The making of a communist:
an interview with Guido Baracchi

I wondered if you could tell me a little bit about your early life, your education and how you became a socialist.

Yes. Well my early life was a petty bourgeoise life. My father was an astronomer, my mother was the daughter of a wealthy wholesale butcher—and I grew up in this bourgeoise atmosphere. I went to kindergarten with Dick Cassidy. I went to Melbourne Grammar School when Stanley Bruce was the captain of the school and I was at Melbourne University when Menzies was in full flight there.

However, before I got very far with the Melbourne University I became a socialist. I started on this road in 1910 when for the first time in the Commonwealth the Labor Party won an Election, a federal election. I went to have a look at the election results posted on the newspaper offices fronts on a huge board. Both the Age and the Argus in Collins Street had these boards and that was the way you got the changes in the election results at that time. Well, I was standing outside the Argus office in Collins Street looking at the results and the results showed that the Labor Party, this new thing, had unmistakably won the election. In front of me I heard two people, a man and woman comment on the latest figures on the board and the woman said “Labor’s won—what happened” and the man said, in a horrified tone “Capital will leave the country”, and the woman equally horrified said, “Oh”. In subsequent years, in 1912 I had some socialistic writing in the Trinity College, Melbourne University, magazine Fleur de Lys, and in the following year I became one of the two editors of

_Australian Left Review_ publishes the first in its series of interviews with Australian socialist pioneers. This interview with Guido Baracchi was conducted by Alastair Davidson in 1964. It will be followed by a second interview dealing with Baracchi’s memories of the early years in the CPA and international communist movement. We hope to publish interviews with the late Sam Aarons and others in future issues.
the magazine and also secretary of their debating society. What they called the Dialectic Society.

In the last number of Fleur de Lys that I edited I had one socialist article of a very flippant character and one sort of you might say, liberal article on the habits of the young men in college in relation to all the young girls that you came in contact with. The combined effect of this was to create a fairly considerable row. As far as the Dialectic Society was concerned, they chose each year somebody that they called a Prelector, who was called on to give an address.

They used to try and get the Governor and about four other speakers to criticize his address. Well, they chose me as Prelector and after this I arranged a debate in which I invited Dr. Maloney a federal member in Melbourne, to participate as there were elections coming on, I've forgotten exactly what the subject was—but it was to do with the elections. Anyway the Warden of Trinity, a rigid conservative Ulster man—he wouldn't have a bar of Dr. Maloney on the Trinity College premises—declined to allow him, as soon as he heard of the invitation, to participate in the debate. However, I took a hall over in Parkville, just across the road, and arranged to have the debate there and invited Maloney again. He said he'd come.

**Did you have much knowledge of the writings of socialists at this time?**

I didn't have much knowledge of marxian socialism. The only knowledge I got was from the lecturer in political economy at the Melbourne University. They didn't have a chair at that time. It was a very poor subject and the lecturer wasn't a professional economist, he was a lawyer called Kelly and he gave a few (less than half hour talks) on Marx which really hadn't much to do with his subject at all. He sort of didn't know anything about it and all I really knew of Marx, beside his name, and one or two minor things, was this very misleading stuff I got from Kelly. On the other hand, the reading that brought me along the socialist road above all others was Shaw and Wells and it was via these two that I progressed towards socialism. Anyway the meeting for the Dialectic Society was a very good meeting. I just forgot there was a Labor woman candidate who came there and spoke as well for the party. But she was just a blow-in and she just gave a brief speech. Maloney said some words in support of her as well in his more general remarks.

This meeting was held in defiance in a way of the Warden outside the precincts of the college. It created a stink too like
the magazine had. The upshot of all this was that at the end of the year Trinity College Social Club held a special meeting and a vote of censure was moved on me for producing an issue of *Fleur de Lys* out of harmony with the tone of the college. This resolution was duly carried.

Well at the very end of the year I got advice from the Law Professor at the Melbourne University, an English liberal of the old school and he said, "Look, I'd get out of this for a little while. Why don't you, if you could manage it, go over to London School of Economics and do a short course there, say a three months course even". And he said, "I know the director, Pember Reeves, who was once in New Zealand, very well and I'll give you a letter to him."

Well I was able to go there and I jumped at this idea. Getting over there I came in contact with the Fabian socialists right away. Graham Wallace was lecturing on public administration, Sidney Webb would sometimes come down there and talk. I once participated in a debate there in which Bernard Shaw took part. There was quite a strong Fabian socialist influence.

**You had not heard of Lenin or Trotsky at all.**

No. I had not heard of Lenin or Trotsky at all. I'd heard of a number of other European socialists but the Russian socialists I had not heard of at all. I might just have heard of Plekanov. I'd heard of Kautsky. I'd heard of Jaures. I'd actually heard Jaures speak.

**Before he was assassinated?**

Yes. He was killed just on the outbreak of the war. I left Australia at the very end of 1913 and on the way to England I went through Paris and there I heard Jaures speak. I heard another quite famous and very different sort of speaker speak at that time, rather lecture, and that was Bergson.

Well then the period I was in England, between the end of the year and the outbreak of the war I came across other influences. I came across the socialists and their printed paper the *New Age* and a man called Orage was the editor.

This *New Age* and its guild socialism, National Guild they preferred to call it, took me away from the Shaw-Wells and Fabian Socialism.

There were various ideas about the state's role — the unions were going to look after the producers and the state was, in some period going to be the representative of the consumers.
Well anyway this partnership of state and union was brilliantly expounded in the New Age. It got me in quite a bit, along with one or two other Australians at the time—Vance Palmer was one of them, and Palmer knew these New Age writers quite well and there were others too, there was a man called Sinclair who was lecturing English at Melbourne University. He was a radical parson and he ran a paper called Fellowship where for a while he propagated guild socialism. Anyway I had these Fabian influences and that's what you could class the New Statesman, the first number of which appeared in 1914. I can remember running around to their offices to get the first number of the New Statesman.

This paper had considerable interest for me. But I much preferred the guild socialism of the New Age, to the more Fabian type of socialism of the New Statesman.

That was about the condition I was in when I left England about a month before the war and went to the continent on the way back to Australia.

I went through Germany to Vienna and I was in Vienna a fortnight before the war broke out and I would have been there when it did break out, except for the fact that I had an uncle in Italy who had some holidays. He lived in Rome and he asked me to come down before my ship was going and spend time with him, and then go on to Australia. So I got out of Vienna in time to avoid the outbreak of war while I was there and I left Italy from Naples on the last day of July—perhaps the 1st of August 1914.

Going through Germany and Vienna I hadn't the faintest idea that we were on the verge of the First World War. Not the faintest. Although I was sufficient of a socialist to have predicted it was coming, the actuality of the thing got me completely unaware. Actually the ship I was on entered the Red Sea when the war broke out.

I spent time on the boat in preparing the Prelection. I decided to give it on the subject of guild socialism, which was relatively unknown in Australia at that time. I called the lecture 'The Last Word in Socialism'. It was a dubious sort of a title in a way.

I had in the preparatory statement made a few remarks slightly, I wouldn't say adverse, to the war, but not calculated to stimulate recruiting. Then I got onto the general question of Guild socialism, but the opening remarks were along the lines of being more
interested in peace organisation than war organisation. They might be said to be the beginning of my anti-war developments.

You haven’t mentioned any socialist among your acquaintances. You didn’t know people like Bob Ross . . . ?

I knew Bob Ross very well, but afterwards. At this time, 1914, I didn’t know many socialists in Australia outside academic circles. There was Maloney, I got hold of him. He might be called a socialist, but I got hold of him because he was Labor member for Melbourne. But people like Bob Ross I only met them a very few years after that. My father on the other hand knew Bob Ross quite well, because he used, from time to time to lecture on astronomy at the Hall of the Victorian Socialist Party in Exhibition Street and he did say that he did quite a bit of lecturing for various bodies on astronomy, talks on the moon and so on, and he said that the best audience that he had in Victoria was that audience, Bob Ross’s party.

He used to tell me about the Socialist Hall and the socialists there, but I didn’t know them personally at all until later.

When did you become an organised member of the party?

Just a few years later, in the latter part of 1914 when I gave this Prelection address. This happened as a kind of evolution, natural for me during the war. By 1916 I’d got considerably hostile to a lot of things in connection with the war. The conscription referendum came on at the end of 1916. I did in an organised way play a very prominent part in that. I was still more or less working in the university circles, but I did get very hostile to conscription. At the end of 1915 I had already met a socialist woman and become close friends with her. That was Katharine Susannah Prichard.

I was progressing towards the organised stage and by 1917 I was beginning to hot up.

At that time in the Melbourne University the principal debating society for the students was the Historical Society. They used to meet in the Biology Theatre. Just outside the theatre was the university lake, now only a memory. Bob Menzies was quite active in the Historical Society where the debates took place. A professor was quite active too. He was often in the chair. He was anti-catholic and used to get the goats of a number of liberal catholics like Harry Minogue, who was also a guild socialist, and Higgins was active in this society.

You knew him well?
Oh very well, I was on the editorial board on the M.U.M. with him. In the beginning of 1917, along with Higgins and Minogue I was appointed onto the editorial board of the M.U.M. The editor was a girl, who was not on the left at all, but always used to give the left a pretty good go.

This magazine and the Historical Society combined got me further on the socialist path.

In the Historical Society I was already taking a class struggle line and I had Higgins, who later became a communist, getting up and saying that he thought that that was a hopeless way of looking at things.

**How did you become committed to the idea of class struggle. What brought you to this—had you read something . . .?**

I had heard of it in a negative kind of way from people like Wells and I'd read a few pamphlets, socialist pamphlets and even the *Communist Manifesto* by this time. Although I hadn't swallowed the *Communist Manifesto* whole—I was still impressed by the idea by the history of class struggles and I spoke along these lines in the Historical Society.

**Were you reading law at that time?**

Yes at that time I was reading arts and law.

In this society I developed a bit further along class struggle lines. Every magazine I had anything to do with seemed to get into trouble and the M.U.M. wasn’t an exception. In it I had the first of a series of three articles (the other two never appeared) on Guild Socialism. I also had a book review which was a very uninhibited sling-off at a number of professors, especially the Anatomy Professor, Dickie Barrie who had produced in war time a symposium of views, "*The Newer Imperialism*" the book was called. I had a terrible go-in at this and I always felt that although I got into trouble officially about something else in the magazine, that it was this particular thing that got the proff's goat. I copped it more for that than the other thing.

However, I began this series of articles on Guild Socialism just in the same way as I had begun the Prelection address with a reference to the war. The first sentence in the article was, "The War Is Not Primarily Our Affair." This created a terrible stink. I got carpeted by the Professorial Board. There was a great flow of letters to the press on the subject in which at one stage I joined in and ended up by saying in this letter that I would be
better convinced of the patriotism of the students if more of them enlisted and the patriotism of the professors if they took up knitting socks. This sort of thing got me in worse than ever of course and finally it got to such a stage that the hostile overwhelming majority of students decided they were going to dunk me in the lake.

They chose the night when I had to open a debate at the Historical Society, which as I said bordered the university lake. I was informed what was going to happen but I couldn't get out of it. When I got fairly near the lake there were at least a couple of hundred students blocking the way and I had to walk through them. I did walk through them. I got as far as the Biology Theatre and they were a bit slow. I walked up the steps and got nearly as far as the top of the stairs and if I had got into the auditorium I would have been alright. But they suddenly realised that they were letting the quarry slip through their fingers and then came the last minute rush to grab me just about on the top step and hauled me down and stuck me on top of one of the two great blocks of stone on either side to the entrance to the theatre and asked me what I had to say for myself. However, they finally pulled me off this and shoved me towards the lake. It was the middle of winter and they got to the edge of the lake and then they gave me a mighty push. If they'd have wet their own feet they would have done a better job of me. Then I had to go back to the Historical Society theatre and open up the debate.

I was dripping wet and I got some sympathy and a cold out of it too and that was pushing me further along the socialist road.

Just one point, Menzies wasn’t there that night. He wasn’t in the theatre and he wasn’t in the crowd outside. Higgins somewhere or other had written that Menzies was there but I’m quite confident he wasn’t there. I had an excellent view of the crowd outside I would have spotted him in a moment. I am sure that he was not there. Also he said at the time, “I detest Mr. Baracchi’s views but I think that he ought to be allowed to express them” which was pretty good from him in wartime.

There was great hostility in the university among university students to people who were against the war?

There was, yes there was a very very great hostility. There was on the other hand of course a minority, a small minority, who were not against the war, but would like everyone to have a free go on the subject. But the great majority were bitterly hostile to any sort of criticism on anything connected with the war at all.