Early Years
in the Party
R. Dixon

I first became interested in socialism and the Communist Party in the town of Lithgow. My family had moved there in 1914 soon after the outbreak of the First World War, and my father worked in the coal mines. There were six children and my father's wages were insufficient for our family needs, so we always lived very close to poverty. Consequently, my mother set up a boarding house in Lithgow in order to supplement the family income.

I left school at the age of 14 - that would be the year 1920. I set out to try to find a job, but there was very little work available in Lithgow at that time. It had been a boom industrial town during the war with the steel works and small arms factory, as well as the mines working flat out, but in 1920-21 there was not much work going. So it was some 12 or 18 months before I was able to get work, at a very low wage in a bicycle shop. After that I found work in the post office, and in 1925 a position on the railways.

The year 1925 was a turning point in my life.

Richard Dixon worked for a time in the Communist International. He was President of the Communist Party of Australia for many years, and has participated in a number of international communist gatherings, including the meeting of 81 parties in Moscow in 1960.

young Scotsman who had come to Australia after the war, Billy Orr, who was later to become the General Secretary of the Miner's Federation of Australia. Another boarder was Tony Luchetti who is the present Federal Labor Party member for Macquarie. We were friends and knocked around together.

In March or April 1925, Jock Garden, who was then secretary of the Communist Party, was billed to speak in Lithgow in the local park on the Sunday afternoon. Orr, Luchetti and I discussed his visit and decided to go along and hear what he had to say. In the course of a long and varied career, Jock Garden had been a religious lay-preacher, and he was somewhat of a demagogue. Apart from this, he was not a very deep thinker. I don't recall what he said in the Lithgow Park, but whatever it was it made absolutely no impact on me. At the meeting the chairman announced that Garden would speak again that evening in the Miners' Hall and the subject, I remember, was the Russian Revolution and Proletarian Dictatorship.

We didn't know what proletarian dictatorship meant, but we were sufficiently interested to decide to go along and attend the evening meeting. The Miners' Hall, we discovered, was also used by the Plebs League, a leftwing educational body which had a small library of working class literature in the hall.
Garden's speech again made no impression. The chairman of the meeting, however, was Charlie Nelson, who was subsequently to become the General President of the Miners' Federation. I think that Orr, Luchetti and I were the only members of the audience who were outside the Communist Party or those associated with it - a small left group. At the end of the meeting, Nelson sought us out. He accompanied us down the main street of Lithgow, and talked to us. I suppose we talked for two hours or more. Nelson's remarks were very enlightening and very stimulating for me.

During the period that I'd been unemployed, and also arising from experiences after getting work, I began to ask many questions about society, but I could find no answers. I listened to discussions among the boarders in our house, who were all workers, but they were at a low level of understanding and very confused. At one stage during this period, I decided to study the Labor Party's views, so I bought the Labor Party paper which at that time was the Daily Mail, subsequently to become the Labor Daily. I bought it for some months and each day read it carefully, but found studying it a futile exercise. It provided no clues whatsoever to what was happening in society, as far as I was concerned at any rate. I also went along to listen to some boosted religious spokesman who had come to Lithgow to see if religion had anything to offer in the way of answers to the problems that concerned me, but I got nothing.

In the discussion with Nelson I heard, for the first time, the marxist theory expounded, and the views and ideas expressed seemed to fall into place with remarkable clarity. Nelson had made a study of working class literature, He was well versed in the marxian doctrine. He had been connected with the IWW and the OBU. At the time we met him he was studying the writings of the German worker-philosopher, Joseph Dietzgen - the Positive Outcome of Philosophy and some other works. On that Saturday night we got a pretty solid outline of marxist philosophy and the materialist conception of history.

Nelson was a very voluble man; he was the sort of fellow who was never lost for a word, and he never used a word with one syllable when one with two or three would do. I would think that in 1925 when I met him, he would have been in his middle thirties, but he looked older. He was bald; he was a man with a very strong and square chin. When he was in discussion with you, especially if there were differences, he had the habit, when making a point, of jutting his chin forward, to give an impression of strength. But he was also a man who had serious weaknesses which were to show up later on. Some years before our Lithgow meeting he had been an alcoholic and a very sick man at that. He had set out to conquer this illness; he gave drink away and at the time we met him was a complete teetotaller.

Nelson proposed to us that we should attend a study group on marxian political economy and the three of us discussed it and agreed that we'd go along. So we got together approximately weekly, I think, maybe fortnightly, for discussion on political economy - Bogdanov's Economic Science was the textbook we used. Some time later, maybe 10 or 12 months, Nelson brought along a new student to our class, J.D. Blake. At that time he was a youth of some 16 or 17 years of age, but a pretty intense student.

At this time, 1925, the Communist Party was fighting for affiliation to the ALP and they were doing some work in this connection in Lithgow. Nelson suggested to us that we might join the local ALP branch in order to strengthen the left. Luchetti and I went along to the ALP branch but it made no impression on me. Indeed, I was completely unhappy with both the atmosphere in the branch and the discussion that went on there. I suppose I was somewhat idealistic. I think I attended the Labor Party branch meeting on only one occasion. Luchetti, on the other hand, remained a member of the Labor Party branch. Subsequently he became associated with the Lang organisation, but ultimately he returned to the Federal Labor Party and after the death of Ben Chifley was elected for the Federal seat of Macquarie.

Bill Orr at this time was working in the Lithgow steel works. Soon after he found employment in the mines and became a member of the Miners' Federation and, along with Nelson and others, became very active in the union. He would have been about 25 at the time, I think.

I was then working on the railways. I'd been appointed to the relieving staff which meant that I was frequently away from Lithgow working at one or another country railway station, sometimes for months at a time, so
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that my association with the group developing in Lithgow was constantly broken. However, each time I returned to Lithgow I made contact with the local organisation again.

In 1927 most of my family moved to Sydney, and I also applied for a transfer. Early in 1928, I commenced work in the Sydney parcels office. Soon after arriving in Sydney, which would have been in February or March, I made contact with the Communist Party at their headquarters in Sussex Street. In July 1928 I joined the party.

In Sydney at this time there was only one party branch. All the members in Sydney met, I think it was fortnightly, and when I was not working (I was doing a lot of shift work at the time), I would attend the meetings.

Usually there were between 20 and 40 members in attendance at branch meetings. I was most anxious at this time to come to grips with the marxian theory and so I commenced to work through Marx's Capital and also attended a class with five or six other members of the party on a Saturday afternoon. Among the students at this class were Jack Simpson who was subsequently elected to the Central Committee and Political Committee of the Party, and also Dick Richardson, an outstanding party activist and a very lovable character.

I began to develop work in the trade union (the ARU) in the Sydney parcels office. I had attempted to develop union activity in Lithgow, but the organisation there was completely dead and no union meetings were held. On the Sydney station, in the parcels section, there were many more men working. There were some hundreds in the parcels section alone, but the union was in a bad way. It was still suffering from the aftermath of the 1917 general strike. The more militant workers could tell me who, on the parcels staff, had worked during the 1917 strike and who had stood firm for the strike. The chairman of the parcels sub-branch of the union was a leading porter; as a matter of fact, he was my immediate boss. The secretary of the sub-branch had scabbed in 1917 and the workers were aware of this and had very little confidence in the sub-branch of the union which was in the doldrums.

I got together two or three workers and we discussed the need to change the position in the branch, and also the leadership of the sub-branch of the union. We discussed this matter with other workers on the job. I indicated to them that I was ready to contest the secretary's position and a union mate of mine, who was a rather wild, erratic Irishman, but who, somewhere along the line had had contact with the IWW or a socialist group, agreed that he was prepared to run for the position of chairman.

In January 1929 a meeting of the sub-branch of the union was called; there would have been about 15 or 20 at the meeting, and there I was elected secretary and my colleague was elected chairman. A few days after this, I attended a meeting of the Sydney branch of the Communist Party. This was the annual meeting and branch elections were held. The secretary of the branch was Edna Nelson. She indicated that she wouldn't be nominating as she had other work to do. When nominations were called someone nominated me and I was elected secretary of the Sydney branch. This was a position I had no wish to occupy; I felt I had neither the experience nor the knowledge to hold the position. But I couldn't withdraw my nomination as I had no good grounds for this. I had to let my name go to the ballot and I was elected to the position.

All this happened within one week. I was elected secretary of the sub-branch of the union, and then secretary of the Sydney branch of the Communist Party. My work in the railways involved shift work and that meant I couldn't always attend the Sydney party branch meetings. However, I carried on and found that the position didn't require, at that time, a very great knowledge or organisational ability. As a matter of fact, most of the directional work of the party in Sydney came from the central committee. The Sydney organisation very largely confined itself to matters of such as paper sales, collecting finance, holding a monthly dance as a means of raising money, and some other activities, including educational work.

The secretary's position wasn't as difficult as I had imagined when I was elected. All this happened at the beginning of 1929, which was a period when there were significant changes taking place here in Australia and throughout the world, changes which were to affect the position of all parties and all classes.

During the First World War and after, there had been considerable industrial growth in Australia so that local capitalism was strengthened. This growth of Australian
capitalism meant also a growth of nationalism and, in turn, led to struggles, to growing conflicts between the Nationalists (this was the tory party at that time) and the Country Party. Government policy in preceding years was to work closely with British imperialism; the Country Party, in particular, was of the opinion that Australia should restrain industrial development in this country in the interests of providing raw materials for British industry and importing the manufactures we required from Britain. This policy was no meeting increasing resistance from Australian capitalists, and it caused and increased the strains between the Nationalist Party and the Country Party. But, as well, the industrial growth of Australia had brought changes in the work force. The number of industrial workers had increased, which meant that the strength and the number of unions operating in industry also grew. In the earlier years, the AWU, with its base centred mainly in the countryside among rural workers, and shearers especially, had become the most powerful union.

Because of the dominant position of the AWU, it was able to get control of the Labor Party Opposition in most States of Australia. In NSW, in 1925-26, Lang, who had become the leader of the parliamentary section of the Labor Party, came into conflict with the AWU bureaucracy in a struggle to get control of the Labor Party machine. Basing himself on the unions that had grown with the development of industry, Lang was able to defeat the Bailey-AWU control of the Labor Party in NSW to establish his domination of the Labor Party.

The trade union movement was thoroughly reformist in the 1920s, the trade union leaders were completely dependent on arbitration. The 1917 strike had ended in defeat, it was a debacle for the workers. The officials, oriented towards arbitration, spread defeatism among the workers; nothing could be gained by strikes, they claimed.

These trends were all present as we moved towards the 1930s. The Communist Party was affected by Labor Party and reformist influences. These were to create very serious problems for the party. We had to take into account the fact that in 1928-29 unemployment was growing and a general offensive was undertaken by employers and governments against the trade union movement.

The Marine Cooks were among the first to be attacked, then the Waterside Workers. During this dispute, the government passed legislation to license waterside workers - the infamous "Dog Collar Act" as it came to be known. In January 1929, Judge Lukin had been appointed to the Arbitration Court by the Bruce government. He was an old and retired Queensland judge, a very reactionary gentleman. Obviously, he was appointed to do a particular job. In 1929 he delivered his Timber Workers' Award which abolished the 44-hour week in the industry, reduced wages, and undermined long-established conditions of the workers. It was a most vicious attack on working class conditions and it led to the Timber Workers' strike which was to go on for some 12 months.

The timber workers' strike was to lead to very militant struggles and demonstrations. In March 1929, the northern coalowners, led by John Brown, at that time the biggest of the coal barons, issued an ultimatum to the miners that they must accept a 12½ per cent cut in their wages. The northern miners rejected the ultimatum, and the coalowners closed the mines and locked out the workers.

There is a very interesting sidelight to this move of the coalowners. The Bruce-Page government, in a move to break the resistance of the workers, passed a very vicious anti-trade union law, one of the worst such laws seen in Australia. The object of this law was to smash the resistance of unions to the employers' attacks. Under it, the timber workers had been heavily fined; the secretary of the Melbourne Trades and Labor Council had also been fined; scores of timber workers had been haled into court under both federal and state laws. The Federal government also made provision for secret ballots of workers on strike. They proceeded, in fact, to take a ballot of the timber workers. The Sydney Trades and Labor Council and the timber workers' Strike Committee issued a call for the timber workers to come together in a great demonstration outside the Trades Hall. The workers were asked to bring their strike ballot papers with them. These were collected and then publicly burned in a great bonfire. At the same demonstration, an effigy of Judge Lukin was also burned.

This splendid act of defiance of the timber
workers was a clear expression of the growing militancy among the workers, a militancy that was in marked contrast to the leadership of most of the unions.

Bruce's anti-trade union legislation created its own problems for the government. As with all such legislation, governments seek to give the impression of impartiality - hence the section dealing with strikes also dealt with lockouts. It seemed it was designed to deal both with strikes by workers and lockouts by employers. Now, on the northern coalfields, the miners were not on strike, but were locked out by the coalowners to enforce a 12½ per cent wage cut. The Bruce government was now challenged to take similar action against the coal barons as it took against the timber workers. The demand was raised that John Brown and other coalowners be hauled before the courts and dealt with. Was the law impartial? Was it intended to deal with capitalists, equally as with workers? The course of events really caught the Bruce government with its pants down.

The last thing the government wanted was to have to deal with employers. Its legislation was designed to deal with the trade unions and strikes. It was vicious class legislation and the reference to lockouts was a sop to legally minded airy-fairy democrats. When the demand was made for the Bruce government to take action against the coal barons, it was in real difficulty. After long hesitation, it issued summonses against John Brown and several others, but the government had no intention of going on with the action. Within a few weeks, the summonses were withdrawn. This meant, of course, that Bruce's legislation lost all credibility. In other words, it came apart under pressure from the workers and the way in which the class struggle had developed.

In the coal dispute, miners in the northern fields were locked out, but in all other parts of the industry, in the west, in the south, in Queensland and Victoria, the mines were working at full blast. In these districts, the miners levied part of their wages for relief for the northern miners, who although locked out were not entitled to government assistance. The policy of the Communist Party was for an all-out struggle that would stop coal production and force a solution to the dispute. Orr and Nelson played an important part in this campaign.
Over all, this period, 1928-29, witnessed a most ruthless offensive on the working class. The 44-hour week was swept away, wages and conditions were undermined and unemployment increased. It was a time of very sharp class struggle. The whole of the leadership of the working class movement was found wanting in this situation. The Labor Party leadership sought a way out of the crisis beneficial for capitalism, the reformist trade union leadership, lacking in fighting spirit, resisted struggles by the working class, and the Communist Party did not come forward with vigorous independent policies and organisational leadership and actions that were essential in this situation.

The Communist Party played some part in the struggles which were taking place, but was unable to establish its independent position from the left of the Labor Council, from Garden and company. Party activities in the big struggles were subordinated to the Labor Council approach; thus we were influenced by reformist policies.

Before we could become a real communist party, that is a party in the sense that Lenin spoke of, a party which was a leading force in the organisation of the masses for the struggle against capitalism, we had first to settle accounts with the left reformist influences within the party and also to overcome the old Socialist Party concept that the role of the party was simply to carry on propaganda and educational work for socialism. The party, of course, must always carry on propaganda and educational work for socialism, but if we are to achieve our aims, we must be revolutionary organisers and leaders in the mass movement.

The founding of the Communist Party in 1920 was a very important step towards establishing organisational and political independence of the party, in that we were separated as an organisation from the Labor Party. But organisational separation was not enough.

The party had still to assert its ideological independence from the ALP and reformism in order to establish itself as a genuine revolutionary communist party. This was how the problem began to emerge in 1929. In all the organisations of the labor movement, the question of leadership was now under challenge - in the Labor Party, in the trade unions and in the Communist Party.

The people who had formed the Communist Party in 1920 or who had joined it around that time or later, had brought into the party their political ideas and these were left Labor Party ideas, Socialist Party ideas, IWW and anarchist ideas. But these ideas were still a long way from the revolutionary theory necessary for a communist party. The withdrawal of Garden from the Communist Party in 1926 and then of Baracchi and others was part of the process of change going on within the party. But even so, rightwing reformist influences remained and these had to be rooted out along with the old simple Socialist Party concepts of the party as just a propaganda organisation.

Kavanagh, for instance, had a very confused idea of the Communist Party. He urged the party to go "back to Marx", and essentially he meant to the economic theories of Marx. He had not come to grips with Lenin's development of marxist theory and the modern revolutionary aims and tasks of the party. He could be very sectarian in policy and tactics, which was a characteristic of the old socialist groups and the IWW. On the other hand, in the big mass struggles of 1928-29, he moved towards the reformists thereby demonstrating his ideological confusion and inability to reach a really strong, firm, independent class understanding of the policies needed.

In the 1928-29 period, the top leadership of the party was unable to find answers to the problems confronting us, in the circumstances of the very bitter class struggles and reformist betrayals. Nor could they deal with the problems that arose with rising unemployment and economic crisis. Another issue that arose sharply in 1928, and to a greater extent in 1929 was: what kind of communist party were we to be? A socialist propaganda sect closely linked with the left wing of the ALP, or were we to be a communist party organisationally and ideologically independent of the ALP and reformism? A party whose policy and tactics were revolutionary and designed to win the support of the masses of the working people, a party which could play an active and leading part in the class struggles against capitalism, and which set out to win over and prepare the working class for the fight for socialism?

The leading figures in the struggle against the policy of the party leadership were: here in Sydney, Lance Sharkey and Herbert Moxon, who at that time was a national activist of the
central committee. In Brisbane, J.B. Miles was leading the fight. The Communist International also came into the conflict and played a vital and very positive role.

In 1928, the 6th Congress of the Comintern was held and representatives of communist parties from most countries of the world attended, including Australia. The congress reached the conclusion that capitalism was entering into a period of economic and political crisis and that this would give rise to a new round of wars and revolutions.

The 6th Congress resolution drew attention to the role of reformism in propping up capitalism; it called for a sharper struggle against the reformist betrayals and for the communist parties to prepare themselves for the big class battles that lay ahead; and to develop the independent leadership of the workers in the struggles.

Subsequent to the congress, a document was prepared which became known as the Queensland resolution. The importance of this document was that it suggested lines of policy that the party could follow in Australia, with emphasis on the need for more determined opposition from the Communist Party to the reformist leaders, and reaffirmed the need for Communist Party candidates to run independently at elections. This policy was operated during the Queensland State elections towards the end of 1928. J.B. Miles was one of the Communist Party candidates; Fred Paterson was a leftwing candidate supporting a joint policy put forward by members of the left.

Now, that happened in the Queensland State elections, but a majority of the central committee members rejected these tactics for the federal elections. In these elections at the end of 1929, no Communist Party candidates were run. The Communist Party advocated the defeat of the Bruce government and the election of a Labor government. In the circumstances of that time, this was a wrong policy. Sharkey and Moxon opposed this policy and immediately after the elections, there began a very sharp discussion in the party, and criticism of the leadership given by the central committee grew.

This discussion which preceded the party conference due to take place at the beginning of January 1930 brought into question all main lines of party policy. The Comintern also played a part in the discussion. The executive committee of the Comintern expressed disagreement with the policy of the central committee.

The Comintern document was published in the Workers' Weekly on December 6, 1929. Those events are set out in detail in Campbell's History of the Australian Labor Movement. The Comintern intervention arose through correspondence from Sharkey and Moxon who had been censured and threatened with expulsion from the party by the central committee for publishing the Comintern document. The publication of this statement in the Workers' Weekly had a big influence within the party. It analysed the changes in capitalism, the role of reformism, and it very clearly stated the role and function of the communist party in the struggles of the working class, criticising the views of the majority of the central committee. The Comintern statement declared:

"Apparently the Communist Party of Australia regards itself as being merely a propaganda body, a sort of adjunct to the left wing of the Labor Party, whereas our conception of the role and functions of the Communist Party is that it should be the leader of the working class and the principal driving force in its economic and political struggles."

By the time the 9th Party Conference assembled in Sydney on January 10, 1930, the tide of opinion within the party had swung against the majority of the central committee. This was reflected in the election of the new central committee. The majority of the retiring committee were rejected with the exception of E. Higgins, who at the time was editor of the Workers' Weekly. L.L. Sharkey and H. Moxon were returned. New members of the central committee included R. Dixon, E.J. Docker. Because the rules of the party at that time required the central committee to be elected from party members resident in Sydney, where the headquarters of the party was situated, J.B. Miles was not entitled to contest the elections. He played a most important part in the discussions and work in the conference.

The 9th Conference of the Party was unquestionably a turning point in the history of the Communist Party. It cleared the way for the party and the new leadership to bring about those changes in policy, methods of work and tactics which would open the way for the party to extend its influence and leadership in the great movements of the masses that were unfolding.