican government by force in 1936, Spain became the cockpit of the anti-fascist struggle.

For in contrast to the earlier triumph of the right in Italy, Germany and Austria, in Spain there was concerted and effective resistance. The open assistance that Mussolini and Hitler gave the rebels was answered by leftwing volunteers. It seemed to them that if the insurgents could be defeated, the wider ambitions of the fascists could be defeated also. Moreover, Spain excited the sympathy of a new generation of intellectuals, writers, artists and middle-class progressives for whom it was the first and formative international cause.

The book is organised in three parts — arguments within Australia over Spain; the fortunes of the Australians who went there; and their return.

In company with Britain and the other major powers, the Australian government maintained a policy of strict neutrality towards the civil war. The proclaimed intent was to minimise the threat to international peace by seeking, as far as possible, to ensure that all countries remained neutral. This meant turning a blind eye to the considerable and direct support that Germany and Italy gave the rebels, so in practice "strict neutrality" served the conservative preference for appeasing the dictators. But neutrality also found support within the labour movement from those who feared that Australia might again become involved in a European war.

These attitudes were by no means peculiar to Australia, but Inglis suggests that the Australian response to Spain was noticeably lukewarm. The level of international awareness was low, the paucity of news services marked. Only a minority of Australians felt strongly about Spain, and many of those (noticeably the groups of Mediterranean immigrants and

