The Communist Party has attracted an unusual amount of media exposure over the past 18 months over various issues. In this article Greg Giles analyses this coverage looking at the problems and benefits associated with it.

**Any Publicity is Good Publicity?**

It is rare indeed in this age of 90-second grabs and bingo-based media monopolies to see the Communist Party getting a mention in the mainstream media.* But it has been an unusually newsworthy 18 months for the CPA.

The sixtieth anniversary of Tribune received substantial coverage, and this was followed closely by the landmark decision of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal in the Rix case. Then, in April this year, came the resignations from the CPA in Victoria and Queensland.

The press took up the resignations with glee. They had an important effect in “mainstream” politics because of positions some of the resignees held in trade unions, and “mainstream” politics is news. But the press on this occasion took the unusual step of airing the complex issues underlying the resignations. Bernie Taft was given the rare privilege of a lengthy piece in The Age explaining “What happened to the communist dream”. It was also carried by the Newcastle Herald. The Bulletin carried a long article looking at the inner party discussion on the prospects for socialism, and spoke at some length to CPA members and the Victorian resignees.

The Age and Newcastle Herald both allowed a “right of reply” to Bernie Taft’s article. It was no coincidence that the most detailed analytical coverage of the prospects discussion was allowed to surface because it involved a split in the CPA. Newspaper proprietors will not let that sort of opportunity pass.

On re-reading many of these articles I was constantly reminded how the complex issues involved suffered under the combination of poorly informed journalists, sensation seeking sub-editors and the need to make even subtle questions “short and newsy”.

The newspaper coverage of the Special Congress, before and after, reflected this deadly combination. The Congress was largely a discussion of ideas, strategy and future possibilities. To outsiders there was little “hard news” in that. One solution to this is to invent some “news”. “New name and facelift to tidy up Communist Party image” is how the Sydney Morning Herald previewed the Congress — despite specific statements from CPA officers that a name change (let alone a facelift!) was not on the Congress agenda. This became even more specific — “Communist Party to change name” — by the time it had reached The Age.

They Got It Wrong

Apart from the name change furphy (which prompted at least one CPA member in Sydney to ring the day after Congress to inquire in all innocence as to the CPA’s new name), there have been some other clangers. The “Half Awakely” award goes to The Age journalist who interpreted Tribune’s policy of “providing a voice for the left” in this way:

“Since Tribune abandoned its attempts to stick to official party edict, it has devoted its pages to such diverse Marxist factions as the CPA, SPA, CPA (M-L), the SWP, the anarchists and the two man party called the Communist Left.”

But it is not only the journalists who get it wrong. The sub-editor is responsible for the “slant” of the story and the headline, and they often
advance the "juiciest" bits to the front of an article even if it has little importance in the context of the story. This is where the fixation with a non-existent name change began.

It is also the reason for the headline on a reasonably straight article in The Australian about Tribune's anniversary which proclaimed "Flack over new image angers Tribune bosses". Shock, horror!

It is a peculiar thing, but I cannot remember The Australian ever referring to BHP "bosses" or CRA "bosses".

Not Right, Not Wrong

There is a special brand of journalism which deals with complex issues by trivialisation and ridicule. The end result may be the same as distorted or inaccurate reporting, but it deserves a special mention because the motivation behind it is conscious and deliberate.

"Communism is a laughable thought for an Australian political system" the Adelaide Advertiser editorialised. According to them, the CPA "coyly planned to drop the word 'communist'" because with "the fragmented Hegelian-Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist-Maoist-etcetera mish-mash of ideologies that is communism today, it must be getting pathetically lonely on the extreme left".

Another expert in the capitalist-school-of-trivialisation is that erstwhile editor and libertarian anarchist, P.P. McGuiness of the Financial Review. In an editorial which was supportive of the CPA's victory in the Rix case, he nevertheless managed to describe left parties as "a source more of amusement than concern"; as attempting to "give intellectual respectability to essentially non-rational notions"; of "contributing a good deal to the pernicious influence of 'radical' political economy (a kind of left-wing creation science)", and of advocating "what one wit has described as Land Rights for Black Lesbian Whales".

Perhaps any anarchist who can write editorials like that has the chance of becoming editor of the Financial Review. That's what freedom of opportunity is all about in this great country of ours.

Is It Worth It?

Not even a good journalist can guarantee a fair coverage of issues on the left. Editors, sub-editors and news editors can chop and change stories to suit their particular slant. After all, you can't really expect a fair go in the capitalist press, can you?

Despite the gremlins and outright distortions in much coverage of the left, I should stress that some is very good (see Michael Stutchbury's coverage in the Financial Review, 5.11.84) and even the most twisted articles contain much that is true. The great reading public would have learnt that Tribune and the CPA are independent of the USSR or China; that we have a democratic model of socialism; that we support women's, Aboriginal, gay and environmental issues as well as the labour movement; and that we are seeking greater unity on the left. This information would have gone to millions, rather than the thousands we usually reach.

Of far greater concern than the inaccuracies and trivialisation is the common attitude that the left is not newsworthy at all. Whether we like it or not, getting into the newspapers, on the radio, or — best of all — on TV, gives a legitimacy in the media-glazed eyes of the public. If the coverage is "over the top" there is always a letter to the editor or a right of reply to correct the mistake(s).

In general the left is too shy of publicity, and I look forward to the day when, like the Italian Communist Party, CPA Congress is broadcast live on national TV.

There is a saying in the media world that "any publicity is good publicity — as long as they spell your name right". I don't know if Brian Aaron?Arons?Arrons?Aarons? would agree, but I hope that when and if a new socialist party is established in Australia they choose a name that even sub-editors can spell correctly.

* I have not considered either radio, TV or "alternative media" coverage in this article. Coverage of events or these media was quite extensive. However I don't have recordings of the material. Also, the alternative media who, in many ways, give the left the best coverage, do not have the mass audience enjoyed by commercial outlets. At least, not yet.

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