

The Australian Labor Party and the Australian left

By Roger Clarke

THE AUSTRALIAN Labor Party (ALP) celebrated its centenary in 1991, in its fourth consecutive term of national office — it went on to win a fifth term. Measured by the criterion of years in office, the ALP has been remarkably successful; yet it has always disappointed those of its supporters who expected an ALP government to bring about a more equal society. In the preface to his history of the ALP, Ross McMullin writes: "A recurring theme is the tension between what the ALP's prominent politicians were doing or not doing, and what the rank-and-file activists wanted them to be doing."¹

The ALP is a product of the trade union movement, yet Labor governments have repeatedly clashed with trade unionists. For example, in 1910 south Australian railway navvies went on strike; the Labor premier (Verran) declared: "The Labor Party of today cannot be dictated to by the revolutionary socialists of this state." That same year, in a separate dispute with Adelaide tarpavers, strikebreaking labor was brought in from Melbourne. In the resulting clashes with strikers, police used their batons freely. Verran endorsed the conduct of the police, stating: "The police will do their duty in regard to the protection of persons and property."²

Federal Labor governments and Labor governments in other states have similarly used the police or the army against strikers, many of whom would have been members of the ALP or of an affiliated union. Why then has the ALP survived for so long, without being deserted by its rank-and-file?

The ALP

THE ALP was formed in order to put representatives of the trade unions into parliament. Trade unions had sponsored parliamentary candidates well before the national maritime strike of 1890 and the Queensland shearers' strike of 1891.³ The results were not encouraging: some endorsed Labor candidates, once elected, quickly disowned any Labor affiliation. In 1902, the second federal conference resolved to require candidates for endorsement to sign a pledge to withdraw if not preselected, to do their utmost to implement the platform, and to vote with the caucus majority on all platform questions. Similar provisions still apply today. A spectacular example of the party disowning a "representative" was the expulsion of right-winger Vince Gair in 1957, while he was the ALP premier of Queensland.

As well as many of the individual members of the ALP being trade unionists, affiliated unions are represented (usually by full time officials) at state conferences. Despite (or possibly because of) the influence of the trade unions within the ALP, the party "prag-



Labor's 1902 platform: a White Australia

matically" assumes that any prospect of the abolition of capitalism is an impractical dream, and attempts to represent the interests of labor within this framework.

The first plank of the 1902 platform was: "the maintenance of White Australia", which falls short even of equality of opportunity within the capitalist system. The second plank was the introduction of compulsory arbitration. "White Australia" has been replaced in the ALP platform by sentiments in favour of multiculturalism, but the ALP still appeals to "the independent umpire" to conciliate class conflict. The "accord" between the Hawke and Keating governments and the ACTU is rightly opposed by socialists and union militants, but it is not a departure from the ALP tradition.

The ALP today is still a party based on the trade unions, but a party whose aims are still limited to "a fair go" for workers. Some capitalists see no danger in a Labor government, preferring conciliation with unions to conflict. Others are not convinced: Liberal Party leader John Howard spoke for the latter when he criticised Paul Keating for negotiating leave and superannuation provisions with the ACTU. Howard said: "I think there is something very demeaning and very humiliating about the elected prime minister of Australia going cap-in-hand to the ACTU, grovelling for permission to introduce budget measures. It indicates very clearly that this government is still very much the serf of the ACTU and of the trade union movement."⁴

Howard was grandstanding of course. Nevertheless the complaint does suggest why trade union members might prefer the ALP to some new party. They may want a government that is the "serf" of the trade union movement. They may feel that political influence should not be the prerogative of employers. Why then should trade unionists sympathise with calls for them to break their links with the ALP?

Alternatives to the ALP

A NUMBER of socialist groups were formed in the years between federation (1901) and

the first world war. One of these groups, the Australian Socialist Party (ASP), stated its objection to the ALP.

"The Labor Party does not clearly and unambiguously avow socialism, nor does it teach it: it is unlike any other working-class creation in the world in that it builds no socialist movement, issues no socialist books, debates no socialist problems. It is not international, it is not Marxian. In politics and practice it is liberalism under a new name; in utterance and ideal it is bourgeois."⁵

The conclusion drawn from these premises was that the ASP should have nothing to do with the Labor Party. Yet, on the ASP's own testimony, the ALP was a (non-socialist) working-class creation. This suggested to some other socialists that their strategy towards Labor should be "boring from within." Tom Mann, a former secretary of the British ILP, argued that socialists must involve themselves in this mass party of the Australian working class, and seek to win it to consistent socialist policies. The socialist movement must be built "not in hostility to the Labor Party, but untrammelled by its restrictions."

Tom Mann was active in the Victorian Socialist Party. The aim of the VSP was not to oppose Labor but to act "as a ginger group for socialism."⁶ Socialists were active in both the VSP and the ALP simultaneously. By 1907 it had nearly 2,000 members.

The Third International and the Communist Party of Australia (CPA)

THE MOST significant of all the attempts to form a revolutionary workers' party was the Communist Party. The CPA was formed from the ASP, elements from the International Workers of the World and Jock Garden's group of "Trades Hall Reds." Garden's group was active in the Labor Party, whereas the others were opposed in principle to participation in the ALP. As a result there were two groups, both claiming to be the Australian Communist Party. The Comintern demanded a unity conference; when the ASP refused, Garden was recognised as the official representative of the Communist movement.⁷ However the Comintern's intervention was not confined to banging sectarian heads together. The CPA needed a coherent strategy; one that synthesised militant opposition to capitalism with recognition of the continued mass support for the Labor Party. The Comintern hammered out a united front tactic as a general method of approach to mass reformist parties. The implications for Australia were spelt out in a letter sent to the CPA in 1922.

"The Australian Labor Party is even more outspokenly a trade union party than its British counterpart, with an equally petty bourgeois, reformist set of leaders. Nonetheless, the masses in their bulk continue to cling to the Labor Party. Does this mean to say that if the working masses are to be won for communism, we should work within

this mass party? The Communist International answers this question in the affirmative."⁸

Accordingly, the CPA was advised "to join the State Labor Party as well as the Federal Labor Party."⁹ The application to affiliate was not to be a once-only gesture.

"But should the Labor Party leaders refuse to admit us into their organisation, this is no reason for abandoning the United Front. It must never be said that the Communists divided the workers. That must be left to the leaders of the Labor Party. Our duty as Communists and as the Party of the working class is to bring our class to victory. This can only be done by pointing the way and working with the masses and show[ing] them that we are the real leaders and that our place is inside the workers' organisations."¹⁰

The CPA did succeed in affiliating to the Labor Party in June 1923. But at a 1924 federal conference, Theodore (the Queensland premier) argued that Communist Party members should be ineligible to join the ALP. "You cannot mix oil and water" he said, and a large majority supported him.¹¹ The CPA tried standing candidates against the ALP in elections for the New South Wales State Parliament, but received only a few hundred votes. Garden subsequently resigned from the CPA and rejoined the ALP.

The Third Period

AFTER GARDEN'S departure, the CPA did not immediately repudiate the united front. They concentrated on trying to build militant rank and file groups in the trade unions, which was the main point of the united front. The leadership came under increasing criticism from the Miles and Sharkey faction, which with Comintern support, won control of the party with a perspective of super-optimism. They declared: "It is a definite lie to say we can do nothing because we are only a small propaganda sect, we are a party."¹² They had maybe 400 members.

The CPA's achievements in the early 1930s are yet to be emulated. The CPA did exemplary work in building the Minority Movement, assisting rank and file activism in the trade unions and organising the unemployed. The downside was the crazy sectarianism implied by the (Comintern) theory that the ALP was 'social fascist'. To quote Tom O'Lincoln: "Wild-eyed rhetoric and ultra-left confrontations might successfully regroup a thousand activists but as the party grew the task was to win broader layers of people, and for this a marginally more sane approach was advised."¹³

If the CPA had taken a "marginally more sane" approach all along, they might have convinced more rank and file Labor activists that the CP's place "is inside the workers' organisations." In other words, the "Third Period" was an opportunity for the CPA to grow by keeping to the original United Front perspective. If the stick had been straight in the first place, bending it in the direction of the Popular Front would not have seemed necessary.

The Fourth International

THE FOURTH International attempted to

revive the original perspectives of the Comintern. In 1944 the Australian section of the Fourth International issued a manifesto which said:

"Within the labour movement as a whole, the Labor Party as well as the unions, the revolutionist should not cease in his activity, but should always attempt to stem the rising tide of reaction, calling for resistance to the growing subordination of officialdom within the capitalist state. He should also cooperate with any section of the movement that adopts a sound working class policy on some particular issue. The aim must be always to steer these limited demands towards the wider goal, the attainment of state power by the workers."¹⁴

The Trotskyist movement dwindled, then revived in the late 1960s and early '70s. In 1985 the Socialist Workers' Party [SWP, linked to the American rather than the British SWP] disavowed Trotskyism¹⁵. It renamed itself the Democratic Socialist Party and became Gorbachevite, then Castroite.

These changes in the SWP's attitude towards Trotskyism were accompanied by a change in their orientation to the Labor Party.¹⁶ As the SWP had been in the Labor Party they could hardly say that it was a matter of principle to be outside. Instead it was argued that the move to the right under Hawke made the entry tactic inappropriate in the current period. This argument misunderstands the point of the United Front tactic, namely to *oppose* the politics of the ALP leadership from within the party.

A more "theoretical" argument was that the traditional analysis of the ALP (and the British Labour Party) as a "bourgeois workers' party" was incorrect — Lenin said (in 1913!) that the ALP was a "liberal-bourgeois party." This scriptural argument was made ten years earlier by Ted Hill¹⁷, leader of the CPA (M-L). Hill's conclusion, opposition in principle to joining the Labor Party, is far more consistent than the SWP's. But the argument itself is an example of the scholastic "Leninism" that was created (literally) over Lenin's dead body.

Australia's biggest would-be Trotskyist group is now the ISO, linked to the British SWP. Its opposition to "entryism" goes back a lot further than the DSP's. To the extent that the ISO still discusses its policies, it still accepts the "bourgeois workers' party" analysis of the ALP. Thus it cops a lot of flak from the DSP for being "soft on Labor." The ISO is soft on Labor, but not for the reasons that the DSP claim.

The ISO is soft on Labor because of its superstitious fear of "reformism." Opposing reformism from within the mass reformist party is shunned for fear of ideological contamination. Therefore instead of effectively fighting Laborism at its base, the ISO settles for general propaganda against reformism.

Today, there are a host of "reforms",

higher wages, full employment, shorter working week, working class access to education and health care, that are crying out to be raised in the whole labour movement. Raising these demands within the ALP is not outrageous; many members genuinely want all of these things. Of course the right will say that these things are no longer possible, but isn't this precisely the debate we want to have? If the alternative is coining "revolutionary" slogans that are designed to be rejected by the broad movement, which activity should serious socialists prefer?

Conclusions

IF THIS somewhat polemical survey of the past and present is to serve any constructive purpose, it should suggest what we should do in the future. I think the perspective of waiting for the ALP to become an outright bourgeois party is politically mistaken; if we are to lose the ALP as any sort of workers' organisation, we will be better placed to regroup if we have fought against this loss from inside the Labor Party.

However, the problems on the Australian left are not merely tactical, and joining the Labor Party is no miracle cure for these problems. In the past it has been demonstrated all too clearly that it is possible to join the Labor Party and still be a narrow sect. The wider problem is to rescue the Marxist conception of socialism as the self-liberation of the working class.

A subset of this wider problem is the need to restate the original Marxist attitude to democracy. The denunciation of parliamentary democracy as "bourgeois", without having workers' councils in existence (even as a popular idea) suggests that the "proletarian" alternative is no democracy at all. (For the Stalinists, this suggestion was the truth.) The decline of the Communist Parties was not solely due to their lack of radicalism. At times they *were* radical, but radically anti-democratic.¹⁸ They lost the ideological battle with "bourgeois" democrats, dragging the reputation of Marxism down with them. ■

Notes

1. Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*, Oxford University Press, 1992
2. Ross McMullin, *ibid*, p78
3. Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Penguin, 1971
4. *The Courier Mail*, 3 May 1995
5. Tom O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, p29, Stained Wattle Press 1985
6. Ross McMullin, *op. cit.* p61
7. Tom O'Lincoln, *op. cit.* p32
8. *To the Masses!*, 1922, reproduced in "Socialist Fight", 1981, from the CPA journal
9. *ibid*
10. *ibid*
11. Ross McMullin, *op. cit.* p134
12. Tom O'Lincoln, *op. cit.* p36
13. Tom O'Lincoln, *ibid*, p38
14. *Fourth International*, July 1944, p218
15. Jim Percy and Doug Lorimer, *The Socialist Workers Party and the Fourth International*, Pathfinder Press, 1985. See also *Workers' Liberty* No. 4
16. *Labor and the Fight for Socialism*, New Course Pty Ltd, 1988 (first published 1985)
17. E F Hill, *The Labor Party? Dr Evatt, the Petrov Affair, the Whitlam Government*, 1974
18. Robert Fine, "The poverty of anti-Stalinism", *Workers' Liberty* no.14, p14

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