Discussion:

Red North revisited

In *Australian Left Review* (No 80), Carmel Shute, in her review article of "Red North", said that at the beginning of the 1935 crushing season the Australian Workers Union (AWU) had won an agreement to burn cane in the Ingham district only.

As a participant at the time I know that is not correct as the following account will show.

Ingham had two sugar mills, both owned by the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR). About 570 men were employed to cut cane for these mills.

For 18 years prior to the 1934 strike, no union meeting had been held and most cutters had never attended a union meeting. When cutters were getting sick in bigger numbers than usual, some went to the union office and asked for a meeting to be called.

The union refused. The local branch of the Communist Party (CPA) initiated a petition and collected signatures calling for a union meeting in accordance with the AWU constitution.

The required number of signatures was obtained and submitted to the union office. The CPA advertised the meeting and called on all cutters to attend.

Although the AWU organiser went around the district telling cutters not to attend, about 80 percent turned up and voted to go on strike until all cane was burnt and Weil's Disease declared an industrial disease. This hectic strike was successful.

Before the 1935 season started, the CSR, assisted by the AWU officials, recruited 200 men from the NSW Northern Rivers and arranged for them to come to Ingham. The plan was to victimise the activists of the 1934 strike. The AWU officials led the way in saying that it was now safe to cut the cane green.

Each cane gang consisted of seven or eight cutters and a cook. Together they signed a contract to cut cane for a group of three or four employers. The AWU now said that all gangs must register with the union one week before the sign-on. This was done so that the union could hold out any militant. If a gang included such a cutter the union would tell the gang leader to exclude him or lose the contract. Those AWU officials were the most effective spies for the CSR and other employers.

Green again

The 1935 season started and cane was cut green. Within a few weeks some men became so ill that a deputation went to the union office and asked for a meeting to be called. The union officials said "no". Again, a petition was produced and signatures obtained. This time the AWU organiser called the meeting since it was known that, as in 1934, the meeting would take place. But the AWU called the meeting for signed-on cutters only and arranged for uniformed and plain clothes police to stand at the door of the meeting hall. Those who had not been signed on for a cut could not attend even though they were financial union members.

Nevertheless, the cane was burnt the following week.

The 1936 season started at the end of May with a record crop. The propaganda machines ran flat out. The AWU played a leading part, saying it was now safe to cut the cane green and that it would be cut green further north. (The strike at Innisfail and Tully in the previous year had been defeated.)

Again, the cane was cut green and again, after only a few weeks, men were ill. Soon a ward at the local hospital was full of cane cutters. Agitation for burning was stepped up, groups of cutters again made representations to the union. Eventually, the cane was burnt, but not before some cutters were badly affected. One young Italian became so ill and close to death that he received the last sacraments. After four or five weeks he recovered and applied for compensation. He sought help from the AWU but, as usual, they said the they could not do anything.

The case went to court. The insurance company brought Dr Raphael Cilento to help them against this disabled cane cutter. Dr Cilento was regarded as an authority on tropical diseases but, until this
case, he had shown no public interest in establishing what diseases were affecting cane cutters. He had not been in Ingham before.

Now he claimed that the Italian cutter had typhus. The cutter lost the case.

A deputation went to the AWU to argue that if this cutter had typhus, then the union should do something about typhus as an industrial disease. Again, the union made a negative response.

Although there was a Labor government in office at the time, and there were many such cases, any gains that cane cutters made were despite, and against opposition from, CSR, the AWU, big farmers and rats. Success came only when the rank and file became active and able to unite the many nationalities making up the workforce on the canefields. The driving force for this was the Communist Party.

— George Bliss.

The left drew on the energies of able men and women who made enormous sacrifices. Yet the record of the left in Australia consists essentially of errors, defeats and repeated attempts to rebuild. It was not until the Second World War that the Australian Communist Party achieved its maximum membership — some 20,000 members in a population of seven million. By the end of the war it held leading posts in unions including the miners, the metal trades and the maritime workers, representing more than a quarter of the organised working class. However, that was the highpoint. By the end of the 1940s the Communist Party was losing ground. Since then it has suffered defections in 1956 and 1968, and two major splits until today it is as weak as it was between the wars.

How is it that the left failed? If we look at the period from the end of one war to the beginning of the next we can recognise certain crucial weaknesses. On the eve of the First World War there were a number of organisations, the pragmatic ones linked to the emergent labor movement, the doctrinaire ones more concerned with agitation and exerting an efflorescent influence on less organised sections of the working class. The effect of the Russian Revolution was to reorient the left towards Leninist methods, insofar as these were understood, but with the re-establishment of capitalist stability in the 1920s, the Communist Party found itself isolated from the mainstream of the labor movement, a problem compounded by ill-conceived attempts on the part of small groups of activists to capture mass organisations. The onset of the Depression at once created conditions for a left advance and, at the same time, saw the communist tactics of the third period throw away these advantages with a

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The interwar period poses particular problems for anyone seeking to understand the history of the Australian left. At the end of the First World War we have the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Communist International. Over the next few years the monarchies of Europe collapsed, working-class movements reached for power and movements of colonial liberation sprang up. At the end of the 1920s there was the most severe capitalist crisis in history. During the 1930s the fight against fascism mobilised a broad range of progressives.