

THE 1949 COAL STRIKE

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The 1949 coal strike was an event of wide-ranging significance in the post-war history of Australia. In the thirty years since, a great deal has been said and written about the causes, conduct and outcome of the strike, and most analysts appear to agree that the economic claims of the miners were well founded; many of the analysts in turn agree that the miners were justified in taking strike action. But a fuller picture has emerged with the publication of Phillip Deery's **Labour in Conflict: The 1949 Coal Strike**, a selection of documents linked by the editor's commentary.*

The fourteen points adopted by the National Convention of the Miners' Federation in August 1948 were merged into four major demands: long-service leave, a 35-hour week, a thirty-shillings-weekly wage increase and the provision of pit and town amenities. In the prolonged negotiations between the miners, coal owners, Joint Coal Board, and the Coal Industry Tribunal, the owners rejected the 35-hour-week claim, made long-service leave conditional on odious, provocative conditions, proposed

incentive payments instead of a wage increase and wanted the elimination of the compulsory retirement age of sixty years.

In the final round of negotiations — for which the miners had agreed to postpone their mass meetings from June 2 to June 16 — the owners rejected the long-service leave claim. The Coal Industry Tribunal (Gallagher) was to arbitrate on this claim but withheld his judgement when the Miners' Central Council decided to proceed with aggregate meetings on June 16. Strike action may still have been avoided or delayed but for the decision of the NSW Combined Colliery Proprietors Association — endorsed by Gallagher — to file an application restraining employees from striking. (This application was aimed at the prosecution of union leaders in the event of a strike.) The aggregate meetings of the miners voted ten to one in favour of strike action and the strike began on June 27.

This strike of the miners for their economic claims was not a 'communist plot'. It stemmed from the miners' real needs and

was undertaken on their own decision. Apart from some disagreement about whether the pre-strike negotiations should have been continued further, the economic core of the miners' decision to strike is not much in question. Controversy has centred on Communist Party aims and influence in relation to the course of the strike: the efforts to 'politicise' the strike and use it in warfare against reformism and against the Labor government. It was this political approach, it is argued, which prolonged the strike beyond the point at which it should have terminated if the economic aims of the miners had been the only consideration.

Responsibility for this Communist Party political line as it relates to the 1949 coal strike has generally been attributed to me. For example, Ralph Gibson, in his book *My Years in the Communist Party* (1966), expressed the accepted view:

But, in spite of all difficulties, more could and should have been done to find a broad basis for waging the struggle. The Communist Party (though it was far from having a majority of members on the Miners' Federation Central Council or on the Combined Mining Unions Council which conducted the struggle) could have assisted with better advice had this not been the period of the 'Left line' when comrades Blake and Henry had a majority position in the Central Committee Secretariat of the Party. Their line may be judged from the fact that they proclaimed the final defeat as a 'great working class victory' because the workers 'secured in this struggle invaluable lessons on the true role of Labor governments'. (This verdict on the miners' strike — significantly — has recently been defended by E. F. Hill.) (p. 149.)

In this connection, dealing with the background to the actual strike, Phillip Deery quotes the stenographic report of a speech made by J. D. Blake to a Political Committee meeting of the CPA, March 15, 1946 (that is more than three years before the coal strike). An extract conveys its main content:

We set ourselves, it seems to me, the objective of developing and leading the struggle of the workers against the employing class; ...we set ourselves the objective of teaching the masses of the Labor Party, the workers, by their own experience in the struggle, the worthlessness of their social democratic leaders. In other words of winning the masses away from their adherence to

social democracy, of winning them to our position, the revolutionary position of the Communist Party. (Deery, p. 31.)

All members of the Committee rejected Blake's analysis. As Deery says: "L. Sharkey accused him of 'left sectarianism', R. Dixon in a lengthy criticism suggested he should 'have a refresher' of Lenin's *Left Wing Communism*...." (Deery, p. 31.)

This particular discussion arose out of the condemnation by the Political Committee of a sentence in a draft resolution written by me for an impending (1946) Victorian State Conference of the Party. The sentence in question (eliminated by the Political Committee) read: "The workers will gain from Labor governments, as from other governments, only that for which they are prepared to unite, organise, and fight". My line of thinking was directed against the wartime wage pegging regulations which the Chifley government continued to maintain in force. (The Melbourne public transport strike towards the end of 1946 made the first breach in wage pegging. The more prolonged Victorian metalworkers strike, which immediately followed, effectively ended the wage freeze.)

The documents provide a picture of the political and industrial situation before the coal strike. In his speech to the 15th National Congress of the CPA in May 1948, R. Dixon said:

The strike wave is not only beginning to embrace new sections of the working class and drawing them into active political life, but is also resulting in exposing the role of the capitalist state, the Labor Party and reformist leaders and is opening the way for the passing of the masses to the side of the Communist Party.... In spite of the fact that the political nature of the strike(s) will tend to increase, there are strikes led by reformists and by some Communist trade union officials which are conducted as purely economic strikes and this is most unsatisfactory.... If it is to play the leading role in this struggle, the working class must be drawn into action in the struggle against capitalism on a broader scale. The Labor Party reformist betrayers must be isolated and the Communist Party brought forward as the organiser of the people's struggle against reaction.... Comrade Sharkey spoke about the length and bitterness of the Queensland strike and said we must expect more struggles of this nature in the future.... The Queensland rail strike gives an indication

of the nature of future strike struggles. The strike commenced around economic demands but became, in the course of the struggle, a strike of vast political implications. The Labour Government emerged as the chief strikebreaker for the bourgeoisie.

.... The struggles that face the Party and the working class, we can expect, will assume great political importance. The capitalist state machine will be swung into action against the workers, reactionary laws will be used, the trade unions and the Communist Party will be attacked and this will tend to emphasize the political characteristics of the strikes. (Deery, pp. 36-37. Originally in *Communist Review*, June 1948, pp. 165-67.)

That this was directly linked to the situation in the coal industry was shown in the speech of Edgar Ross to the same Congress:

We recognise the truth of what comrade Dixon told us at the discussion yesterday [a fraction meeting of communists drawn from the Miner' Federation, P.D.], that coal may well be the key to the Party's fight against reaction, that coal is a weapon, and that we must see that it is our weapon in ensuring that the mining union plays a more and more decisive role in the big issues, against crisis and war, the defeat of reaction.... (Deery, p. 38.)

L. Sharkey (who became General Secretary at this Congress) told the delegates that:

The time has come when we must take a bolder political stand in the trade unions.... The question of the relation of the trade unions to the Labor Party has been raised. There is, or was, a conception in our Party that this is the way to build the United Front. To affiliate the trade unions to the reformist party obviously strengthens reformist ideology and leads to the belief that the ALP is the true party of the workers....it is clear that we cannot pursue a policy that strengthens the reformist grip over the trade union masses. (Deery, p. 35.)

A federal election was due at the end of 1949 and this was the subject of the main report given by R. Dixon to a meeting of the CPA Central Committee in February 1949; in part, he said:

The Communist Party is entering the election campaign in a very big way, as the working class alternative to the other parties. In the 1943 election our slogan was for the return of the Labour Government and the election of communists. That was during the people's war. In 1946 our slogan was for the

defeat of the Liberal and Country parties and the election of communists. In this election our basic slogan must be the election of communists to Parliament and the organisation of the people to struggle for the programme of the Communist Party.

We are entering the federal elections with 76 candidates. Such a large team was dictated by the political situation confronting us, a situation which makes it necessary to present the Communist Party as the real alternative to the present government.

.... we must combat the theory that the Labour Government is the lesser evil to a Liberal or Country Party Government.... We lose thousands of votes in elections because of the lesser evil theory....

Insofar as the Liberal, Labour and Country Parties are concerned, it is necessary to say that whilst they do differ on many issues, these differences, with very few exceptions, relate to details and not principles. In principle, these three parties aim to strengthen capitalism and weaken the working class movement. They strive to promote monopoly and imperialist policies.

On all these issues ... the Labour Party is at one with the Liberal and Country Parties. Only in minor details do they differ.

It is an illusion to believe that the Labour Party is a lesser evil....

In the elections we must carry on not merely a propaganda campaign. Our aim is the organisation of mass struggles for the policy we put forward, to develop struggles against rising prices, for higher wages, in defence of peace and democratic rights. (*Communist Review*, February 1949, pp. 108-110.)

At the same (February 1949) meeting of the Central Committee, Sharkey said:

...On all of the major questions the Labour Party is in the camp of the bourgeoisie.

I do not think it presents any mystery, we simply go out and tell the working class that we are the party of the working class — not the reformists.... In the coming period, our aim is to liquidate reformism as the decisive policy in the working class movement.

These quotations are necessary to document the formation and nature of the strategy of the Communist Party in the 1949 coal strike.

Having commenced his documentary story of the strike with an extract from a speech by Blake, Phillip Deery concludes his account with a long quote from a 'pamphlet' by Blake which reads in part:



Newcastle, August 1949. A meeting to rally support for the miners' stand.

The coal strike was of tremendous importance for the Australian working class. Firstly, the workers secured in this struggle invaluable lessons on the true role of Labor Governments (and) the ALP leadership...

Secondly, (it) established the fact that the arbitration system has been made into a vicious bludgeon against the working class by the Labor Governments...

Thirdly, the coal strike demonstrated that great working class victories can be won even though specific economic claims are not secured in the course of the strike...

Fourthly, the defence of unionism and the rights of unionists to regulate and determine their own affairs has now become a matter of first-rate importance for the whole Australian working class...

Finally, the conditions have been created for developing the fighting, united front of the working class. It is the great responsibility of all communists to help the Labor Party workers fully to grasp the lessons to be learned from the coal strike. The Labor Party workers must never be lumped together with their right wing leaders. These workers will more rapidly move over to the banner of united working class struggle to the extent that the communists show vigour and understanding in organising and developing this united front... (Deery, pp. 98-99.)

As Deery justly observes:

Unfortunately for the Communist Party, only communists themselves and a handful of trade union militants understood these lessons. Workers' attachment to the ALP was confirmed by the coal strike, not weakened, and reformism was not exposed but emerged triumphant... (Deery, p. 99.)

Deery is not wholly accurate as to the provenance of this final statement on the strike. It was a report prepared by me in consultation with the full party secretariat (Sharkey, Dixon and Henry), submitted to and endorsed by a meeting of the Political Committee of the CPA in August, and published in the *Communist Review*, September 1949. An article by R. Dixon printed in the *Communist Review*, October 1949, contains the same conclusions.

As to my actual participation in the coal strike, I was brought to Sydney from Melbourne towards the end of July on the instruction of the Political Committee (the reason given for this was that communist leading work in the strike was in a bad way: Dixon was abroad, Sharkey had just been sentenced to a term of imprisonment and

Henry was occupied with special work.) On the night of my arrival in Sydney, I was taken to a meeting of the Political Committee (Dixon and Healy were absent) which collectively briefed me on my responsibilities: mobilise the resources of the Communist Party to strengthen the fighting spirit of the miners, develop publicity and counter the widespread anti-strike propaganda, develop moral and financial support for the miners; in brief, to strengthen the front and continue the strike.

I did my best in the final two weeks of the strike to carry out these directions with which I was in full agreement. At the time it seemed to me, and I think to the others present, that the meeting of the Political Committee was devoted to a real estimation of the strike situation. In fact, it was not. The main thrust of the discussion — prolongation of the strike — was not questioned by anyone. Had the real situation been examined, the conclusion would have been reached that it was time to terminate the strike — but then there would have been no need to bring me from Melbourne had that been the case.

However, the attribution of culpability to individual communist leaders is a pointless exercise. (The documents, in fact, show clearly general agreement on the line in 1949.) It may serve the purpose of some transient factional interest, but the exercise diverts attention from the real problems which lie deeper and continue to produce similar effects.

No single criterion suffices to provide a definitive answer to questions about communist attitudes to the Labor Party, but an examination of the times when the Labor Party formed the government and a comparison with those times when it formed the opposition might provide a useful guide.

For a long time, certainly from 1927 on, there were two articles of faith which were crucial to the thinking of an Australian communist: first, the idea that the Labor Party was a 'bourgeois' party or a 'two-class' party; second, that the Communist Party must so regulate its activity as to win the majority of the workers from the reformist ideology of the Labor Party to the revolutionary ideology of the Communist Party. Throughout all the permutations of the united-front tactics, and all the

perceptions of the Labor Party as a 'two-class' or 'bourgeois' party, the aim of winning the majority of the workers away from the ALP to the Communist Party was never in question; the only question was how — what were the correct tactics? Hence, an insistence on the importance of the united front with the Labor Party or with Labor Party workers (non-sectarian) could go hand-in-hand with the most violent denunciations of Labor Party reformism (sectarianism).

The conception of the Labor Party as a 'bourgeois' or a 'two-class' party still governed the approach to these matters in the mid-1960s. Discussing relations with the Communist Party of New Zealand in the **Communist Review**, January-February 1965, R. Dixon wrote:

What else do we mean except the character of the Labor Party when we speak of it as a 'two-class party'?... In the pamphlet...both terms are used interchangeably. It is a bourgeois labour party with its mass basis in the working class. At present, ...the crucial problem for our parties therefore, is: how to win the majority of the workers from their support for reformism to support for socialism.

At various times the notion of a united working class party — combining the ALP and the CPA — has been advanced as the preferred solution to the contradictory approaches to the united front inherent in the perception of the ALP as a 'two-class' party, or a 'bourgeois' labor party. But the insistence that this new united party must be a revolutionary marxist-leninist party indicated that the solution was only in words. The question was begged: the problem remained.

The source of the problem, it seems to me, should be sought in the basic strategy of the Communist Party, which was modelled on the Russian revolution; the working class under the leadership of the Communist Party would carry through a political revolution, conquer state power, socialise the means of production and proceed to the establishment of socialism. Because the 'bourgeois' Labor Party had the support of the majority of the working class, the exposure and isolation of the reformist Labor Party was an essential part of the process whereby the majority of the workers shifted over to the revolutionary position of the Communist Party.



A cartoon illustrative of the miners' antagonism towards the mine owners.

Strikes were seen as bringing workers into class struggle, away from the influence of reformism and towards revolutionary politics. The 1949 coal strike was a good example of our exaggerated estimation of the revolutionising significance of strikes; also of our one-sided appraisal of strikes *vis-a-vis* other actions of the people.

Most strikes are, in fact, an essential part of the struggle workers must conduct in the market place to maintain and improve their material situation within the system. The right to strike on political issues is a right trade unionists insist upon; but such strikes will succeed to the extent that they represent, and develop, the political culture and awareness of the workers concerned, not only that of their leaders and most conscious members.

Communist strategy as it related to the Labor Party originated with Lenin. For almost two decades this strategy enabled the Communist Party to have a strong influence within Australian life. In the great depression, communists were in the forefront as organisers of the unemployed — rallying them for struggle. They were the moving force in lifting the trade unions out of the doldrums caused by ineffectual reformist

leadership; they won many positions in trade unions, improved the efficiency of the unions and raised their fighting spirit.

The Communist Party carried on constant educational work on the menace of fascism; in the general democratic, anti-fascist struggle against nazism in Germany, against Franco in Spain, and against reactionary attacks on democracy in Australia, the Communist Party set the tone and can claim the main credit for inspiring the anti-fascist and anti-war movements in the decade of the thirties. These were significant accomplishments which attained their high point during World War II when the major role of the Soviet Union in the defeat of world fascism merged with Australia's national interests.

These very successes were partly responsible for concealing from us the one-sided and misleading nature of the basic strategy — its unawareness of areas of decisive importance. Fundamental political and social transformation required work in a much wider area: the area of the value-system of the people, how their values change, how struggles for changed social and cultural values may penetrate the political realm, the system of political parties

and organisations and their various alignments — in short, the promotion of a new cultural hegemony of the rising class.

When the Communist Party saw the areas where it had won its greatest strength as opening the road to political power, it was confronted by a tenacious hegemony against which it imagined it had been influential; it found itself pressed to the outside of the main political process. The revelations of stalinism offered an opportunity for critical reassessment and orientation in 1956 but the opportunity was rejected.

The experience we did not properly examine (our historical past from post-1917 to the 20th Congress of the CPSU) shows that the class cannot be pressured or forced into revolution. Hegemony, the cultural-political ascendancy of the class in the nation, is essential for the revolutionary transformation of the social order; this is hegemony of the class, not the Party.

The Lenin strategy, based on the realities of tsarist Russia, was misleading for communists in Australia; it said that the workers were misled into reformism and held back from revolution by the reformist leaders of the Labor Party who were the purveyors of bourgeois ideology in the labour movement — the labour lieutenants of the bourgeoisie. This conception narrows to an unreal degree the manner in which bourgeois ideology permeates the working class. Bourgeois ideology is the pervasive hegemonic influence of the prevailing social order; the Labor Party is as much influenced by the working class under this hegemonic sway, as it is the purveyor of that influence to the class. Descriptions of the Labor Party as a 'bourgeois' party led to wrong conclusions as to what is needed if the prevailing bourgeois hegemony is to be replaced by the cultural-political hegemony of the rising class, the working class, or today the new workforce in process of class formation — which includes its own cultural growth.

Real change has to take place in the workforce, change which encompasses a growing consciousness of the need for a more human social order and way of living, not a 'socialist' mirror-image of capitalist consumerism. Such changes are more likely to be multiform rather than linear, involving new movements as well as changes in such established organisations of

the working class as the trade unions and the Labor Party. In our specific Australian conditions, the leninist conception in the long run placed the Communist Party in the position of an exterior force, not merely in the sense of being guided by conceptions which had only partial relevance to our conditions, but more importantly as a force seeking to change the Australian labour movement from the outside rather than the inside; it placed us outside the organic development of the class. To reverse this process does not reduce down to dichotomies such as whether to be a mass party or a ginger group, whether or not to criticise this or that bourgeois practice of Labor Party leaders. It means being on the inside, not external to, the class. It means perceiving everything from the position of the class rather than from narrow party interest; discerning the future in the class as it presently is, not invented or imposed but as it is manifested in the movements of the class itself.

Formation of revolutionary strategy in our conditions needs to begin with the fact that the vast majority of the workforce is firmly embedded in the bourgeois-democratic context of modern Australian life and that revolutionary change here is likely to assume a distinctive character, one big difference being that it will be a prolonged process — a long revolution rather than a knockout blow. In Australian conditions the transforming process evidently will involve more or less fundamental reforms. Not only should our revolutionary movement support reforms, it should be an active initiator of reforms as reforms and engage in the struggle for them. The conscious struggle for reforms is part of the transition to a new awareness — a new hegemony. Until revolutionaries overcome their distrust of reforms as a co-opting plague, they are unlikely in our conditions to advance beyond fragmentary fringe sects.

One cannot portray and project the future in the present unless one is positively tied in to the present, with motives that are not ulterior but completely interior to the ongoing movement.

Labour in Conflict: The 1949 Coal Strike, Phillip Deery (ed.), Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra, and Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1978, pp. xii + 106. \$11.50 (case), \$5.50 (paper).