A labor historian discusses the impact of the Russian Revolution on Australia.

ON NOVEMBER 8, 1917, the newspapers of Australia reported: "As a result of the conflict between the Russian Government and the Soviet Revolutionary Committee regarding the control of the Petrograd military headquarters it is reported that the Soviet Committee has proclaimed itself a new Provisional Government."

Portentous words! . . . and people in Australia paused in their daily activities in amazement and wonder. Sections of the working class had no doubt that something epoch-making was taking place. From the canefields of North Queensland to the timber mills of Victoria came examples of workers downing tools to celebrate the event. The organisation of Russian immigrants in Brisbane proclaimed themselves an Australian Soviet. Their comrades in Melbourne stormed the offices of the Czar's representative and occupied them for a period. Red flags were flown from trade union halls and Labor activists extended congratulations to the Russian leaders.

The news came as the reactionary Australian Government led by the Labor renegade W. M. Hughes announced its second attempt to gain the approval of the people for military conscription for overseas service in the First World War, and many leaders of the Labor movement sensed that the triumph of the Bolsheviks would reverberate throughout the world and have its influence on the outcome, as perchance it did. Australia returned a bigger "No" majority than in 1916.

Members of the socialist groups, functioning in Australia since the 1880s, had no doubt of the significance of the developments. Public meetings then being held regularly in all capital cities to conduct socialist propaganda and express opposition to the imperialist war were devoted now to explaining Russian events as a working class seizure of power. But support for the new regime extended beyond the socialist groups. Labor Councils in the big cities hailed it, the Federal conference of the Australian Labor Party recorded its congratulations and men like Frank Anstey and Percy Brookfield spoke out boldly in Parliament in its defence.
The writers and thinkers of the Labor movement saw the October Revolution as in the tradition of the struggle for social justice of the Australian working class, and their enthusiastic support revealed the spirit of proletarian internationalism. Support for the Revolution extended even beyond the Labor movement. Members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy like Archbishop Mannix, then playing a prominent part in the fight against conscription, accepted the change in Russia as having freed the people from Czarist tyranny.

Reaction responded by slandering the Bolshevik leaders, misrepresenting their policies, linking them with "the German enemy", and clamping down on solidarity actions in Australia, and there were many sharp clashes with the authorities, and many gaolings. But the Labor movement remained united in its support of the Revolution and reacted sharply to the moves that developed to crush the new regime by economic blockade, and then armed intervention. And when the news came of the terrible toll in famine conditions of the years of war, counter-revolution and Allied military operations, relief activities on a wide scale were organised with the endorsement of the Labor Councils.

The October Revolution posed with a new sharpness issues of ideology and method that had plagued the Australian Labor movement since its birth, as it experimented with the single tax theories of Henry George, the co-operative ideas of Robert Owen, the utopian socialism of Bellamy and others, the syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the reformism of the Labor Party. Eagerly, now, many of the thinkers in the Labor movement turned to a re-examination of the writings of Marx, sought out the works of Lenin, and began seriously to study the new type of organised power expressed in the Soviets.

While there was revealed a wide range of opinion on the implications of the October Revolution, all agreed on its relevance for Australia, with an acceptance of the position that the success of the Bolsheviks constituted a challenge to the Australian Labor movement to adopt measures to give it a socialist orientation politically and greater militancy industrially. The prevailing mood among the Labor intellectuals was one of criticism and self-criticism!

Prominent in the debate were Ernest Lane, "Jack Cade" of the Brisbane Daily Standard, Maurice Blackburn, of Victoria, Arthur Rae, then editing The Labor News, Henry Boote, editor of The Australian Worker, and R. S. Ross, secretary of the Victorian Socialist Party.

The intellectuals of the Labor Party, generally speaking, came down on the side of the viewpoint that the experiences of the
Russian Revolution could not be applied in any literal sense to Australian conditions, that “an Australian way” must be found, along the lines of the One Big Union providing the backing for nationalisation measures through Parliament. Wrote Arthur Rae—“The issue is whether Labor is to be a middle class party with a platform of palliatives or a working class movement for complete emancipation and reconstruction on a socialist basis.”

While warmly supporting the Bolsheviks, Rae canvassed the possibilities of a non-violent development of socialism in Australia, claiming that “the universal ballot, plus industrial pressure, perhaps organised through soldiers’ and workmen’s councils, would open the way to peaceful, legal and complete change in ownership” (Labor News, 18/1/19).

The viewpoint that the Soviet system, while admirable for Russia, was not suitable for Australia, was most comprehensively developed by R. S. Ross, who, in the booklet Revolution in Russia and Australia wrote . . .

I have no doubts whatever as to the Soviet way being the way—and the right way—for Russia . . . but Australia needs neither violent revolution nor the Soviet system, but may march along evolutionary lines until the hour of capitalism’s collapse.—Then comes Sovietism, if required, then comes Socialism . . . making the industrial “immediate aim” the One Big Union and the political “immediate aim” Nationalisation, with the further aim of blendsing as the State on the day of the conquest of political power by the working class, with Lenins on hand to dare and do . . . One Big Unionism and the Soviet system are in essence as alike as two peas in a pod.

The impact of this type of thinking was shown at the 1919 conference of the Labor Party, which was noteworthy for a record number of successful motions advocating nationalisation in one form or another, including the taking over of the private banks and the imposition of a capital levy. Reflecting the impatience within the Labor Party to “get on with the job”, A. C. Willis, General Secretary of the Miners’ Federation, led a group of militant trade unions out of the conference to form “The Industrial Socialist Labor Party”, which set out to win support in other States around a program of rejecting parliamentary action in favor of setting up the “Industrial Republic of Australia”.

In October, 1920, the Federal Executive of the Labor Party reacted to the pressures with a move without precedent in the annals of the Labor Movement. Declaring that the time had arrived for “a bold move forward”, the Executive called upon all bona fide trade unions to meet in a conference “to see if they could find a surer and shorter road to the socialist objective”. The upshot was the adoption by the Labor Party of the objective of “the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange” and a detailed scheme of implementation patterned on the concept of the One Big Union (itself a product of the IWW). Labor leaders like Willis, E. J. Holloway (then President of the
Melbourne Trades Hall Council, later MHR), J. A. Beasley (then President of the Sydney Labor Council, later MHR), and R. J. Heffron (later Premier of New South Wales) spoke lyrically of the coming decade as “bringing about the transition of capitalism to socialism”.

But it was one thing to praise the Bolsheviks in Russia and quite another to apply revolutionary concepts to the Australian scene! Bitter divisions developed in the Labor Party on the important issue of “methods”, with the result that from the first position on the “fighting platform”, socialisation was relegated to the position of “ultimate objective”, and an elaborate scheme of militant activity around a “Council of Action” effectively sabotaged. The socialisation objective receded further and further into the background in Labor Party politics and, despite valiant efforts by key union officials like Willis, the One Big Union was still-born. However, current trends unleashed by the October Revolution did lead to the growth of trade union unity, culminating in the important unification of the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1927 — in the conditions actually a more realistic approach.

It was in the developments among the socialist groups that the October Revolution, in an historical sense, had its most significant impact. All sincere in their acceptance of the marxist content of the October Revolution, they were also divided on the important question of how to further the movement in Australia in the new situation. The important issue of the future orientation of the socialist groups was resolved with the formation and consolidation of the Communist Party . . . and there began the long and difficult struggle to achieve, operating from that essential base, one united working class movement accepting the theory and practice of scientific socialism.

With the influence of the October Revolution still deep-going, in spite of now sustained right wing counter activity, there were some important initial successes. On Willis’ casting vote as chairman, the NSW Conference of the Labor Party in 1923 voted in favor of affiliation of the Communist Party. Although backed by a majority of affiliated unionists, the decision was never accepted in practice by the right wing leaders of the Labor Party and the two parties went their separate ways, with, however, plenty of examples since then of united activity on vital immediate problems.

As a direct result of the October Revolution, proletarian internationalism reached its highest peak in Australia, as elsewhere, expressed in political and industrial links — “ground work” which contributed in a fundamental sense to the development of the Labor Movement internationally.
With the receding of the revolutionary wave in the 20s, socialist perspectives temporarily lost their immediacy in Australia, but in the many other urgent, vital issues that arose the impact of the Russian Revolution not only continued to be felt but, in a sense, more profoundly and more widely, as the life and death struggle with fascism developed.

The concept of peaceful co-existence upon which the new Soviet State had based its relations with capitalist states now gathered new meaning in the call for collective security to halt aggression and while, despite tremendous world-wide support, failing to prevent the Second World War, it did bring its dividends in Allied war time unity that resulted in the defeat of the aggressors.

In all this the people of Australia, and particularly the Labor movement, played their part. True, anti-communist "cold war" policies have since brought further imperialist aggression and conflicts and the ever-present threat of a new world war, but it is a measure of the significance of the historical events of October, 1917, that the Soviet Union today stands guard in defence of peace, with a literally decisive voice on the issue.

The sober fact is that despite the efforts of reactionary circles, their continued provocations, their periodical campaigns of slander, the support for the Soviet Union won in the October days and strengthened particularly in the course of the Second World War have never really been lost, the tremendous impact of the 1917 Revolution never eradicated, but, indeed, it has grown and deepened with the passage of years.

The basic task confronting communists that so clearly emerged in the discussions around the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 remains ... to assist the entire Labor movement towards an orientation of scientific socialism expressed in the "here and now" in the stand to be taken on current immediate questions like the effects of the new technology on living standards, war budgets, threats to national independence, and reactionary Asian wars ... in the process creating a movement ready and able to take advantage of objective conditions, as they develop, for decisive socialist achievement.

It is in this context that the concept of the Coalition of the Left is so significant and important. It is, in part, the application to the pressing needs of the present period of the profound socialist thinking in the days following October, 1917, that led to the Labor Party's socialisation objective, the formation of the Communist Party, and the moves for rapprochement between the Communist Party and the Labor Party.