Bill Parkinson

Bill Parkinson, who recently retired as General President of the Miners' Federation and as member of the National Committee of the Communist Party of Australia, talks to Theo Moody of his life and work and of his hopes for the future of the working-class movement.

IN 1847, the boy William Parkinson began work in the coal mines in Durham, north-east England. He was seven. His father, a miner, as his father had been before him, carried the lad to and from the pits each day on his back. It was in the nature of things in coal-mining Durham that, when William grew up, his son and, later, his grandson, also William, should go to work in the mines.

"The cottage where I was born on November 15, 1907, was only a stone's throw from the pits and, since I came from a family of miners (he was the fifth-generation miner) what else should I do?" says Bill Parkinson, who retired in November last after 13 years as General President of the Miners' Federation of Australia.

Times, however, were slightly more enlightened when the younger Bill entered the mines. He was twice the age at which his grandfather had started—14, then and now the minimum age in Britain at which pit boys could start work. (In Australia it is 16).

There were other opportunities, too, for young people. Young Bill was something of a football genius, and he was given full opportunity to make use of it. In 1919, when he was 12, he played international schoolboy football against Scotland, and against Wales and Scotland in 1920, becoming the first schoolboy in England to win three international caps. "Schoolboy football in those days had as big a following as the senior grades," says Bill. "When I played for England against Scotland at Stamford Bridge in 1920, there was a crowd of 42,000."

In 1924, the mining Parkinsons turned their backs on sooty old Durham and its mines for what seemed the brighter prospects of
the mines of Australia, and soon two generations—the father, Bill and his brother Jack—were carrying on the family coal mining tradition at Mt. Keira, on the south coast of New South Wales. (When Bill's father retired on a miner's pension he had spent 52 years in the mines "at the point of the pick").

Bill found that work in the mines in Australia was just as tough as back in England (he calls mining "the dirtiest, most arduous and probably the most dangerous work anywhere") and the owners just as greedy and as careless for the welfare of the miners. That fact, and the inspiring militancy of the Australian miners and their Federation in the constant struggle for better wages and working conditions nurtured the political and industrial education of Bill Parkinson—an education that carried him eventually to leadership of the Federation, and to recognition by both workers and employers as one of Australia's most outstanding trade union administrators, advocates and orators. (As an orator Bill Parkinson is a most impressive platform figure. Short, solidly built, with a face as rough-hewn as you'd expect a miner's to be, he is no thunderer; his calm reasoning as much as his eloquence is his strength).

Soon Bill was deeply involved in union activities. In 1926 he left Mt. Keira for a spell in the northern coal fields, but he returned to the south, and from 1930 to 1937, working in the Burragorang Valley, he was Secretary of the Nattai-Bulli Miners' Lodge. In 1937 Bill Parkinson returned to Mt. Keira and was there until 1947 when he was elected President of the Southern District of the Miners' Federation. It was in these years that Bill Parkinson's political education grew apace.

Bill was a Labor man, as his family had always been. "Until 1938 I had always voted straight Labor," Bill says. "It was about this time the Hughes-Evans group formed the left-wing State Labor Party in New South Wales and I was so impressed by their policies that, in the 1939-40 State elections I voted for their candidate, Bill Frame.

"About this time I was becoming interested in Socialism, too. It was a two-mile walk to the Mt. Keira mine and I used to make it each day with a bloke named Jack Smith, an old socialist. He and I would argue all the way about politics, about Hitler and Stalin and the war he said was coming. I had known there were Communists in the Federation, but it hadn't concerned me very much. Now I was becoming really interested. Then one day Jack Smith handed me the booklet, The Socialist Sixth of the World, about the Soviet Union, by the Dean of Canterbury, the Rev.
Hewlett Johnson. I read it and re-read it, I was so impressed. I suppose you could call that the turning point.” In 1943 Bill Parkinson applied for and was admitted to membership of the Communist Party, “and, before I knew where I was, I was selling 43 Tribunes a week at Keira and had recruited another nine blokes to the Party.”

It was as a well-known and highly-respected Communist that Bill Parkinson was elected Southern District President of the Federation in 1947, and General President in 1954, succeeding the late Idris Williams. He held the position unopposed until his retirement in November. He was also General Vice-President for all except one year from 1947 to 1954, and for 14 years a member of the Miners’ Pensions Tribunal.

The mining industry has always been a turbulent one. The mineowner, notoriously a greedy employer, has always fought tenaciously against any improvement in miners’ wages or conditions. But the last 20 years, as turbulent as any in the history of the industry, have been years of great victories for the miners; because of the vigilance and unity of the leadership and the rank-and-file, the great technological changes in the industry, the mechanisation, have been accompanied by important gains for the miners.

But they have not been won without cost. In the 1949 general strike—which resulted in the miners winning long service leave payments—Bill Parkinson, then Southern District President, was one of five miners’ leaders jailed (he got six weeks for contempt of the Arbitration Court). The others were General President Idris Williams, General Secretary George Grant, Western District Secretary Jock King and Southern District Secretary Maurice Fitzgibbon.

Now, on his retirement, Bill Parkinson recalls some other notable events—tragedies, victories, setbacks—of those years:

The 1947 dust demonstrations, when 2,200 miners, their wives and retired miners demonstrated in Sydney against this menace, which was resulting in 10 per cent of South Coast miners coughing their lungs out every year. The improved conditions won by this demonstration are now known to every dusted mineworker in New South Wales.

The 28-day stay-in strike following closure of the Glen Davis mine. This strike resulted in workers for the first time in Australia receiving equity and alternative employment.
A tremendous change took place in the industry in 1954 with the Federation finally agreeing to extraction of pillar coal by mechanisation. This year also saw the beginning of heavy retrenchments among mineworkers and, for the next four years the Federation was constantly engaged in struggle to lessen its impact. This long struggle culminated in the massive Town Hall rally in Sydney, which led to the Automation Inquiry, and the Federation's policy of full employment compelled State and Federal Governments to release money for public works to absorb retrenched miners.

The miners in 1960 lost out in the protracted court hearing of their claim for a 35-hour week, but the extra week's annual leave granted gave what had been a miners' dream for many years — three holiday periods in each working year*—breaking the monotony that mineworkers are called on to endure as a result of being cut off from fresh air and sunlight for a quarter of their working lives.

1961 saw an event that brought pride to every member of the Federation—the 700-mile motorcade of Queensland miners from Collinsville to Brisbane in protest against the State Government's action in closing the Collinsville State Mine.

In 1966 the Federation was able to have the Long Service Leave Award substantially amended. As a result miners today have what are probably the best long service leave provisions among Australian workers. In the years since then the Federation was able to win substantial improvements in Miners' Pensions.

There were mine tragedies in those years, too: 1954 was the year of the Collinsville disaster when carbon dioxide claimed seven lives. It was only chance that it was not 107. In the same year carbon dioxide killed two miners at Helensburgh. 1965 recorded the death of four miners in the Bulli disaster and 1966 took the lives of five men at Wyee.

Of these and earlier tragedies, Bill Parkinson says: "The undeniable fact is that the coalmining industry, per capita, is the third largest killer in Australia, the only causes of death greater than fatal accidents in the mining industry being heart disease and associated conditions and all forms of malignant cancer."

Bill Parkinson says of what he believes to be tasks still ahead of the Miners' Federation:

"Number One on the list is the need for greater activity against the criminal war in Vietnam. I am convinced the organised trade

* Three weeks at Christmas, one week at Easter and one week in August-September school holidays.
union movement could play a much more important role to bring about an end to this war. Miners, like many other workers, have never confined themselves to narrow self interest and they know that wider political issues affect their lives. The Vietnam war is being paid for in many ways and it carries in it the risk of atomic war which could lead to world-wide destruction.

"Second task is the shorter working week, yet to be achieved.

"Third is the amalgamation of unions with... the coalmining industry. I believe this to be imperative.

"Fourth is finalisation of the mineworkers' pension scheme.

"Last, but not least is the need to develop a greater social consciousness of the tremendous threat that monopoly capitalism means to the Australian people and the international working class—and the fact that socialism is the only answer. Unity within the working class can and will determine this issue in favor of the working class."

Indeed, Bill Parkinson is convinced that unity of all forces of the left is the supreme need of the day. Of all his achievements as President of the Miners' Federation, Bill Parkinson is proudest of all that he has left it completely united — a condition that did not exist when he took over; the bitter political differences in the leadership then were seeping down to the rank and file. That has changed so much that, of his association with Federation General Secretary Bill Mahon (who has since died), Bill was able to say:

"I think our close, happy and successful association has proved conclusively that difference in party affiliations proves no obstacle when two men, charged with responsibility, are prepared to sit down and work at problems of their membership in a manner of unity, complete co-operation, trust and sincerity, one with the other, in the interests primarily of our members but at all times, generally, of the working class."

Bill Parkinson says: "The thing is to sit down and talk it over and try to see and understand the other bloke's point of view. My grandmother in England was something of a philosopher. She used to say to me: 'Well, now, there's a little bit of good in the worst of us and a little bit of bad in us all.' It is in that belief that I have tried to operate within the Miners' Federation."