An Early Alliance of the Left

THE STATE LABOR PARTY (1940-1944) is seldom remembered these days. It gets only a passing reference in James Jupp\(^1\), while Alistair Davidson in his recent history of the Communist Party of Australia seems to regard it as little more than a convenient legal party for under-cover Communists\(^2\). At a time when the CPA is actively seeking closer cooperation and alliance with various Left elements it is worth examining this earlier alliance more carefully. The following pages represent a brief and somewhat personal account of this story. I write it this way because my own political biography is a part of the story and because to tell it as a participant is perhaps better than to write it as an academic exercise.

The immediate origins of the State Labor Party — or to give it its formal title of those days, the Australian Labor Party (State of NSW) — was the 'Hands off Russia' Resolution which was passed at the Easter Conference of the Labor Party in March,


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1940. This resolution, which expressed the determination of the Australian Left to oppose the switching of the war from Germany to the Soviet Union, brought about the intervention of the Federal Executive of the ALP into the affairs of the NSW Branch. On April 11, 1940, the NSW State Executive was forced to expunge the ‘Hands off Russia’ Resolution. However, the matter did not rest there. On June 15 the Communist Party was declared illegal. On June 18 a Special Federal Conference of the ALP adopted a new war and defence policy which offered cooperation with the Menzies Government in a national War Council. Consistent with this new policy the Parliamentary Labor Party voted for the Emergency Powers Bill brought down by the Menzies Government. Only four members of the Parliamentary Labor Party (E. J. Ward, Maurice Blackburn, Reg Pollard and Dr. Maloney) voted against this measure. For this act of defiance they were congratulated by the NSW Executive. This action riled the conservative Labor forces so much that they induced a second intervention of the Federal Executive. This time the State Executive was suspended. A majority of the Executive, including J. R. Hughes, W. P. Evans, W. Booth, A. Wilson, W. E. Gollan, E. A. Ross, E. Walsham and others, refused to accept dismissal and constituted themselves as the A.L.P. (State of New South Wales).

From the outset the SLP opposed the ban on the Communist Party and sought to have it repealed. Many Communists joined the SLP, participated in its deliberations and activities, and held office at all levels from local branch to the Central Executive. But the SLP was clearly not functioning as a Communist Party in these years. It continued to occupy the traditional office in the Trades Hall in Goulburn Street. Its organisation remained that of a Labor Party. In addition to having many locality branches, it also had some trade union affiliates. It maintained the same electoral organisation as the official Labor Party and it concentrated a great deal of its activity in the effort to win seats in parliament and to influence parliamentary and local council policies. In the federal election of September, 1940, the SLP polled over 100,000 votes (in NSW) and later a sizable vote in the 1941 State election. Communists influenced the form of work, policy, party education and propaganda activities increasingly throughout 1942 and 1943, but they were not the major influence on the party at any stage.

I went to Sydney in January, 1942, to take up a school teaching post at Wahroonga. Prior to then I had not been very active politically. As a history student at Melbourne University in the

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3 In early 1940 there was no fighting on the Western Front opposite the Ziegfried Line but Britain and France were preparing an expeditionary force to assist Finland against the USSR.
pre-war years I had been stimulated by my study of fascism and socialism and by the anti-fascist struggle in Europe (above all Spain) to take a progressive stand. I joined the Labor Club in 1938, during my second year at the University. Over the long vacation early in 1938 I had worked as a fruitpicker in the Shepparton district and had witnessed the demonstrations of unemployed. I read the Communist Manifesto for the first time sitting on an upturned fruitcase in an Ardmona orchard. In 1941, after completing an MA thesis and while doing an Education course, I joined the ALP and became a member of the South Carlton Branch. When I arrived in Sydney I sought to link up with the ALP, but my uncle (the late Dr. C. M. Churchward) was already an active member of the SLP and he persuaded me to go first to see Bert Chandler, then secretary of the SLP. An hour and a half discussion with Bert convinced me that the SLP was more progressive and more socialist than the Official Labor Party. Consequently I joined the SLP and became a member of the Gordon Branch, the chairman of which was W. A. Wood, then editor of the SLP newspaper Progress.

Gordon Branch of the SLP was an active branch numbering over 30 members. Its meetings were lively and it held regular classes on themes such as fascism, socialism and Labor History. The branch participated in local as well as national and state political campaigns and I quickly gained experience in a fair range of political activity. I was a delegate to the SLP Conference in April, 1943, and was elected to the Central Executive. I was elected to the Education and Political Committee at the first meeting of the new Executive on May 14, 1943, along with W. E. Gollan and W. A. Wood. Coopted members of this committee included Len Fox and George Farwell. I was thus in a key position during the crucial year of the United Front between the State Labor Party and the CPA.

The CPA was legalised on December 18, 1942. During the period of illegality (June, 1940-December, 1942) the CPA increased its membership from under 4,000 to over 15,000. It was still growing during 1943. The SLP on the other hand was clearly dwindling. Although it had over 40 branches and several industrial affiliates (mainly miners’ lodges) its membership had dropped to about 4,500, concentrated mainly in the metropolitan area with some outlying branches at places such as Cessnock, Maitland, Lithgow, Portland, Gosford and the South Coast. Many members and supporters had gone back to the Official Labor Party after the establishment of the Curtin Government in October, 1941.
The situation at the beginning of 1943 was that an Allied victory seemed in sight, but the Australian war effort was still somewhat handicapped by the fact that the Labor Government was kept in office by the grace of two independents (A. Wilson and A. W. Coles). Anti-government forces were increasing their attacks and were soon to force the Government to resign. Early in 1943 the Communist Party proposed a limited united front agreement with both the OLP and the SLP. The offer proposed joint action to:

- Promote a greater war effort.
- Strengthen support for the Curtin Government and ensure its return to office with a clear majority.
- Promote a strong campaign for a second front in Western Europe in order to hasten the defeat of the Axis Powers.
- Promote policies of peace and freedom in the post-war world.

The OLP rejected the offer, but the SLP accepted it enthusiastically. A joint Consultative Committee (four members of each party) was appointed to formulate a Joint Action Agreement along the lines suggested by the CPA. This agreement was worked out swiftly and without friction and it was adopted by the Easter Conference of the SLP late in April, 1943. The agreement provided for joint action by the two parties to:

- Carry out propaganda explaining the character of fascism and the anti-fascist People's War.
- Achieve a greater war effort.
- Unite the Labor Movement behind the Curtin Government, to work for its return in the Federal Election and to strengthen it by the election of Communist and SL members.
- Campaign for unified allied strategy, a second front in Western Europe, a solution to the Indian problem, and supplies for China.
- Combat attempts to weaken Allied Unity.
- Support the Social Services Plans of the Curtin Government and its proposals for a referendum on federal powers.

The agreement carefully stipulated the forms of cooperation to be developed at the executive, federal electorate and local levels and contained a number of guarantees for the continuation of the separate identities of the two parties. For example, during the
Federal Election in 1943 the parties operated an exchange of preferences agreement and did not stand candidates against each other. Joint campaign committees, joint election meetings and rallies, were held in several places. Joint central functions included the massive rally on June 22 at the Sydney Town Hall, the November Town Hall Ball and the November March and Domain meeting. The agreement facilitated the existing cooperation of members of both parties in Friendship with Russia work, in War Loan rallies, in the campaign for Joint Production Committees in industry, in election work, and in many other areas, including the struggle for improved treatment of Aboriginals. Notwithstanding the considerable effort put into the election campaign, and the extensive use of radio and leaflets, neither party secured a seat, although one SLP candidate, Sid Conway, polled over 10,000 votes in Cook. The only consolation was that both parties had played a major role in the devastating defeat of the UAP-CP coalition and in the return of the Curtin Labor Government in September, 1943.

The first public proposal to amalgamate the two Left parties was made by John Hughes, Vice-President of the SLP, at the Central Executive meeting on October 1, 1943. In a realistic report to the Executive, Hughes recorded the dwindling support for the party and explained this as due mainly to the removal of the original cause for the appearance of the party, the lack of a strong anti-fascist foreign policy on the part of the ALP. Since the Curtin Government had taken office in October, 1941, the Labor Party had changed its foreign policy and consequently the anti-fascist Left in Australia had returned to the support of the ALP. Under these circumstances only two courses remained open to the SLP — to seek re-entry into the Official Labor Party or to merge with the CPA. The latter course was preferable, since the CPA had a clear socialist objective whereas the ALP did not. Hughes therefore recommended that an approach should be made to the CPA to sound out the prospects for early amalgamation. If the CPA supported the proposal the Consultative Committee of the two parties was to be entrusted with drafting the amalgamation agreement.

This report resulted in an extended debate. Only one member of the Executive (Mr. B. Anderson) opposed the suggestion outright, on the grounds that the State Labor Party was a valuable ‘transition stage’ for disillusioned ALP members since it was less extreme than the Communist Party. Such people would join it in increased numbers when the OLP began to lose support, but few of these would join the CPA. Several members, including myself, suggested a more cautious approach to amalgamation with an interim period during which the executives of the two parties would work closely together, but the parties retain their separate identities.
However, the merger went through with the utmost speed. The Joint Consultative Committee produced a resolution on amalgamation before the end of October. After extensive discussion in the branches of the SLP this resolution (with some minor amendments) was adopted at a special one-day conference of the SLP on November 27. The amalgamation was then ratified by a special conference of the CPA on January 15, 1944, and finalised by a joint conference of the two parties on January 16.

The Amalgamation Agreement provided for the election of members of the SLP to various leading committees of the Communist Party — five members to the Central Committee, two members to the Metropolitan Committee and 15 members to various District Party Committees. In this way J. R. Hughes, W. E. Gollan, H. B. Chandler, A. Wilson and E. A. Ross were elected to the Central Committee and June Mills and F. Graham to the Metropolitan Committee. I was elected along with Ted Walsham to the North Sydney District Committee. Individual members of the SLP had to seek individual membership of the Communist Party — briefly re-named the Australian Communist Party (with which is amalgamated the State Labor Party, NSW). This caused no problem to most SLP members, of whom perhaps a third were already members of the Communist Party. I joined at the end of January, 1944. A minority of members of the SLP — perhaps one in ten — found it impossible to join the Communist Party. Such persons sometimes rejoined the ALP, but many dropped out of political activity entirely. The influx of new members into the Communist Party brought a sudden inflation to NSW membership figures, but this was temporary. Membership wastage after 1945 soon brought it down again.

Three questions are worth raising at the conclusion of this brief record. Why was this United Front so successful? What impact did the former SLP members have on the activities and policies of the Communist Party in following years? How relevant is this story for the present and future of the party?

The United Front of 1943 was successful for a number of reasons. It brought into alliance two parties with broadly similar policies and with identical immediate objectives. The war had radicalised the SLP (and for that matter other sections of the Labor Party) and moderated the policy of the Communist Party so that the two parties met easily at a position to the Left of the Official Labor

1 During 1942-43 most Communists who were members of the SLP retained their membership of both parties. Some however, withdrew from the SLP when they joined the CPA. This course was followed by W. A. Wood late in 1943.
The care with which the original alliance agreement was negotiated and the generosity of the final amalgamation agreement produced very friendly relations between the two parties at all levels. The overlap in membership, appreciable at the beginning of 1943 and increasing steadily throughout the year, made cooperation between the two parties uncommonly easy.

Did the SLP group modify Communist Party policy, attitudes and activities? It was widely assumed in 1944-45 and in later years that it did not. But perhaps this is inaccurate. Have former SLP members any different record as members of the Communist Party? We do not really know the answer to these questions. For my part I felt I was catapulted into an intermediate leadership position in the Communist Party without the benefit of the usual apprenticeship. For many years afterwards I felt that I was not fully a member of the Communist Party, but rather someone with one foot in the Communist Party and the other still in the Labor Party. I had certain reservations about the party's underlying philosophy and I did not easily replace enthusiastic support for the USSR by uncritical adulation of it. The process of 'political recruitment' into the ranks of the Communist Party took three years at least.

I do not think that the record of the 1943 United Front between the Communist Party and the SLP has much relevance to the present. The conditions in 1943 were quite unlike those of today. The alliance was a radical reformist alliance designed to put ginger into the ALP. It was in no way a revolutionary alliance. The situation today calls for an attempt to build up an alliance of Left and Revolutionary Forces in the search for a revolutionary strategy suited to Australian conditions. On the other hand, the pre-conditions of success for a radical alliance are pretty much the same under all conditions. These include the existence of considerable overlap in policy and the determination to seek out these coincidences and to maximise them. It also illustrates the necessity for frank, open, sincere relations between the Communist Party and organised groups it is seeking to involve in common action. There are always two sides to any united action agreement.

On the other hand, members of the industrial affiliates were often unhappy about the amalgamation since the Communist Party organization did not provide for union affiliation. Several prominent SLP persons (including the President, W. Booth and Dr. C. M. Churchward) supported the amalgamation but were unable to join the Communist Party.

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