The making of a communist: an interview with Guido Baracchi

Could you tell us something about works of Lenin that were available in Australia in those early days?

Up till the time I was expelled from the Communist Party at the end of 1925, I hadn’t read *What Is To Be Done* at all and I don’t know anyone who would have read it unless it was a Russian reading it in a Russian edition. We got our Leninism from *The State and Revolution*. I can remember a VSP man called Hoskins. He wrote under the name of “Dogmatist”. He wrote a pamphlet *The Materialist Conception of History*. It was a very famous little pamphlet in its sphere and in its time — an able bit of work in its way. It was from this, from *The Proletarian Revolution* and the *Renegade Kautsky* and *Left Wing Communism* a little bit later that we got our Leninism.

And you also read, after the beginning of 1919, the New Communist Manifesto; did people take great notice of the 21 points in 1919?

Yes, there was quite a lot of argument about those. In the VSP, for instance, there were people who reckoned they were too tough altogether and were more inclined to accept the British ILP attitude to the 21 points. But they were discussed quite a lot.

And am I correct when I say that the Melbourne Branch of the Communist Party was established some time between 23rd and 28th November . . . . ‘A Communist Party of Australia was formed by Baracchi and Laidler in Parer’s Hotel Melbourne’ . . . . in this correct?

This is the second part of an interview with Guido Baracchi conducted by Alastair Davidson in 1964. The first part appeared in *ALR* No. 31.
You tell me. They actually established the Melbourne Branch of the party at the request of the United Conference of 30th October 1920. This party advised members of the VSP to form a Communist Party of Victoria but retain membership in the VSP.

I've seen the Communist Party minute book. There was an original book which ran from 1920 into the middle of 1921 and I have read it. It's in the Hancock papers.

Is it? It would be more or less correct. The Conference that was held in November 1920 had two delegates who came from Melbourne — C. W. Baker and myself.

He still lives up here in New South Head Road, is that correct?

I knew he lived somewhere in NSW and I saw him before I went to Europe in 1955. That was the last time I saw him. He was working in Edel's Music Shop at that time; I went into that shop and there he was. He said, "Well, we started something in 1920".

Was he an American?

Well, he had all the manner of a Yankee salesman — not the present ones, but an old time one. I think he must have been in America, and he had a sort of Yankeefied method of speaking. But I couldn't say that he was an American. About his propaganda, too — of course the American socialist influence here was very great. There was such a vast flow of books and pamphlets that came from Charles Kerr in particular. As to whether he was originally from America, whether he had been in America, I don't know. He came to the Communist Party through the Rationalist movement, of course.

About this question of the two delegates that went to the foundation conference in November 1920, Baker and I, we were sent by these Melbourne communists and I definitely think there was a meeting in Parer's Hotel. Besides Laidler and me, there were a number of others. Baker would certainly be one, and Charlie France would be one, and Maruschak would be in it, and Frank Stevens would be in it. Of the four tendencies I mentioned, I think that the ASP tendency would not be represented there; although there would be Russians there, I don't think any organised Russian group was represented.

They were all expelled from the VSP, were they?

Yes. But I think the date would be round about right. It's pretty
vague on my part, but I wouldn't dream of denying it. The time seems right.

You and Baker came to Sydney and stayed here with the Proletarian? It became the official journal?

It did afterwards. Baker and I came to Sydney and went back to Melbourne immediately after the conference to report to the Melbourne group what had been done. A subsequent conference was held in the ASP Hall, corner of Liverpool and Pitt Streets. We went back at Xmas and we stayed a couple of nights in the Burlington Hotel. Plenty of cockroaches. So many that you couldn't sleep for them — the cockroaches and Baker's cough. But we went back once and reported. The Proletarian was still running up to June. The last number here was in June 1921. At this time I went to New Zealand. Baker, just when I don't know, went to Sydney and Laidler stopped publishing the Proletarian. After an interval Baker brought it out in Sydney. I was not in Sydney at the time the Proletarian started. I was actually overseas when I got the first number of the Proletarian from Baker from Sydney.

You went overseas in 1921?

In June 1921 I left for New Zealand. I was in New Zealand until towards the end of 1921. I came back to Sydney for a very brief time and then, at either the end of 1921 or at the beginning of 1922, I went to England.

And you were at that time an active member of the Communist Party of Australia?

I was a member of the CPA from the time it began until I became a member of the British Communist Party. I was a member of the Australian Communist Party up till the time I left Australia and I was considered a member even though I was out of the country and not paying dues. When I got to England, I was there for a brief time and then I went to Germany.

This was in 1922?

I was in Germany for the remainder of 1922 and all 1923. I was a member of the German Communist Party during that time.

You took part in the 1923 Communist Party rising in Germany?

No. I took part in the activities of the CP but the only place where the rising occurred was in Hamburg and I was in Berlin.
But I was editor, with an Englishman called Clark, who had been a conscientious objector during the war and was three years in gaol. Clark and I were editors on the English edition of the three-language paper **International Press Correspondence**. During the rest of '22 and '23 Clark and I were editing the English edition of **I.P.C.** I was a member of the Berlin District of the CP. I used to attend their meetings and demonstrations, and marched with them when Borofsky was assassinated in Switzerland. His body was brought to Berlin. I heard Radek speak at that funeral memorial in the rain and I volunteered from our office to participate in any action that occurred in Berlin. We were called together one day in the office and were asked would we volunteer for this action, and I said I'd volunteer and ‘What do we have to do?’ They laughed and said ‘When you are told, get out in the street and fire’. I said ‘With what?’ There were plenty of demonstrations and I had been chased out of a square and down a side street by the police; there were a few tanks around too. It was called off at the last minute, but the message didn't get to Hamburg and the insurrection occurred there.

**Were you influenced greatly by any of the German Communists?**

I knew Paul Levi, not very well, though I knew all his work. I knew his background and I was very friendly with a very intelligent group of his young student supporters who were expelled from the CP at the same time he was. I used to foregather with them very frequently at night in a well-known cafe in the Unter den Linden, called Cafe Bar. They told me an immense amount about Paul Levi, his attachment to Rosa Luxemburg and her work. I met Levi a few times before he either suicided or accidentally died by toppling out of a window in Berlin.

I never met Thalheimer but I heard him speak. I attended a German CP conference in Leipzig in 1923 and Thalheimer spoke there. The other, less theoretical, leader of the CP at that time was Brandler.

**He was expelled later in 1927?**

That's right. I heard Fisher and Maslov speak at this conference, and Clara Zetkin. I heard her speak both at the Congress and in Moscow later.

**Did they influence you in any way? Were they great or medium or just fair?**

I admired Thalheimer's theoretical work very much. He wrote a book on Dialectical Materialism — I don't know whether you know
it. It was delivered in Moscow in the form of lectures to Oriental students — Chinese and Indian students — and I think it was a splendid piece of work. One of the best books of its kind that had ever been written. He was certainly an extremely able theorist. Then there were other theorists like Karl Korsch, who was subsequently expelled, and I knew also that famous character Willi Munzenburg.

**He was the one who ran the League Against Imperialism?**

Yes, and he became the International Secretary of the Workers' International Relief. I was subsequently the Australian rep. when I came back to Australia in 1924, I was secretary of the Workers' International Relief here. At this time it was trying to collect money for German workers who were having a tough time. Munzenburg was a magnificent organiser.

Have you read the article by Carew-Hunt on Munzenburg in St. Anthony's Papers, No. 9?

No, I haven't.

He got most of his information from Buber-Neummann. But what I wanted to ask you in connection with the Workers' International Relief is about Lane's book — Reminiscences of a Rebel, Dawn to Dusk. He mentions a man he calls a rep. of the Communist International who had come to Australia on behalf of the Workers' International Relief.

It was a man called Hirscovici. He was here when I got back to Australia. He subsequently went back to Russia again. His Russian name was Gorkin and he'd started the WIR here and turned it over to me. I very much doubt whether he was a rep. Since he was a Russian and a Communist, I did not doubt for a minute that he was working for the Communist International in Australia, but I doubt whether he was a representative of the Comintern. I doubt if they would have had as their rep. the same man who was doing this work on the WIR.

In 1925 Latham, when he was speaking in the House of Representatives — and I have never been able to establish whether this is true or not — said that the Australian Communist Party had a rep. at the Comintern called Montefiore. I have never got this from Communist sources.

This rings a bell somewhere with me and I can remember Christian Jollie Smith speaking about Montefiore, but I never know of him...
in 1924 and 1925 when I was on the Central Executive of the CPA, I never knew of him as having such a position.

I'm of the opinion that this is incorrect — he might have been an Australian who was in Moscow.

That happened with more than one. It happened with Freeman and then Earsman was in Moscow and Garden was in Moscow.

I received a letter from Earsman. He died last year. It was actually to Tom Barker, but I received a copy of it. It was about what he did when he went back to Russia in 1922 and '23.

Did that letter come from South Australia?

No, it was written from Edinburgh. It was written to Tom Barker and Barker sent me a copy.

Did you ever lend it to Rawlings?

No.

Why I am asking this is that Rawlings got from somebody, I'm not quite clear as to whether he got it from somebody in SA, this letter or a copy of it and he said it was from Earsman. Rawlings showed me the letter. It was most interesting. Earsman was quite advanced then. When the letter came he was the Secretary or President of the Labor Party. He was a Warden during the war and received an OBE for his work as such. He was one of the founders of the Edinburgh Festival. Quite extraordinary. He was still very active and hale and hearty, but at least he retained a leading position in the Labor Party.

He was quite well educated, wasn't he? He might have been self-educated, but he was quite well read.

He was an engineer. He was a member of the AEU and a very active member, and he had a strong syndicalist bent before he joined up with the communist movement. He was interested in Guild Socialism, too. He liked to gather round intellectuals or semi-intellectual people like Maurice Blackburn, myself, Sinclair and the fellowship. We started the Labor College the three of us. We started it in the Trades Hall in 1917. He was close friends with Christian Jollie Smith over here in the Communist Party, too. But he read a bit, he read quite a lot of books on Bakunin. He read Bakunin as distinct from Marx. His reading of Marxism was very slight. He wasn't an intellectual; he was,
I think, more or less self-educated. You might say, to use a very corny phrase, he wasn't a university type at all. But he picked up in a practical sort of way bits of knowledge from all over the place in the course of his activities and, in preparing a talk or something like that, he'd read something. But he certainly wasn't a very big reader.

He was the dominant personality in the very early party, wasn't he? Or was Garden; it was either he or Garden?

Yes. Well, he was the Secretary and he came over from Melbourne to Sydney and he gave the drive to the formation of the Communist Party so far as the inner group of the party was concerned. He couldn't last too long in harness with Garden, without there being some differences arising between them. Garden with his, you might say, more opportunist trade union practitioner's attitude, as distinct from that of Earsman, who concentrated on the formation of the Communist Party.

He formed the NSW Labor College here and he got a man who was a great reader. That was Moses Baritz. He couldn't quite take Moses' erudition and Earsman's drive; they couldn't get along together, they fell out badly. On the other hand, Earsman could gather intellectuals around him, like Christian Jollie Smith. Earsman, you might say, preceded Garden as the leading force in the formation of the Communist Party here, but Garden fairly soon succeeded him.

Earsman seemed to favor at this stage an educatory and Australian Socialist Party type of role and believed the role of socialists in Australia should be to educate the workers. This seems to be expressed in his writing, in the Labor College, etc. However, the party seems to have become an organisation for boring from within the ALP, which seems to suggest that Garden had the greater lead.

The only thing I would cavil at is the ASP bit. The ASP would not have a bar of him. They regarded him as a syndicalist rather than a communist, you know. But for the rest, I think that what you say is pretty right.