TED DICKINSON

Jim McNeill, member of the International Brigade in Spain tells of some memories of one of the leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World.

TED Dickinson was a wobbly, that is, he was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, the international movement of workers that flourished in the first quarter of this century.

The IWW attracted some great and colorful characters, and Ted Dickinson could be numbered as one of them. A man of great humor and kindliness, yet still a tough and uncompromising fighter for the "working stiff".

Here and in Britain he was a central figure in all the free speech and unemployed struggles of the twenties and thirties. A lieutenant in the British Battalion in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, he died before a Franco firing squad in February, 1937.

I could write reams about Ted Dickinson, but I haven't reams of space, so I'll deal only with some of the more memorable events.

Ted was born at Grimsby, England, in 1904, and came to Australia with his family as a child. His mother was widowed early and had to take in washing to keep the family. She later remarried and moved to Armidale, NSW, but Ted moved back to Melbourne.

Ted studied with the Workers' Educational Association, which led him to Marx. About this time (1923-24) he became associated with the great wobbly, Charlie Reeves, one of the famous 12 IWW leaders who had been sentenced to 15 years' jail in 1917, but were released after serving a few years.

The IWW had become dormant with the jailing of its leaders, but, on his release, Charlie revived the movement in Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne. Ted Dickinson and "Ham and Eggs" Lyons (so-called because of his part in a ship strike involving a demand for ham and eggs for ships' crews) revived it in Sydney.
Ted soon became one of the leading figures in the IWW. Five feet ten, brown hair, blue-eyed, carriage as straight as a ramrod, he was an enthusiastic speaker, writer and organiser, with tons of ability. He was a regular speaker in Sydney's Domain and had a big following. He had a musical voice and often led the Domain crowds in the singing of the old wobbly songs.

When "Direct Action", the IWW paper was revived in Adelaide, Ted became its editor. I was a member of the editorial board.

Perhaps best of all, I remember the time Ted Dickinson and I went to Adelaide in the 1927 free speech fight. Adelaide had written to the Sydney branch for help after the entire Adelaide branch had been jailed.

When we reached Adelaide there was no one to contact, so we distributed leaflets we had had printed in Sydney, announcing that prominent speakers from NSW would speak in the Botanic Gardens on the following Sunday.

At 3 p.m. on the Sunday, as we pushed our way through the dense crowd around the IWW stump (it was really a stump, a huge tree cut about 4ft. from the ground), we found that one of the branch had been released from jail and had announced our arrival to a big crowd of unemployed.

The first chill wind of the depression had already reached Adelaide. A thousand had been put off the railways and public works that week-end, and hundreds of others from private jobs. Hundreds of them were at the meeting. There was a strong force of police, too.

During the meeting Ted noticed in the crowd five clergymen who had travelled in the train with us from Melbourne. Ted invited one of them to take the stump, but he refused. Ted then referred scathingly to some who were content to ride on the back of the central figure of history but remained deaf to the dangers of wars and unemployment.

He then called for volunteers to speak, and 40 took the platform, although they had been told that no fines would be paid.

A strong Free Speech committee was formed at a meeting that night. During the week Ted received a summons charging him with blasphemy, "in so far as you used the words 'Ride on the back of Jesus Christ'." Funds for the defence came in from unions and at further Sunday meetings the crowds threw in generously.
By lunch time at the court hearing eight witnesses had all said that they had not heard the words “Jesus Christ”. Some had heard the words “central figure in history”. During the adjournment the prosecutor asked Ted how many more witnesses he was calling. The answer, in a lazy, casual voice, was “Oh, two hundred”.

On the resumption of the hearing the prosecutor, in an agitated voice, told the magistrate that he understood the defendant intended to call another 200 witnesses. Could His Worship make a decision about all the other cases waiting to be heard? Several solicitors got up and said they had had witnesses at the court all the week and had been held up because of 40 free speech cases.

The magistrate then said the defendant was innocent until proved guilty and he could call as many witnesses as he wished to prove his innocence. Ted then said: “The eight witnesses I have called are representative of the 200 I intended to call who, in turn, are representative of the 3,000 at the meeting. In view of the congestion of the court, I will leave my case in Your Worship’s hands”. His verdict: “I have some doubts about the prosecution case. Case dismissed”. The evening paper billboards that afternoon carried the headline: “200 Witnesses”.

In the weeks following, many took the stump. It was proving so costly to the State that convictions that once earned a month’s sentence dwindled to 14 days, seven days, then 24 hours.
At the end of six weeks we received a message to see the Police Commissioner, who guaranteed that, if we submitted a list of speakers, all would be given permission to speak. So ended the free speech fight.

Ted was involved in many unemployed and industrial struggles after that, including the 1928 watersiders’ strike and lockout in which he received nine months’ jail.

In the late 1920s Ted Dickinson married and went to England, where he helped form an anti-fascist movement that co-operated with the Communist Party against the British Government’s appeasement policy and against Oswald Mosley’s blackshirts. He also took part in the many unemployed struggles and the hunger marches of the ’30s.

In 1936, when Franco and his generals, with the backing of Hitler and Mussolini, rebelled against the Spanish Republican Government, Ted joined the British Battalion which was to fight so gallantly with the International Brigade in defence of the Spanish Republic. Ted’s character and ability were such that he was soon commissioned a lieutenant in the British Battalion.

Tom Wintringham who commanded the British Battalion has said of him: “Ted Dickinson was a brilliant man with such a personality that, although he spoke little Spanish, he could make quick contact with the Spaniards. We always sent him ahead in advance parties and always when we arrived we found everything shipshape”.

Ted was killed during the battle of the Jarama Valley, in the defence of Madrid, on February 13, 1937. The day before the British Battalion had beaten back a heavy Moorish attack with heavy losses on both sides.

On February 13 the Moors resumed their attack, but this time they advanced giving the clenched fist anti-fascist salute and singing the *Internationale*. Bill Meredith, a runner who had started back with a message from HQ wrote what happened and his account has become part of the official history of the British Battalion:

“At the time of leaving HQ there was no sign of any disturbance at the outpost. It was not until I had started out that I heard the strains of the *Internationale*. As I got nearer I was surprised to see large numbers of fascists coming over singing the *Internationale* and their hands raised in the anti-fascist salute.”
"Our boys were holding up their fists in welcome to them. I had not the least doubt that here was a mass desertion from the fascist lines.

"Yank Levy seemed to be the first to realise that a trick had been played. By this time there were swarms of fascists in the trench.

"‘For Christ’s sake, get back’, yelled Yank. The singing was still going on; fascists were swarming into the position.

"Fry and Dickinson, his second-in-command, stood together and, although I hardly noticed Fry, I well remember Dickinson, his style and dress. Overcoat, top boots and smartly-clipped moustache, legs apart and back as straight as a poker, he looked every inch a soldier, despite being surrounded by fascists.

"He looked at them with contempt written all over his face and it was obvious that his capture would never shake his calm courage. These two, Fry and Dickinson, were two of the finest leaders under whom men could go into battle.

"The next instant Fry fell wounded. Dickinson, partially screened by a Scotsman, Tommy Bloomfield, undid Fry’s sam brown officer’s belt and threw it into some undergrowth. He knew the fate of officers falling into fascist hands.

"They were being marched with hands above their heads when young Elias asked in broken Spanish for permission to smoke. Permission granted, he reached into a pocket when a machine gun sputtered and he fell dead. The same burst of fire killed Stevens.

"Dickinson then said, ‘If we had a bunch of Australian bushmen here we’d have pushed you b——s into the sea long ago’.

"His words were not understood, but his tone was. He was stood aside, his back to an olive tree. Three Moors advanced. Just as the order to fire was given, Dickinson said, ‘Keep your chins up, boys. Salud’.

"Three shots rang out and Dickinson fell.

"All the others were lined up to be shot when a German officer appeared and countermanded the order. He realised they could be exchanged for important prisoners”.

An unforgettable character, Ted Dickinson.