The Road to St. Kilda Pier

Reviewed by Mike Donaldson


I will ignore Milner's depiction of the Communist Party of Australia as "eurocommunist" characterised by "pale pink humbug" on the grounds that, as the title of his book suggests, he was writing from Melbourne in 1983/84, and I have assumed that his insights into the rest of the Australian left are not as ill-formed as his understanding of the CPA.

Milner commences his once-over of the Oz left by drawing a distinction between emancipatory socialism — socialism from below, and regulatory socialism — socialism from above, or statism. This enables him to juxtapose "stalinist communism" and parliamentary laborism as examples of the latter, and counterpose them to the former as typified by the IWW and currents within the "old" new left. This distinction drawn, Milner quickly clears away the undergrowth of existing left parties.

The ALP is not a socialist party, does not mobilise the population around issues, except to vote in compulsory elections and, when it is interested in socialism, is concerned with statist conceptions of it, with socialism from above. The CPA was an internally undemocratic instrument of Soviet foreign policy until, under the influence of Dave Davies and Bernie Taft, some of it stumbled toward conventional eurocommunism, as the rest headed for Peking and Moscow. The four trotskyist grouplets grow neither large nor small, and remain precariously dependent on the importation of blueprints drawn up overseas. Quod erat demonstrandum. The task then is to save socialism from the ALP, eurocommunism, maoism and trotskyism, and the way forward is to form another ("from below") socialist party.

If all existing parties are so dramatically inadequate, why have a party at all? In what is the best part of the book, Milner handles this question head on. He points out that the working class in Australia, comprising as it does nearly three-quarters of the population, is the only social group potentially able to challenge the power of capital. The experience of revolutionary struggles to date is that capital has only ever been seriously threatened when oppositional politics has "taken on a proletarian character". It is difficult to conceive of a successful strategy for socialist transformation which would not take as its starting point the stopping of the flow of surplus value from the working class by and through the self-organisation of that class.

A central difficulty of such a project is the "uneven" political consciousness among working class women and men, and it is this that the new socialist party would importantly address. While developing socialist ideas and actions within the offices and factories, the party would be both developing and drawing to itself the actual, already existing, practical leadership of the labour movement in struggle (job delegates and shop stewards), without whom socialism could not be effected.

New socialist party activists within the movements would also bring back to the new party the lessons developed and developing within the movements, and would attempt to infuse and recast their marxism and political practice appropriately. They would, for example, take seriously the personal-political inter-relationship by actively constructing a socialist culture and community, and would attempt to build into the party's structure the methods of work, practices and institutions which were in important (though necessarily restricted) ways prefigurative of the socialism that it was attempting to achieve. So far, so good. This is familiar ground, and very well summarises the project that a lot of us embarked on some time ago. (In 1979? Any resemblance, however, to the program of the CPA, or to that position within the CPA crudely caricatured by its opponents as "preservationist" is entirely coincidental.)

Socialists from the new party would also take socialism to the movements, unlike the "whole layer of Communist Party 'militants' who have been regularly elected to PND committees, but who have never mentioned in public either their membership of the party or the fact that they think some version or other of marxism might help to explain why there is a nuclear arms race".
Milner concludes that "each of the existing left parties constitutes an obstacle in the way of any ..., restructurings, and their combined weight is at present such as to prevent the generation of new party political forms". Part of what is required to get to the new socialist party is a new left magazine open to different views on the left so that the different varieties of radical politics can be tested against one another. What a splendid idea this is. Others have thought so too. Scarlet Woman is now in its tenth year of production, Chain Reaction has produced 39 issues and Australian Left Review began moving towards an "open concept of marxism" a decade ago, and towards a magazine format in 1981.

The magazine would be produced by "some appropriate type of pre-party political organisation". This non-party organisation would be open to members of existing parties and would develop into a "loose federation of activists working together around concrete political issues". The federation would be local and not national for "what is needed today in Victoria, is a Victorian socialist league capable of intervening in the political life of this particular city of Melbourne". These autonomous non-parties will eventually federate to form the new socialist party as the others liquidate themselves as organisations.

This will sound familiar to those who have been following the CPA "Prospects Debate". It is, as Milner admits on the final page of his book, the position adopted by the 23 "Taftists" in Victoria. How embarrassing for Milner (and for the Tafts), for Milner, on the one hand, wants "a socialism which smells of revolution and the overthrow of tyrants" and, on the other, finds his practical political position pre-empted, "for the last thing any socialist organisation deserves is to be marked from birth by the type of pale pink humbuggery which has, as much as anything, brought the CPA to its present sorry state". And so, as Milner prepares to launch himself into the void, he perceives that the Tafts and their mates are already there, waiting for him. (Will the new socialist organisation split???)

What is perhaps most enjoyable about St. Kilda Pier, the first major written contribution to the debate from outside the CPA and the Association for Communist Unity, is the sense of "newness" it exudes, a welcome "freshener" and an antidote to cynicism. For myself, I am reasonably sure that five years on I will be, as I now am, working within a marxist party which comes close to enunciating and developing that sort of full-bodied emancipatory socialism which is described so well by Milner. But I am also reasonably sure that Dr. Milner will be sitting at the end of the pier watching the waves roll by. And that is a shame.

Mike Donaldson is the president of the NSW South Coast district of the Communist Party of Australia, and teaches sociology at the University of Wollongong.

Labour and the Money Power continued from page 36.

Labour and the Money Power

Alastair Davidson is well-known as a historian and writer. He is at Monash University.