THE DECADE 1930-40 was a very significant and creative period for the Communist Party of Australia. During these years our influence among the working people grew rapidly, and the political consolidation of the Party, of its political line, tactics and organisation took place. The Communist Party had been founded, October 30, 1920, in the aftermath of the socialist revolution in Russia and the creation of the Communist International. But for the next ten years the Party was unable to consolidate its position, overcome internal differences and provide answers to the many political problems before it.

Reformism, which permeated the whole of the Labor movement, Labor Party, trade unions and Left alike, was a powerful barrier to revolutionary advance. It exercised a strong, muting influence on the radicalism that spread among the working people following the Russian revolution and the conclusion of the First World War, when it strove to divert support for socialism into safe Labor Party channels. Socialist organisation that had preceded the Communist Party — the Australian Socialist Party, the Socialist Labor Party, Industrial Workers of the World, etc., had never succeeded in breaking through the reformist barrier and winning mass support. They remained small sectarian organisations largely removed from the main stream of political struggle and the life of the people.

For the newly founded Communist Party, therefore, clarification of the role of the revolutionary Marxist party in the struggle against capitalism, together with an elaboration of the theoretical, tactical and organisational approach of the Party to the Labor Party and...
reformist trade union movement, was of crucial importance. Some Party members could see no future for the Communist Party and proposed that it should disband and call upon its members to join the Labor Party in order to strengthen Labor's Left Wing. Others saw the Party as something of a 'ginger up' group that by its criticisms and activities impelled the Labor Party to more militant policies.

The differences within the Party on these issues became very acute in 1929, when the downturn in the economic situation began and the class struggle sharpened. The Conference of the Communist Party held at the end of 1929 declared against subordination of the Party to the Labor Party. It called for an independent Communist party and for vigorous measures to improve the work and leadership of the Party in the struggles of the people, and it elected a new Central Committee to implement these decisions. The changes that came over the Party during the 1930s can be shown in one aspect by membership figures. At the beginning of 1930 there were about 300 Party members, by 1934 just on 3,000, and in 1939, 5,000. The first big move forward came during the economic crisis 1930-33, which brought into the forefront the main contradictions and worst features of the capitalist system.

The economic crisis was a shattering experience, the number of unemployed exceeding one-third of the workforce, with great numbers working only three or four days a week. The extent and degree of poverty in Australia was without parallel. The crisis succeeded, in a way that no propaganda of ours could have done, in exposing the sham and illusions of parliamentary politics and the bankruptcy of the policies of the Conservative and Labor parties. In those pre-Keynesian days, banks, economists and conservative governments alike had only one answer to economic crises — slashing government expenditures, closing down public works and reducing wages, salaries and social services. Such measures simply compounded the chaos.

Initially the people, in landslide proportions, turned to the Labor Party. At the Federal Elections in November, 1929, the Scullin Labor Government was elected with a record majority, and in quick time Labor Governments were formed in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. Labor, however, had no answer to the crisis. Their policy was not to end capitalism, but to obtain reforms that made it more palatable. With the economic system in a state of collapse it was now not a matter of improvement of capitalism by reform, but of saving it. The Scullin Government turned its back on Labor policy, which had been to develop public works and to
finance a variety of other Government activities with the aim of relieving unemployment. Instead of this, responsibility for economic policy was virtually handed over to a group of bankers and bourgeois economists who dictated recessive policies which increased the burdens of the working people.

New South Wales Premier, J. T. Lang, took up a different stand from that of his Federal Labor colleagues. The economic crisis, in his view, was not the product of contradictions within the capitalist system, but the result of a conspiracy of international bankers, who, for some obscure reason, had brought the capitalist system to a standstill. Lang waged an incessant campaign against international finance. He attacked the Scullin Government and split the Labor Party, breaking the New South Wales branch away from the Federal organisation. In terms of actual policy he advocated negotiations for the reduction of overseas interest payments and, failing agreement, the suspension of all payments until overseas bondholders agreed to reduce. He also made vague proposals that the national currency, instead of being based on gold, should have a goods basis.

Disillusionment of the working people with Labor was rapid, as the bankruptcy of its policy and leadership became apparent. Before 1932 was out the backlash came, and each of the Labor Governments were defeated and removed from office. Except for New South Wales, where Lang's demagogic attacks against international finance continued to influence large sections of workers, Labor was heavily discredited and at its lowest ebb.

From the inception of the crisis the Communist Party set out to explain the capitalist crisis and popularise socialism. We worked for the establishment of the unemployed workers' movement, based on committees of the unemployed in all suburbs and towns, committees which became very popular. They took up the struggle for the demands of the unemployed and developed a great variety of activities, including cultural and educational work. They were democratically controlled by the unemployed themselves and many talented organisers and leaders were thrown up by them.

The Communist Party was also in the thick of many other activities. The struggles against evictions; campaigns to increase the dole and for Government relief works to provide jobs for the unemployed; demonstrations, and the hunger marches from the Northern coalfields, Newcastle, the South Coast and Lithgow, to press the claims of the unemployed; the organisation of legal defence and assistance for thousands of workers, arrested and gaol ed or beaten up by police. The Party also had to defend its legality and combat constant police repression against our meetings and
members, and the organisation of workers' defence was initiated to fight against the New Guard.

These struggles and activities provided rich experiences for the Communist Party and was the basis for its rapid numerical growth and political development. Thousands joined the Party during those years, but we lacked the organisation and the experienced political activists to properly initiate them into the Party and consolidate their membership. Nevertheless, by 1934 membership had increased ten times over and a large proportion of these were already mass leaders who had won the support and confidence of men and women they worked amongst in the movement and struggles of the unemployed. The days of the small socialist sect now were behind us. We had broken down the barriers of isolation and had won widespread support.

Our relationship to the Labor Party also had changed. There were no longer suggestions that our aims could be realised only as a Left Wing of the Labor Party, or that our role was that of a 'ginger group'. We had decisively differentiated the Party from the Labor Party; some think too decisively, reformism having become almost a dirty word. But the political independence and revolutionary role of the Communist Party was now something more than a name — it was recognised and seen as a fact.

The Party was growing and learning, but, naturally enough, there were many mistakes. Here I will only refer, in brief, to mistakes in propaganda. The situation we were faced with called for vigorous exposure of reformism, and this was certainly forthcoming. There were common mistakes such as failure to distinguish between the rank-and-file and supporters of the Labor Party and reformist leaders; personal abuse instead of concrete examples and analysis of reformist decisions and activities directed against the working people; neglect of fundamental political and class issues and too much attention to trivialities, etc. If not entirely, these mistakes were associated with the immaturity and inexperience of Party members.

More serious was our characterisation of the reformist leaders as 'social fascists'. This term had its origin in the Comintern at a time when the fight against fascism and war was already high on the agenda. It entered into our propaganda without proper consideration of its political implications and therefore its effect on our tactics and mass work. The term 'social fascism' incorrectly characterised the reformist leaders, directly linking them with fascism. It was to confuse our political estimation of the Labor Party and its possible positive role in the struggles against fascism
and war, and therefore complicated the problem of the united front.

After the Depression

The second phase of Party development in the 1930s began about the second half of 1933, as the economic crisis began to recede and more jobs became available. The economy remained unstable and the rate of recovery was slow; at the end of 1936 there were still 112,000 unemployed in New South Wales alone. But conditions were changing and new problems and tasks were arising.

A most important indicator of these came in January, 1934, when W. Orr, member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, was elected General Secretary of the Miners’ Federation. Bill Orr came to Australia from Scotland soon after the First World War. He worked for a short time in the Lithgow Steel Works and then transferred to coal mining. During the 15 months (March, 1929, to June, 1930) lockout of the Northern miners, following the coal owners’ demand for a 12½ per cent wage reduction which the miners refused to accept, Orr had campaigned on Party policy and won considerable support for an ‘all out’ stoppage in the coal industry to compel withdrawal of the coal-owners’ ultimatum. The policy of the reformist officials, to confine the dispute to the Northern fields, was to lead to defeat for the miners because sufficient coal for all national needs was produced in the other coalfields.

The election of Orr as Miners’ General Secretary was not a fortuitous event. In September, 1934, another Communist, C. Nelson, was elected General President. From then on the swing to the Left was rapid. Seamen, waterside workers, iron workers, railway workers, sheet metal, building workers and various groups of unionists elected Communists and other militants to trade union positions. By the beginning of 1937 there were more than 20 Communist trade union officials and upwards of 1,000 Communists holding executive or local union positions throughout Australia.

The radicalism that was a feature of the unemployed movement was manifesting itself in the industries and a new militant spirit was evident among the industrial workers. The old reformist trade union leadership was discredited, having played a capitulatory and defeatist role in the big strikes of 1928-29-30, when the capitalist offensive on living standards that presaged the economic crisis was in full swing. They gave no leadership during the economic crisis and were incapable of responding to the tasks of the trade unions in the new conditions that arose as the economic crisis receded.
W. Orr's election as Miners' Secretary was the starting point of a new trend that was to radically influence and change the Australian trade union movement. Reformist trade union domination could no longer be maintained in face of the militancy of the workers and the challenge implicit in the revolutionary ideas, trade union tactics and activities of the Communists and their supporters. For the Communist Party the changes in the trade union movement compelled re-examination of established policies and ideas, the scrapping of some and readjusting of others; but, most importantly, the working out and elaboration of revolutionary tactics as distinct from those of reformism.

Tactical and organisational ideas of the Comintern, which were largely based upon European experiences, had proved very helpful in developing the unemployed workers' movement which had its beginnings in 1930, but it was a different matter in the trade unions. Here, while the general Marxist principles and approach were valid, and the European experiences were important, it was essential to develop tactical and organisational methods suited to the conditions in Australia, where reformist domination was firmly established and traditions of craft unionism were strong.

In 1928 the Militant Minority Movement had been established, following the example of the trade union Left in Britain. It made very little progress until 1930, when MMM organisation was established in the mining industry and groups were formed in various other industries. With those developments the MMM became the main organising centre for the Left in the trade unions. However, the question arose even in the early stages: was the objective of the Left simply a minority movement? Success in the Miners' Union elections quickly disposed of this issue, making it clear that the Left should strive to win the support of the majority.

Originally, the concept of the MMM was that it should become an alternative revolutionary trade union centre and movement as opposed to that of the reformists. (In Europe the trade union movement had divided and revolutionary trade unions existed side by side with reformist unions). While accepting the fact that there were fundamental differences between revolutionary and reformist trade union policies and tactics, the Party reached the conclusion that the perspective for the Left in this country should not be a divided, but an organisationally united trade union movement, and this meant that the revolutionary forces should direct their efforts toward maintaining and strengthening national trade union unity, while working within the reformist trade union structure to win the support of the workers and, thereby, to transform the unions. With
this idea as our starting point there was obviously little future for
the MMM as an alternative trade union centre, and its phasing out
began. More importantly, however, this approach opened up new
perspectives for developing the united front.

We had also to consider whether the revolutionary movement
could be content simply with militant trade unionism, as the name
Militant Minority Movement seemed to imply. Miners, shearers and
other sections of workers waged militant economic struggles, but
politically they supported reformism. The workers live and work in
an atmosphere polluted by the anti-socialist ideas of the capitalist
class, ideas which reformism reinforces. Marx and Lenin had
stressed the need for the trade unions to have a revolutionary out-
look and objective. They showed that economic struggles give rise
to trade union consciousness, but not to socialist consciousness,
and that this latter has to be brought into the working-class move-
ment. The question we had to find the answer to in our trade union
work was: how to raise the understanding of the workers from the
level of trade union consciousness up to the level of socialist
consciousness. This is a recurring problem for the Party and has
to be re-examined at every stage of development. It occupies a
central place in the present Party debate when we are faced with a
widening gap between the growth, breadth and intensity of the
economic struggles and the development of socialist understanding
among the workers.

The emphasis in our approach to this problem in the 1930s was
to raise and discuss, from a class and socialist standpoint, the
political issues that inevitably arose in the course of industrial
disputes and trade union activities. The then current phrase for
this approach was 'to politicalise' the struggles of the workers. The
reformists tried to keep politics, or rather class politics, out of the
union activities. The fact that Communists discussed the issues that
concerned the workers from a class political standpoint was very
advantageous for the Left. The large army of unemployed, strike
breaking, the open line-up of employers, government, state forces
and arbitration courts against the workers, as well as questions of
fascism and war, provided facts and arguments for expounding
political and socialist ideas.

In the mining industry an unrelenting series of guerrilla strikes
were being waged by the miners against the coal owners, but they
added little or nothing to the political development of the mine-
workers. The problem of strike tactics and organisation had to be
tackled immediately by the Communists in the Federation. Prior
to 1934 the Party had urged the setting up of 'independent leader-
ship' of strikes and other forms of struggle by workers in industry
or unemployed. One of our objectives was to prevent the reformist leaders from gaining control, since they had been largely responsible for the serious defeats suffered by the unions in the 1928-30 strikes. During the economic crisis they spread defeatist moods among the workers, discouraged strikes and constantly tried to divert industrial disputes into arbitration channels. However, with Communists in the leadership of a union, it was patently absurd to exclude them from participating in strike leadership, so tactical changes became necessary.

The positive feature of 'independent leadership' was that the control and conduct of strikes struggles resided with the workers engaged in them. The aim was to seek the democratic participation of all those involved, in mass activities and in the direction of the struggles. This form of strike organisation ran into difficulties in the industries, where the reformist trade union officials opposed it, but it proved eminently successful among the unemployed. With the election of communist trade union leaders, although the principle of 'independent leadership' had to be modified, it was essential to continue to press for mass participation in the conduct and control of strikes.

Very shortly after Orr's election as General Secretary of the Miners' Federation a strike broke out in a government-owned mine in the small mining centre of Wonthaggi, Victoria. The miners had been resisting moves to reduce their wages and worsen working conditions, when the mine management dismissed a number of workers precipitating an all-out stoppage. The strike lasted for about five months before the miners were successful in achieving their demands. The most important feature of this strike was the mass involvement of the workers in the activities and conduct of the struggle and the organisation that was thrown up. The union Board of Management was widened to include active strikers and this body was responsible to the members for organisation and leadership of the strike. Various committees were set up for picketing, propaganda, organisation and relief, etc. Speakers were developed and sent throughout Victoria and interstate; others were detailed for rabbit trapping, fishing, collecting vegetables, boot repairing, hairdressing and a variety of other activities. General publicity explaining the miners' case issued by the Federal Officers and the Wonthaggi strike leadership was outstanding, and public sympathy for the strike grew. It was estimated that more than 450 workers were active in the strike. Women were also involved and a Miners Women's Auxiliary was formed.

The Wonthaggi strike, although it involved only a few hundred workers, was a new experience for the trade union movement. The
strike activity built up the confidence and unity of the miners in Wonthaggi and throughout the Federation. For the Left in the trade unions the strike was an invaluable experience and set the pattern for strike organisation and tactics. Politically the results were also excellent, and socialist understanding among the workers increased. This was reflected in the growth of the Communist Party and the establishment of a strong Party branch in Wonthaggi.

From 1933 onwards the pressures for uniting the working class for the struggle against capitalism increased, influenced by both international and national processes. Internationally, in Germany which had the most advanced Labor movement in Western Europe, the working class had failed to unite to fight against Fascism and Hitler had taken power. The German Social Democratic Party had contributed to the Nazi victory by its support for the capitalist democratic regime, by its policy of compromise with the monopolies, its support for measures to stabilise capitalism during the economic crisis, and its opposition to a working-class united front against Fascism. The German Communist Party also made serious mistakes. It underestimated the Fascist danger and held the view that Germany was not Italy, and that the German working class could contain and defeat Fascism. It pursued a sectarian policy toward social democracy and was unable to draw Social Democratic workers into a common battle against Hitler.

Having taken over political power Hitler proceeded to uproot and destroy both the Communist and Social Democratic parties and the trade union movement. As the facts of the terrible disaster that had overwhelmed the German Labor movement became known the search for reasons and for measures to prevent a repetition of such a defeat was undertaken. In 1934 the French working people, faced with the imminent danger of a Fascist seizure of power, responded to the call for unity against Fascism. The Paris working class took over the streets of the city in mighty demonstrations with the Communist and Socialist Party leaders at their head and working-class unity was forged. The road to Fascism was barred and the French people's front arose.

The international experiences gave a new emphasis on the need for working-class unity. Here in Australia the Communist Party gave close attention to the experiences and discussions in Europe, and there were internal developments which strengthened the trend towards unity. Unemployed workers returning to industry carried with them their experiences of united action. In the mining industry the successes resulting from united action by the workers, and the effectiveness of the tactics and leadership given by the Communist
officials, made a big impact on district officers. Most of these swung over to support the new leadership, as did many lodge officers. The same processes developed in other unions where Communists succeeded to leadership. These developments demonstrated the possibilities of trade union unity and the importance of correct methods of work with reformist officials in the unions.

Events were also shaping in such a way as to improve the possibilities of unity in action with the Labor Party. Lang had split the Labor Party in 1931 and in NSW had carried the overwhelming majority of Labor Party members and supporters with him, Federal Labor being nearly wiped out. Politically Lang belonged to the extreme Right-wing of the Labor Party, although this was not apparent to his supporters in 1930-32. At the State Election in 1932 Lang was defeated and from then on his position began to weaken. The victory of Orr and Nelson in the Miners' Federation and the trend to the Left in other unions was a clear indication of this. But Lang needed the support of the reformist trade union leaders — the unions having provided most of the funds for the Labor Daily Newspaper, which Lang had gained control of, with the Miners' Federation holding the biggest parcel of shares.

To maintain his hold over the Labor movement and the Labor Party machine Lang set out to consolidate his position in the Labor Daily and to get control of the Labor Council's radio station 2KY. Defeat of Orr and Nelson and the election of Lang supporters to the main official positions in the Miners' Federation was crucial if these plans were to succeed, and Lang set out to encompass this. Intervening in the Miners' Federation elections at the end of 1934 he addressed a series of public meetings in the coalfields and made emotional appeals to the miners to 'treat the Communists as enemies of the Labor movement' and to reject Orr and Nelson. "If there is a likelihood of any union electing members of the Communist Party to a controlling position in that union," Lang said, "it is my bounden duty, as the Labor leader in this State, to urge the rejection of the members of the Communist Party."

Things did not turn out as Lang expected, and Orr and Nelson were re-elected with big majorities. For the General Secretary's position Orr received 7,515 votes, Logan (Lang Labor) 2,919, Teece (former General Secretary) 2,446. The figures for Nelson were about the same. The writing was on the wall for J. T. Lang. His influence and that of his Right-wing supporters had declined, while support for the Left was growing.
The implications of the miners' election was not lost on the reformist trade union officials, as events were to show. Following his rejection by the miners Lang moved quickly through supporters on the Labor Council to try to get control of radio station 2KY. Apart from its value as a publicity medium, 2KY was very profitable and as such a substantial source of the finances under the control of the Labor Council officers, who saw their incomes menaced if Lang succeeded. Although formerly they had been ardent Lang supporters, these officials, together with the Left, succeeded in rallying a majority of unions to defeat the take-over bid. The revolt against Lang's leadership had now extended to reformist trade union executives, decisively weakening his position in the trade union movement.

Lang had used the Labor Daily to viciously attack the miners' leaders and the union's policy in the Federation Elections, and he was equally ruthless against the reformist officials in the 2KY battle. It is understandable therefore that the unions, with the Miners' Federation playing an important role, now took measures to restore their control over Labor Daily. After a long struggle they succeeded, only to find that the paper, when returned to them, was so encumbered with debts that it was beyond the means of the unions to continue with its publication for more than a few months.

This brief outline of events illustrates the rapid process of differentiation, of rejection of the Right-wing forces around Lang, that was going on among the workers and also in trade union leaderships. Consultation and co-operation between the Communists in the trade unions and the reformist union leaders who opposed Lang was developed. These started with the Labor Daily and 2KY struggles, but as the trend of the workers was to the Left, the reformist leaders also adopted a more radical position on other issues before the trade unions, such as on the handling of strikes, defence of democratic rights which was important because of a threat to the legality of the Communist Party as well as other infringements of the liberties of the workers, and also in the struggle against the danger of war.

The co-operation that had developed in NSW extended to other States as well. The union movement as a whole benefited and more militant policies and demands were adopted. The 1937 Congress of the Australian Council of Trade Unions came out in favour of a shorter working week, increased wages and improved working conditions. It declared for a foreign policy of peace based upon a system of collective security and denounced Fascist aggression. The Labor Councils and State Trade Union Movement supported
these decisions. In the industries unity in action was developing, and the shop committee movement was attracting more and more support.

In 1930 the Party had launched a campaign for shop and job committees, as organs of 'independent leadership' of the workers' struggles, and committees were formed in the power and some other industries. Employers strenuously opposed shop committees, regarding them as a threat to their authority in industry and to their unfettered control over production, and refused to recognise them. Likewise, the reformist trade union leaders, who saw the shop committees as a challenge to their union positions and as organising centres of work stoppages over which they would have little or no control.

When the situation in the trade union movement changed following the election of Communists to trade union positions, especially in the metal and rail industries where job organisation was developing, we re-examined our ideas on the role of the shop committees and their relationship with the unions. Because of the craft nature of the trade union movement in Australia the workers in any particular workshop, practically without exception, were divided between as many as five, ten or more unions. We advanced the view that the main task of the shop committees was to unite the workers on the job, irrespective of the craft union they belonged to. The shop committees were not the organisations of one particular union (they could be this only if there was one union in the industry), but had responsibility to the unions as a whole. It was to the advantage of the workers, therefore, for the shop committees and unions to cooperate and work together instead of acting independently of each other.

The Party also raised the need for bringing union organisation into line with changes in industry which were undermining the craft basis of unionism. We urged consideration of the need for industrial unionism, in the event of which the shop committee would become an important part of the industrial union structure. The shop committee was to be responsible to all workers in a particular plant, and this feature of the shop committee, in our view, made it an admirable form of organisation to develop activities for workers' control over production, an issue raised by the Comintern. Unions were not in the same position to do this, because each union covered only a section of the workers on a particular job. The responsibility of the trade union was to extend the authority and the right of workers across industry as a whole, but in each workshop the shop committee had to contest the rights and authority
assumed by the employer, fight to improve the conditions of the workers, and also to extend their rights and develop their control over production.

There were some exaggerated ideas about the shop committees — that they were 'embryonic Soviets' for example — but this was jumping ahead of things. It implied the victory of the socialist revolution and the taking over of the capitalist enterprises by the working class in the name of all the people. In our conditions, under capitalism, the controls over production imposed by the workers through the shop committees were directed towards enforcing the right of the workers to be consulted about all changes in production, to protection from mass dismissals, victimisation, speed up and other methods of worsening conditions in order to swell employers' profits.

By the end of 1937 the shape of the changes taking place in the trade union movement had emerged. The three trends outlined above — the radicalisation taking place among the workers, the co-operation of the left in the trade union movement with a section of reformist leaders and the growth of the shop committee movement — were major factors in the change. The conjunction of these trends contributed significantly to the growth of unity and struggle among the workers and to strengthening the trade union movement as a whole.

In August, 1935, the 7th World Congress of the Communist International took place, at which G. Dimitrov delivered his historic report on working-class unity and the struggle against war and Fascism. On the basis of the Australian experiences we had reached conclusions on unity in action and ways of achieving it, especially in the industries and unions, that drove home the importance of Dimitrov's report. The theoretical and tactical ideas he advanced concerning the united front and the creation of a people's front in the fight against war and fascism, and the need to search for transitional forms of approach to the socialist revolution, opened up wider perspectives and gave added meaning to our work for building working-class unity.

In 1936 the menace of Fascism increased and was given new emphasis with the Spanish Civil War; the Second World War was approaching. In the trade unions and industries anti-Communist organisation was being developed that later was to provide the basis for the industrial groups. These developments meant new problems and new tasks, which we were better able to handle at the time because of the growth, ideologically and organisationally, of the Communist Party and of the Left as a whole.