HISTORY

KNOWING WE WERE RIGHT

What made a communist of the 1940s and '50s 'tick'? BETTY REILLY writes vividly and with humour of the years when the communist party was illegal. She suggests there are lessons to be learnt, and promises more in the future.

When Karl Marx died in 1883, Frederick Engels, his buddy and work-sharer from their early twenties, commenced the graveside farewell thus: "On the afternoon of the fourteenth of March at a quarter to three, the greatest living thinker ceased to think."

Comparatively few people then cottoned-on to the full range of that remark which later sprang into planetary significance, and had all but the loot-laden rich rejoicing following the 1917 socialist revolution, whereby the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin triumphed, and the all-powerful economic, political and social interests of capitalists and landlords over one-sixth of the planet expired.

This world-famous turnaround for Russia’s Tsar-oppressed, multinational millions — geographically described by Lenin as “a new era in the history of mankind” — magically lifted the expectations, and fuelled future struggles, of all exploited humankind for social change; and like mushies after rain, dedicated marxist parties emerged internationally, grimly determined to emulate this stimulating young socialist state, protect its independence and sovereignty, and accept its tenets.

From its inception in 1920, with a fervour bordering on Papal infallibility (i.e. the USSR cannot err), defence of the Soviet system was inextricably woven into CPA policies, activities and organisation.

This euphoric fervour later reached grandiose proportions when, to me and others then living in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, Stalin appeared God-like, and the world at large waited impatiently for the advent of Soviet-style socialism.

Such infantile views weighed heavily then on the ability of communists for factual evaluation of socialist progress in the USSR and in the formulation of our own independent path to socialism.

But experience, accumulated knowledge and collective wisdom eventually made nonsense of cult figures, and socialist formulas went hopping. New problems arise now because of the diversity of parties and political movements all basing themselves completely, or to some extent, on marxism; and debates abound around the validity today of the laws of social development discovered by Marx last century.

In today’s topsy-turvy embryonic “Star Wars World”, Lenin’s analysis of 1917 that “a new era in the history of mankind” had commenced, is mirrored internationally by the conflicting political interests of two different social systems — basically a class struggle — illustrating how the ideas of Marx have changed the world; and in non-socialist countries by class struggle at the point of production, and with powerful working class and communist-influenced labour movements struggling for social change.

This is no dogmatic assertion that socialism is bound to replace capitalism in the world totally. It is merely an acknowledgement that the marxist system of ideas and methods of approaching social problems seems to me the truest yet evolved by history.

Otherwise, why would a political novice (a-panting for the revo’s opening date) have left the hearth and home in 1939 to work in communist ranks, Friends of the Soviet Union branches flat out fostering cultural links with the USSR, and militantly-led trade unions enthusiastically explaining the revolution’s special

Betty
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significance for the Australian working class?

Who, now, boarding the three score years and ten express, could forget the drama and excitement surrounding ARU secretary Lloyd Ross, early in World War II, moving a "Hands Off Russia" resolution and splitting delegates at a NSW Labor Party Conference; the NSW executive's subsequent sacking by higher-ups; and, early in 1940, the new Labor Party (State of NSW) piloted by Wal Evans and John Hughes making its inspirational but short-lived landing?

I'll never forget, as a Glebe ALP member, attending a specially convened branch meeting expected to endorse the new party, jubilantly voicing my support and becoming less politically naive and more dismayed by the second, as about half those present (dinkie-dyed-in-the-wool official laborites) breezed indignantly out.

Popularly known as Pig Iron Bob for authorising sales of scrap iron to Japan for bombs which later devastated Darwin, and the Dog Collar Act whereby wharfies refusing to load the scrap could have their licence to work revoked, Menzies hated our guts with a psychotic intensity.

Repressive and prohibitive war-time censorship regulations played holy havoc with all party propaganda and agitational outlets. Public speakers like popular anti-war activist and communist Phyl Johnson (widely known as the girl in the green hat) were legally tongue-tied, but refused to be silenced. For speaking against imperialist war, Phyl was lumbered by cops from the stump in Chatswood, charged, and sentenced to several weeks in Long Bay slammer.

The editorial collective members were biting their nails down to the elbow each week as Tribune returned in tatters from the censor's venomous blue pencil, until finally banned in May 1940 by the federal Minister for Information, together with other progressive publications like World Peace issued by the League for Peace and Democracy. Old timers will also recall demos at the concentration camp outside Sydney demanding the release of Max Thomas and Horace Ratliffe, incarcerated for being in possession of allegedly illegal printing gear.

But bans and legal frustrations couldn't stop our determined gallop. A mini-Tribune appeared weekly, while branches and district organisations quickly adapted to trusty old flat-bed printing techniques.

With party supporters supplying meeting places, printing and distribution centres, we were rearing to go when PIB's National Security (Subversive Associations) axe fell in June 1940 ... a memorable month when federal cops pounced with impunity into Australian homes, progressive bookshops and party premises, confiscating private property in a willy-nilly search for so-called seditious documents and printing paraphernalia.

Somewhat apprehensively each week, I'd chuck off to a political haven in Kingsford to one-finger-type South Sydney District Committee bulletin stencils. Once getting wind of a possible cop blitz, I hung the stencils awaiting pick-up on a nail outside the upstairs window of my caboose, to find, on checking from outside, the dangling bundle clearly visible in the moonlit brown-out; and memories flood back of nervous spine-tingles when helping to distribute illegal Tribs to depots around Sydney.

But branch morale didn't falter despite spook raids, constant harassment, and the enforced absence of top Party Hats. Glebe party branch members were into diverse political activities, and socially into the beau taste quart bottles of beer-on-tap then sold in pubs. We ran a paper, sold Tribs, collected finance, printed leaflets, chalked-up, pasted-up, and most of all spoke-up.

Friday night street meetings at Paddy's Market, outside the Glebe Post Office and veteran communist Tom Paine's boot-repair shop in the main drag, attracted the committed few, plus stray leg-cocking dogs, locals jingoistically advising us to "go back to Russia", and bored-stiff wallopers in cars taking notes. I often wonder if stenograms of those meetings still survive? But ability to pound and stir the wax was definitely upgraded as we denounced the war, canvassed support for party legality, spoke in defence of the USSR and spilled happily away on international and local topics.

With few qualms, and less knowledge about newspaper management, letalone libellaws, we collected paid adverts, wrote copy, edited and distributed Forward newspaper, once issued by a Glebe unemployed organisation. All was apples until wisdom tailed enthusiasm, following Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour, Darwin and Broome, with publication of a juicy morsel dobbing in Dr. Foley, a Glebe Council heavy, for unemployment organisation. All was apples until wisdom tailed enthusiasm, following Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour, Darwin and Broome, with publication of a juicy morsel dobbing in Dr. Foley, a Glebe Council heavy, for shady deals in air-raid shelter construction. The Doc responded with a nasty missive threatening libel action against the publisher — yours truly. Happily, second thoughts about sueing a doughless publisher and an illegal organisation member prevailed, and the matter grounded.

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 reinforced our deep commitment to defend the USSR. Still officially incognito, party tall poppies like "the old man" (general secretary J.B. Miles), president Lance Sharkey, secretariat member Dick Dixon and others, surfaced publicly. Addressing enthusiastic jam-packed public rallies, they outlined the changing global situation, characterising the conflict now as a people's war for democracy. To defeat fascism meant unstinted support for the Soviet Union including a much-needed accelerated war effort. Appeals at these gatherings for communists and supporters to enlist, saw many on-the-spot volunteers for the armed services. The phenomenal and unprecedented growth of party membership (peaking at around 2,000 between 1941-45) and organisation in the army, navy and air force, began with enlistments at these rallies.

Preoccupied with his 'reds under the beds' tirades, the planetary significance of Hitler's new barbaric crusade appeared lost on Pig Iron Bob. Politically pathetic remarks suggesting Hitler didn't know how to honour a contract (reference to the Non-Aggression Pact between the USSR and Germany) and that "the Russians couldn't fight their way out of a paper bag", were crazily out of tune with the rapidly changing tide of public opinion.

Pig Iron Bob met his Waterloo in August 1941 when forced to resign by his more politically astute parliamentary cronies. In October 1941, Cannbera-ites, tuned-in by radio to Parliament House, would astonishingly have heard ecstatic ALP pollies singing "The Workers' Flag is Deepest Red" as Labor leader John Curtin became Australian Prime Minister.

Communists and "fellow travellers" celebrated, too, as public support for the Soviet Union kited, and a new era of record membership and organisation dawned for the CPA.

TO BE CONTINUED!!!

Betty Reilly, a veteran communist, joined the CPA in 1937. She still takes an active interest in politics, the women's movement and the movement for peace and disarmament.

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