DISCUSSION AND REPLY

The recent publication of Dianne Menghetti's *The Red North* has provoked much interest including a review in *Australian Left Review* 83 by Carmel Shute. In this article, Doug Olive recollects his experiences of party work and events in North Queensland during the period covered by *The Red North*. Olive makes a number of comments, criticisms and commendations of Menghetti's work.

I have just read Dianne Menghetti's *The Red North* and, despite any criticisms I might offer, I regard the book as excellent. The author has captured the spirit of our Party, its broad methods and style of work, approach and attitude that characterised it in the North at the time, and enabled communists to become an integral part of the daily lives of those with whom we lived and worked.

Some errors occur that deal mainly with names, places, events, etc., but do nothing to weaken its political content. However, there are some important shortcomings. One very serious mistake which must be corrected, not only from the point of view of history, but also the correct presentation of our Party's position, occurs on page 129. The author says, "In Mundingburra, the C.P.A. secretary Alex MacDonald contested the seat in 1935, standing as an Independent, while Ayr secretary Doug Olive stood in 1938". (my emphasis)

Alex MacDonald was based in Brisbane, not Townsville. He did not contest the Mundingburra seat in 1935. Albert Robinson was our Communist Party candidate, and received approximately 250 votes. We never even attempted to present Party members under a false label. In fact, we drew our strength from the fact that we always advocated, and taught, our members the absolute need to keep faith with the people, to be honest with the people, never to try to deceive them, at all times and in all conditions possible to present openly the face and identity of the Party.

To stand Communists as Independents would, in 1935, not only have been an easily-seen-through deception, but also a violation of our fundamental principles, method and style of work.

I did stand in 1938, and received 850 votes. In 1941, when the Party was illegal and it was not possible to stand as Communists, we contested the seat again with myself as candidate standing as an Independent Socialist, which deceived no one. We doubled out 1938 vote.

It is important to remember that the election took place two months before Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, and followed such horrific political events as the Soviet-German Non-Aggression pact, the Soviet invasion of the Baltic States, the smashing of the Finnish Mannerheim Line, the declaration of the Party's illegality, and Mussolini's entry into the war.

These events, as shown in the book, made it very difficult for the Party. However, because we refused to retreat, but fought back, because of our well-known long history of struggle against war and fascism, and our close ties with the people, we more than held our own right through that troubled period.

Albert Robinson, in his most informative pamphlet *Robbie Remembers* says that when he left the North in 1940, the Party had 600 members, mostly under 30 years old. That is a considerable advance on 1938. Our votes in Mundingburra, and the adjoining seat of Bowen, in April 1941 showed clearly our increased public support. By 1943, our state membership had grown to 4,500 members, out of an Australian membership of 24,000.

These facts of increased Party membership and electoral support, even following the terrible political events referred to, as well as the conditions of illegality, present a somewhat different outlook from that of Dianne Menghetti.

I must say I was surprised to learn.

Doug Olive

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after all these years, that we had in that period achieved the politically much-aspir ed-to Popular Front. I do not recall any leading party committee in the North or elsewhere, or any leading party member, claiming we had built the Popular Front.

From the 1935 Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, the Popular Front Against War and Fascism became the policy and aim of communists the world over. Few achieved it. There is a big difference between policy, aim and actual achievement.

We learned before 1935 to work in a broad democratic way, to strive to involve in forms of united action the widest sections of the people.

The very nature of the struggle in the sugar industry demanded that we rely heavily on the rank and file. When you fought, you fought on two fronts — against the C.S.R., millers and farmers, and against the A.W.U. bureaucracy. The C.S.R. at that time was Australia's second most powerful monopoly. The A.W.U. was the most powerful union bureaucracy in Queensland. It dominated the Labor Party and government. It was virulently anti-communist, ardently supported arbitration, opposed all strikes — the C.S.R. was God, and communism the Devil Himself.

So struggle always had to be organised in the most democratic way from below, on a rank-and-file basis, with a rank-and-file leadership. This took painstaking, patient and consistent work. One had to communicate at meetings, in leaflets, and especially by personal contact, discussing, clarifying, winning people to our point of view.

This broad rank-and-file method of work began to make its mark on every aspect of work we undertook. We succeeded on lots of issues in building the basis of a popular front, namely, the united front of working class action. The Weil's Disease struggle was an example, as was the wages strike on the Burdekin at Ayr and Home Hill, and many other struggles. We even succeeded in getting wide agreement and joint action with Labor Party branches.

Robbie Remembers deals with some in Townsville, and the resultant expulsion of the Labor Party branches concerned, and their joining the Communist Party. From Ayr, Con O'Clerkin used to cycle to Home Hill every Saturday to sell the Workers' Weekly, and he and Arthur Olive built wide relations and joint action on several issues with Labor Party branches. However, the united front received a setback when the majority of these ALP members were recruited to the Communist Party.

However, only on one issue — not mentioned in the book — did we succeed in involving a significant section of small sugar farmers who, of course, constituted a large proportion of the popular masses in the sugar area communities. I refer to the Communist Party's Sugar Program, again dealt with in Robbie Remembers. This program was drawn up by small grower Arthur Olive on behalf of the Home Hill Communist Party Branch. It was later endorsed by the District Committee.

It was discussed widely with individual farmers, and a meeting of growers was called in Home Hill to discuss it. Only the big growers opposed it, and it was finally adopted by a large majority. The big farmers said it was illegal.

The meeting decided to invite Fred Paterson to examine the program and advise them at a special meeting. Here, Fred pointed out that anything affecting the status quo which was not favourable to the Sugar Board would be declared illegal. However, he showed that, provided they were united, determined and organised, they could win the aims of the program, which meant long-needed justice for small growers.

The program was later taken to a pre-seasonal mass meeting of cane cutters where the rare sight of workers supporting farmers was seen. The CPA Sugar Program was the basis for Fred Paterson's support from sugar areas Home Hill and Proserpine, which were decisive in his election victory in Bowen in 1944.

Another important omission from the book was the anti-racist struggle waged by the Ayr branch of the party following Mussolini's entry into the war in June 1940. Facts about this were published in our illegal paper Spark. This, in the view of the party at the time, was the best example of how to fight racist chauvinism and maintain our party prestige.

When Mussolini's decision was announced, the racists had a picnic. They succeeded in winning support from many workers, including some sympathetic to us. So much so that they convinced a group of A.W.U. members to convene an open meeting to discuss action.

We were ostracised — at a packed meeting attended by R.S.L. leaders,
business men, solicitors and other staunch suppressors of trade unionism, plus about 1,000 genuine workers.

The resolution went straight to the point. It reeked of the poison of racism. "We refuse to cut cane with enemy aliens and other Dago Bastards". It brought the house down. It was seconded by a garage proprietor, a very capable inflammatory demagogue who soon had the majority of the audience intoxicated with chauvinism.

Our task was to try to head the struggle in an anti-fascist direction. Each time we jumped to our feet there were shouts of "Sit down. Throw the Commo bastards out", etc. The racists raved on and on. Finally, a pause came and I demanded of the chair, with whom I had been friendly for many years, "You have let known supporters of Menzies, people who have never ever supported a workers' cause, take up most of the meeting. We, as consistent unionists over many years, demand the right to present another point of view."

Against howls and roars from the racists and a considerable number of workers, we finally succeeded in presenting an amendment which was: "We refuse to cut cane with or for any known member of a Fascist organisation regardless of nationality". We went on to point out that not one Italian worker known to us supported Mussolini. The vast majority had left their native land to escape the fascist terror. At the same time, many wealthy Italian farmers and others were, in fact, fascists, yet under the resolution, anti-fascist workers would be victimised, while fascist farmers would escape retribution.

We showed that it was not in the ranks of the working people where traitors were to be found, but among the wealthy, their political stooges and the top brass. The racists in the audience yelled " Lies, lies. Sit down, Commo traitors". I appealed to the workers, "See how the non-unionists hate the truth". However, only one non-party member voted for our amendment, and he was its seconder.

Before the meeting closed we were successful in moving that, as the strike had to be organised, a meeting open only to strikers be held next day to elect the strike committee, etc. At that meeting I was proposed for election to the strike committee. I said "The majority have decided by democratic vote to support strike action. I'm opposed to what I consider the anti-worker aim of the strike, but because I and my comrades believe in democracy, we will respect your decision. I will accept nomination to the strike committee, but give notice beforehand that I and my colleagues, while still respecting the majority decision, will do all in our power to turn the strike into a progressive, working-class, anti-fascist direction."

This was appreciated by the workers. For a week we worked day and night, visited confused workers' homes, talking to them personally, explaining our position, exposing the reactionary character of the racists. At meetings we continued to press our
point. Finally, we reckoned the situation was right for a test vote.

About that time, Joe Bukowski, local A.W.U. official and, later, state secretary, approached me and said, "Doug, don't you think the bloody strike has gone far enough? The A.W.U. officials had played no part in the strike. I said 'Don't you think it's time you got off your fat arses and did something about it?" He said 'We're calling an official meeting of the union on Friday night. District secretary Tom Dougherty will attend.' "

I had been expelled from the union for my part in the fight for a democratic union ballot — by Dougherty — some years earlier. However, the workers refused to accept the expulsion. Dougherty offered little opposition to my attending the meeting. He knew my position and was relying on my influence to get the strike washed up. He was not interested in racism, only that the strike might spread to other areas and lead to a general struggle which would affect his lord and master — the C.S.R.

We disappointed him somewhat. Their official resolution called for the strike to be ended forthwith and for work to commence on Monday. Our addendum added the words "and that we continue the struggle against fascism wherever it shows its head".

The addendum was carried. The dangerous racist strike ended. By maintaining our ties with the workers and respecting their incorrect, but democratic decision, and patiently explaining and fighting for our anti-fascist position, we transformed near-isolation and near-violent hostility into majority support and a higher influence to get the strike washed up. Thus, our decline in membership and rules, and to assist them to learn anything other than an essential part of the wider struggle for socialist consciousness, and ultimately socialist revolution. The reformists see the struggle for reforms as an end in itself. As Marxists, we realised that to ignore the struggle for reforms and refuse to participate in and lead this struggle, to content ourselves with preaching social revolution, was the surest path to our own isolation.

It is suggested in the book that the reason for the independence of women's organisations in the North was, perhaps, Jack Henry's shyness with women.

I was close enough to Jack, and worked with him for long enough to know that shyness with women was not one of his problems. In fact, one of Henry's strongest points at that time was his attitude to the promotion of women to leading party committees, and his absolute insistence on the organisational independence of the women and the youth organisations.

He was sharply critical of any party member who attempted to take over these organisations. He strongly advocated the right of such organisations, who had their own independent constitutions and rules, to make their own mistakes. He insisted that the role of party members working in women's and youth organisations was to carry out activity in accordance with their constitutions and rules, and to assist them to learn from such activity and from their mistakes, and thus raise their level of class consciousness.

Jack Henry never personally went near the women's (or youth) organisations, so how his shyness or otherwise with women could influence their independence is beyond comprehension.

It has been asked why the influence of the party in North Queensland has evaporated so dramatically over the years. There are several reasons. The denuding of sugar towns of local party leaders in the late 1930s and early '40s — Jack Henry, Jim Slater, Les Sullivan, Albert Robinson, Con Doyle and others — was one important factor.

Many communists, like George Bordujenko, joined the armed forces, while others went with the Allied Works Council. Con O'Clerkin went to sea, Fred Paterson to parliament and later to Sydney. I was promoted to full-time party work in Townsville and, later, Brisbane, as was Jim Henderson.

The war brought great changes in the sugar industry. Labour became a problem, hence the farmers had to improve rates and conditions to get cane-cutters. They burned all crops without reduction in rates. This allowed methods of cutting which sharply increased output, but on which they had previously frowned. Thus, with incomes vastly increased and conditions improved, agitation and struggle tended to decline.

The war and its aftermath increased the workers' demand and the price of sugar. As a consequence, small debt-ridden farmers were able to meet and pay off their mortgages, small impoverished farmers were transformed into affluent and often wealthy farmers. The cane-cutting machine finally replaced the cane-cutter, the most militant section of the industry.

The Cold War, the split in the Labor Party, the rise of the DLP, all played an important part in weakening political consciousness and militant activity.

These factors, together with the split in the world communist movement, including our own party, were, I believe, some of the main reasons for our decline in membership and influence.

Doug Olive worked as a cane-cutter in North Queensland between 1924 and 1941. He first came in contact with the Communist Party through the Workers' Weekly in 1927, and joined the CPA in 1933. He contested state electoral positions for the party twice. He was elected to the Townsville District Committee in 1938, and to its executive in the same year. In 1941 he became full-time Secretary and District Organiser.