HISTORY

SLACKY
The entire business of the dole was disgusting. As a single man I drew 7 shillings and sixpence a week; married men drew 9/6d. — so a wife was worth two bob a week! An insult to womanhood to say the least. Married men also received an extra 2/6d. for each child.

I have forgotten many of the prices but I can remember bread was 2 pence a loaf; 1/2lb. of butter was 9 pence, rice and sugar were each tuppence (two pennies) a pound, and one tin of golden syrup cost 5 pence. I usually bought three loaves of bread, 3 pounds of mutton chops, 1/2 pound of butter, 1/4 pound of tea, 1 pound of rice, 1 pound of sugar, 1 tin of condensed milk, 1 tin of golden syrup and 1 cake of sunlight soap. These nine articles cost all of my dole, 7/6d.

The first Communist I had met on the track was really comical and he was a died-in-the-wool Communist. He never missed giving us a daily lecture. I noticed he was very tactful any time he came up against strong Lang supporters. He could get around a point and prevent bitter arguments or making enemies. One day I had the opportunity to have a long conversation with him, when he gave me his history. He had come from party headquarters in Sydney and was making his way to Brisbane, like the rest of us, to become party leader there. One thing was for sure — wherever he camps he will keep every other swagman there amused.

Sunday 29 May 1932 I left Parramatta and walked 20 miles — 5 miles short of Campbelltown. Next day I walked through Campbelltown and Appin and made camp on the George's River after covering 15 miles. There was an old wooden bridge across the river and it was a good camping place with plenty of water, bush and rabbits.

In the morning I set off along a narrow gravelly winding road. Every two or three miles I would meet a bagman coming from the coast. I stopped and yarned with all of them as they approached me one by one; seldom did you see two together. I made it my business to find out all I could about the coast. The main topic was, of course, where was the best camp site.

They told me all about Bulli. The things that mattered in those days were, was it a good camp? Was there plenty of water? Was there wood for the fire? But the main concern was would the Council and the Police let a body stay there more than one week? In many places the swagman had to move on in a week or two, always for some trumped up reason or another. Vandalism was a reason. Theft was another. Other reasons were invented. So all of us swagmen had to suffer. However Bulli had everything good in the eyes of the swagman — plenty of trees for shade and shelter, water, wood and good company.

After walking about nine or ten miles...
I came to another wooden bridge which also crossed the George’s River. I got into contact with a bloke I met at the bridge. He was full of information. The “Pass” was only a couple of miles off. Only half a mile after the bottom of the “Pass” was a really good camp at Slacky Flat. He also told me that if I got there by 4 o’clock to find Mr. W. Dennis to get registered for a local ration.

I reached the top of the pass by three o’clock that afternoon. What a wonderful sight it was. That was the first time I had looked over Bulli Pass and I’ll always remember it, 31 May 1932. I had never before seen anything so spectacular. Because it was a beautifully clear afternoon I could see along the coast for miles.

I realised I would have to hurry to get to Slacky Flat by 4 pm. I dumped all my luggage in the bush and set off with just my bike. I still had to walk because the pass was much too steep for me to ride. Luckily I got to my destination in time for Mr. Dennis to register me for the next dole day; no questions asked.

Then all I had to do was walk back up to the top, pushing my bike along as I walked to where I left my gear at the top. That last drag made me pretty tired. I had walked just on 20 miles that day and made the 55 miles from Parramatta to Bulli in two and a half days. In those days the road was very windy and my estimation of 55 miles is pretty accurate.

The top of the pass, from where the Service Station is today to the Pass Road, was covered with plenty of thick bush, which was just as well. By the time I reached there a cold westerly wind got up and without shelter, it would almost blow your head off. As there was no rain I didn’t have to pitch the fly. Instead, I wrapped it around me, no wind could penetrate that. Lying on top of my two blankets I slept snug and cosy.

I woke up bright and early to find the wind had dropped, but I was faced with a real problem, namely, how to get down that steep pass with a big load and no brake on my bike. While having a bite to eat I gave it some thought and came up with an idea. I cut the top off a sapling and tied it behind the bike and let it drag along behind me. It worked quite well and the bike and the load came down really easy. I threw the bush away when almost to the bottom and managed the final descent down Bulli Hill without my emergency brake.

By the morning of Wednesday 1 June I was established at Slacky Flat. I found a tree with plenty of bush around it for shelter. Not only that, there was plenty of firewood around and water was not far away. What more could a man want? I pitched my fly there and made a permanent camp. As it turned out, my camp was about 10 yards away from “Bendy Sam” in one direction and about 10 yards from Redman and his Scottish mate in another. At the time, this didn’t register because I knew no one in the camp at Slacky Flat.

On Thursday 2nd I went into Wollongong and got my last track ration. By rights you should pick up a “track ration” once a week and then move on to the next place. Most police didn’t insist on this. Local residents picked up their dole every second Tuesday.

It didn’t take me long to get to know some of the fellows in the camp, especially the ones nearby. Redman was an Englishman and a hot-headed Communist. His Scottish mate, Mac something-or-other (I’ve forgotten his name) was a much younger man in his early twenties. Both of these men were involved in the Bankstown eviction fight. This incident was caused by landlords evicting people from their homes because they couldn’t pay the rent. Communists and militant workers took up the fight on behalf of the people concerned. They barricaded the houses with anything and everything they could get. Then the police arrived and proceeded to smash up the barricades and the fellows as well. Some of them finished up in hospital. Redman was one of them who got hurt. The police had jumped on his stomach as he lay on the ground, injured. And that wasn’t all. The defenders of the barricades were also rewarded with a twelve months suspended sentence. While this was hanging over their heads the police could pick them up at any time.

This was during Mr. Lang’s session
as Premier and was one good reason for the Communists to hate him so much. Of course he made many more mistakes. In later years, I noticed, Mr. Lang came round quite a bit and appeared to favour the rebels. He gave some good lectures at the University. However you might recall Mr. Chifley did the same sort of thing after he had the Miners' leaders arrested in 1949. It seems that most politicians like to make a name for themselves before they die.

Now I was a "local" so I picked up my first local ration at Bulli Tuesday 7 June. It gave me an opportunity to meet some of the "locals". The local ration was worth fifteen shillings for the fortnight. I went straight to the Cooperative Store and cashed in my ration. We could get anything in that store and didn't have to stick to the ration card. That suited me fine. After about a week in Bulli I found I was beginning to like it.

Redman left in a couple of days and I walked into my new home. Like the song, I felt 'Everything's coming my way'. Later on this camp was to become the Communist Party Headquarters.

There was no fireplace so I set to work to build one — on to the end of the tent and I made a doorway in the side. Soon I had the whole place very comfortable. The new fireplace meant that I now had warmth against the cold westerly winds as well as improved cooking facilities.

I joined the Communist Party in June. Every Communist I came into contact with was sure the revolution was just around the corner. I did not know which corner, but I thought I had better get in and give them a hand. The party meeting was held in a fairly big camp that belonged to Laurie Gardner and his mate Shorty. They had enough room for six of us to sit around the table. As well as these two and myself, the other members were Scotty Bell, Len Tracey and Small Un. Small Un and Scotty were married. Small Un was so called because of his small stature. He used to be a jockey. His wife was just as tiny. Of the six of us, none were locals. Like myself, they had all drifted in from various places, mostly from Sydney.

We used to pick up our dole at the Miners' Hall every second Tuesday. The dole official came out from Wollongong. On the dole mornings quite a crowd would gather around. If, at any time, trouble broke out because some person was denied, there were only two of the Party members who could handle speaking to a crowd. They were Gardner and Tracey. It was left to the likes of me to give out a few leaflets or sell Workers' Weekly.

Once we got to know the locals we used to have great fun at the ration dump. We would have friendly arguments, political debates and discussion on almost any topic. One we steered clear of was Mr. Lang. Most of the locals were very touchy on the subject of Mr. Lang, otherwise they weren't too bad a mob to get along with.

Mr. Lang's staunch supporters whom we called "Lang-ites" used to wear a button on the lapel of their coats. The words on the button stated "Lang is Right". The wearers were mostly pig-headed Catholics and luckily they were few enough for us all to have had some good fun.

About this time things were getting serious, politically. Hitler was becoming stronger as were the New Guard who were getting very cocky and threatening to jail all the Communists and do heaven knows what with them. There were eviction fights. Troubles piled upon troubles. To keep their jobs, many weak and scared workers were forced to join the New Guard. Some employers became really fanatical, especially once they scaled into the higher ranks of the bosses. They supported Hitler and Fascism to such an extent they not only read Mein Kampf but had Hitler's picture hanging in their bedrooms. They weren't game to hang them elsewhere where all and sundry could view these pictures.

I do believe these people actually thought then that Hitler was going to fix everything — even come here to Australia and clean up the radical elements and all the Communists. So the scare was on. We lost party members one after the other. They disappeared, mostly to Sydney. It finished up with just Len tracey and myself. Gardner left and I took over his paper run round Slacky Flat. Len looked after the miners, the people round the town and the dole dump. My busy days were just starting. After a couple of months, in October 1932 I had to do the lot — papers, magazines, whatever. Len went to live half way up the Pass with Browns and took over the Thirroul units to strengthen that section of the Communist Party.

In the middle of that same month I got on the electoral roll — another good reason that started me off on a pattern of work for the Communist Party that was to continue for three years. The routine was as follows:

Every Thursday I went into Wollongong to pick up the papers, pamphlets and various other publications and take them back to the camp. At about mid-day Friday I would walk up to Bulli Pit to distribute the literature to the afternoon shift going in and then wait there until three o'clock when the day shift came out. Every week for three years, mind you.

There was one good thing about it, though, I used to have a shower with the miners every Friday.

One of the first things I did when I started my literature run was to make a stall out of pit-props up there at the pit top so as to be dry on wet days as well as to be protected from the cold westerly winds when they blow. That structure stood there unmolested all that time. Even the management didn't interfere. I could not guarantee that to happen today.

In the big tent at the camp at Slacky Flat the young fellows such as Jim Flood, Bill Johnson and Joe Cassidy used to gather to play cards and argue all day and all night. I had the idea of giving them a game that was much quieter. I gathered a few salings and settled down to carving a chess set. They knew nothing about this till I took the finished product over to their camp.

Only Flick Martin, Jim Flood and Bill Johnson knew the least thing about the game; but getting them started on chess was one of the best things that could have happened. Days and nights were quiet and within twelve months they could all play — and some played very well.

We had to find some other avenue for
extra food. Our next trick was to go up to Robertson. It was thirty miles either way, walking five miles up that very steep Macquarie Pass for just one sugar bag of potatoes. We could only carry one sugar bag each on our handle bars. We would walk up the pass from about 10 pm until midnight, have a spell and then start "bandycooting" — an expression used to explain digging potatoes out by hand and stealing them.

On such expeditions we would occasionally hear the dogs bark. We would stop and listen for anybody approaching. When each man had his bag full we started to walk down the pass. We used to get home about 3 am, tired and dirty. About two or three of these trips a season was enough hard work. However had we been given money instead of a dole ticket we would have been able to buy a bag of potatoes. Not a little sugar bag, but a corn bag full of potatoes would have cost only two shillings. The farmers could not sell their crops because people on the dole got no money and people with back yards grew their own potatoes. Many farmers had to feed them to the cows.

As time went by I got more and more customers for the paper "The Worker's Weekly". The papers were only a penny each but some of my customers didn't even have that to spare. They paid me with the penny stamps parents had sent them to encourage their writing home.

Time passed very quickly indeed. In no time it was 1 May 1933. What a May Day. It was the best I have ever seen. There was a free train to Wollongong. Miners, women and children were all there. Each miners' lodge had its own magnificent banner. A very big procession went down Crown Street and finished up at the Showground. There were various speakers who took up an hour or so; sporting activities, beer for sale, free ice-cream and drinks for the kids turned it into a real picnic atmosphere.

During the depression days we used to have some wonderful Communist orators. Tom Paine used to come from Sydney to Bulli at election time and speak at the Russell Street corner for a couple of hours. On a cold, still, winter's night his voice would ring out like a bell. I have not heard his equal. He must have had a fine pair of lungs. From the unemployed camp at Port Kembla came such gifted speakers as Mealey and Jack Delaney. I can recall Mealey speaking on one occasion for four hours. The relief speaker didn't turn up. Since it was a Friday night and late shopping lots of people were out and about. A crowd of some three hundred had assembled. After three hours Mealey asked the crowd if they were prepared to listen to him all night. So he spoke for another hour at which time people started to drift away home. So we had some iron men in those days with no cars to take them home after such mighty efforts.
Early in the morning of Friday 7 July 1933 I had to shoot my dog, Rixo. He was barking incessantly and all the fellows in the camps around me kept calling out “Shoot that b... dog”, “Hit him on the head”, because they couldn’t sleep. When I went out to try to quieten the dog, he didn’t even know me. He had been poisoned. At midnight there was no way I could help him, so I had to destroy him. Had it been daylight I might have been able to help the dog, but then again, it might have been too late.

I was very upset about the whole affair. The dog was only two years old and I had reared him from a pup. He would have been a really good sheep dog had he been trained. However it isn’t easy to keep a dog in a camp for a long time, especially with so many people around. Besides I was so busy I could seldom be in the camp to share the old companionship that Rixo and I had in our travelling days.

On 26 June 1933 we started doing relief work. Maybe we did two hours but mostly we leaned our shovels and mattocks. Another good thing about it was the amount of Communist propaganda we could disseminate on the job. A few men working together would start arguing about politics. When it got too hot the ganger would come and split us up, or shift us to another place. I used to sell Worker’s Weekly on the job. That started the arguments again, especially with the men who were hostile to the Communist Party.

Our job was to clean up the gutters and level off the footpaths by chopping off the grass with a mattock. This implement was not at all suitable. It was never sharp and we had to take the top soil with the grass. The work scheme ended in about three months because, as usual, the government had run out of money. Work ended 22 September 1933 and by 28 September 1933 we got the rest of our money; the six days wait was probably to make sure we didn’t spend it too soon. However after a fortnight on the dole we got some more work and another pay on 25 October.

Sunday 29 October 1933 I went to the Domain and listened to the Communist speakers. I left Sydney on Tuesday 31st and got back to Bulli by 4.30 pm Thursday and Friday I was back doing relief work and this continued two days a fortnight up till Christmas. We had the dole to carry us through the Christmas period. Just imagine seven shillings and sixpence to spend over Christmas. Had I wanted to be extravagant and bought a turkey and a few luxuries for Christmas dinner as the swells do, I would have starved for the rest of the week.

We started relief work again just after New Year, but only until 25 January 1934. We were paid on 31st so we had about 7 months work. Then it was back on the dole again. We got our dole cards back on Thursday 1 February.

I started to fix up my bike and it was no sooner done than the Communist Party put more work on me. Very few people, least of all Party members had a bike in those days. So I became the transport section. I had to ride to Wollongong to pick up four bundles of literature. One went to Curnock in Corrimal, one bundle was mine, for Bulli, the third for A.B. Jones at Thirroul and the fourth for W. Davis at Coledale. There were many people, now gone and forgotten who did some really good work in their time.

Johnathan’s advice. The saw cost me ten shillings deposit.

On Monday, off I went with the saw and a few tools in a sugar bag and a few hopes in my heart for at least a week’s work. Well I got a start. So did a lot of others. We worked all the week, including Friday, when some got paid off. The following Monday more workers were put on but come Friday still others were put off. The next Monday morning there were more new faces. This was the pattern. By using this method the contractor was able to get rid of the weaker workers, but a man had to be incapable to be put off mid-week. Every Friday most of us used to get the shivers wondering who would be next to lose his job. Once it was past three o’clock we felt pretty safe for the rest of the next week.

One of my pastimes in Sydney was to go to the Domain on a Sunday afternoon to listen to the Communist speakers. I can recall being there the day Kisch was on the platform, and he was still on crutches.

Kisch was a big man. He had come to Australia by ship, but the authorities would not let him land because he was a Communist. So he jumped from the ship onto the wharf, broke his leg, was hospitalised but he was ashore. He did.
it the hard way — especially for such a big man.

One other afternoon I recall at the Domain, the speaker on the Communist platform, Rivet by name, dropped dead as he was speaking. Lance Sharkey was there and he took over the platform when Rivet was taken away. He said Rivet would not have wished for a better time and place to die. Nevertheless it was a sad afternoon. The speakers had no microphones and yet, so strong and powerful were their voices that they were easily heard. Joe Keenan was one such wonderful speaker with a keen sense of humor.

It was about this time I returned to Bulli. I had heard nothing of the place so I took my tools and the few pounds I had saved up. It was three months since I came to Sydney. The time had flown by. Besides it wasn't easy to knock back work and money. It was just over five years since I had any money in my pocket. Each week I expected to be paid off and each week I wasn't and so time passed.

When eventually I arrived back at Bulli and Slacky Flat I was in for a big surprise. Half the fellows had gone — even my old carpenter mate Jim. He had gone to Sydney. Old Forscutt had locked up my place and gone to Melbourne. Upon making some inquiries I met hostility, even abuse. Some people, especially the Lang supporters, blamed me for running away from a protest fight about which I knew nothing.

When I left Slacky Flat for Sydney there was no sign of evacuation. On my return people told me that the miserable council engineer, with a constable to protect him, had gone around all the camps and given the people notice to get out and leave Slacky Flat for ever. Most of them were timid and left like good little boys.

I was back only a few days when the engineer and the constable paid me a visit. The engineer stuck his head in the camp and told me I would have to go. "Where to?" I asked him. "Anywhere" he replied. "Thanks" I told him and off they went.