TRIBUTE TO LANCE SHARKEY

The sudden death of Lance Sharkey at 68 deprived the Australian labor movement of a great figure. Lance Sharkey was associated with the Communist Party for over 40 years. He contributed much that is permanent to the theory and practice, not only of the Communist Party, but of the labor movement as a whole.

His political life spanned a generation and a half of the most turbulent and decisive era of Australian and world politics. He first entered political activity in the struggle against conscription in the first world war. The son of a battling farmer of Irish descent, he became a worker in Orange and the West of New South Wales. Moving to Sydney in the early twenties, he was soon drawn into active unionism and became a student of socialist theory.

He was one of that generation of militant workers whose thinking was profoundly influenced by the Russian Revolution. The world war, expressing through horrible carnage the contradictions of imperialism, had turned the thoughts of millions to the need for social revolution.

The experience of Australian workers had traversed a wide field, from the great union struggles of the 1890's to Labor Party reformism and various socialist trends (Australian Socialist Party, Victorian Socialist Party, the Industrial Workers of the World).

The Russian Revolution illuminated the darkness cast by the war, and had a great impact all over the world. This was true for Australia too, even though it was more isolated by distance then than now. The impact of the first victorious workers' revolution led to an upsurge of socialist ideas, thinking, debate and action. The Communist Party was formed in 1920, the Labor Party adopted the socialisation objective in 1921; a few years later the Australian Council of Trade Unions was founded.

Lance Sharkey, after deep study and thought, threw in his lot with the infant Communist Party. For over 40 years he remained steadfast and loyal, through many trials, struggles, and sacrifices. If any one man more than many others of ability and devotion can be said to have moulded the Communist Party, it is he.

He was a man of action, in the thick of innumerable struggles. He was an active unionist, a fighter for the unemployed in the great depression. He took an active part in the struggle of the
miners in 1929-30. He fought against the New Guard, incipient Australian fascism. He was an underground leader of the Party when Menzies outlawed it in 1940, an organiser and propagandist for the war effort to defeat the Axis powers. In 1949, he was framed and jailed for courageous opposition to the Cold War. Courage, tenacity, single-mindedness and loyalty were essential parts of Sharkey the man.

Yet he was more than a man of action and organiser. Editor of Workers’ Weekly, Tribune and Communist Review, he was a writer, thinker and theoretician of outstanding ability.

Of all his contributions, his theoretical work was perhaps the greatest. His work The Trade Unions was both a generalisation of a century of militant unionism and a theoretical concept that still profoundly influences Australian unionism.

A considerable part of his theoretical work was devoted to unity of the working class, the central problem of the struggle for socialism in Australia. He was a leader of the revolutionary trend in the Australian labor movement, to the fore in all the striving of this trend to find the ways to unite the movement. This striving took many paths, including some wrong turnings, yet was always guided by sincere desire to reach the goal. One of his great contributions was to summarise this experience, of which he was a participant, in his article “The Labor Party Crisis.” Written in 1952, a few years before defeat of the extreme right bid for domination of the ALP, this article marked out a new path for Australian communists. They have since followed this path, again with some diversions, developing its ideas in changing conditions. Indeed, it might be said that this article was an important strand in the thinking that is expressed in the concept “Towards a Coalition of the Left” that Australian communists are now debating as their 21st Congress draws near.

The concepts also owe a lot to another theoretical contribution by Lance Sharkey. It was he who made the first draft of the 1951 Party program, Australia's Path to Socialism. This program, with its subsequent amendments, was the foundation on which the Communist Party is building its new ideas of the way forward in a world and an Australia that has changed a lot even in 16 years.

It would be impossible to write an appreciation of this man without referring to a vital strand in his makeup—his internationalism. His Irish descent was a matter of pride. One of his favorite quotations from Marx was on the heroic struggle of Ireland for independence. The part played by Irish immigrants
in the Australian labor movement was also a source of pride, expressing also his Australianism. His favorite song was *The Wild Colonial Boy*, with its merging of the Irish and Australian rebel spirit.

This deep spring of sympathy for peoples oppressed and exploited by imperialism was the emotional chord of his internationalism, to be developed into a scientific concept through his study of marxism. Some of the best of Sharkey’s writings deal with the struggles of oppressed peoples. In the thirties, he wrote several brilliant articles on the Chinese Revolution. These show a depth of understanding and a prophetic vision of China’s emergence as a great nation through the fires of revolution. The support given by Australian workers to China was always a source of pride to him.

His internationalism was naturally expressed best in his association with the international communist movement. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, a colleague and comrade of revolutionaries like Dimitrov, Thorez, Togliatti, Pollitt and Buck. The divisions in the movement hurt him deeply. A participant in the Moscow meetings of 1957 and 1960, he found it hard to believe that agreements reached by the world forum of Communist Parties could be breached. Yet he retained a deep confidence that the divisions were only a temporary phase, that the discussion and testing of different ideas would lead to a new and higher form of international unity.

Lance Sharkey made his own contribution to international marxist thought. Some of his writings were translated into many languages, and proved helpful to communists in many countries, particularly in those countries emerging from colonial status. D. N. Aidit, murdered leader of Indonesia’s communists, often referred to the help given by Lance’s writings, taken back by Indonesian communists exiled in Australia during the war.

To those who knew and honor him, his death is a great personal loss. It is certainly a political loss to the movement he so profoundly influenced. He will long be remembered by his comrades; tens of thousands will honor him as he leaves us. He has a secure place in the history of the Communist Party and the movement that is working for socialism, the vision and dream of generations of advanced thinkers; the socialist Australia of the future will remember him as one of its greatest pioneers.