

Hal Alexander

## Red belt days

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**Hal Alexander** was for many years an electrician, mostly in heavy industry. Joined the then-illegal Communist Party in 1941, at the age of 17 and stayed till its dissolution in 1991. Paid [sic] organiser from 1954-1967 in Sydney, then Adelaide. Many arrests, three jail terms, two on hunger strike. Worked and lived with Arrente people on and off since 1985.

**A**BOUT three years ago I participated on a committee, sponsored by Marrickville Council, to plan a mural on the footpath outside the former Newtown Town Hall to depict the history of the area. This led to me thinking more about the Party's industrial base in the forties and fifties and hence this story.

South and South East of the Sydney GPO, in an ever expanding corridor down to the Kurnell peninsula, hundreds of thousands of workers and their families were born, lived and died serving the interests of those living easy elsewhere.

Just as those living vampire-like on the labour of others (thank you Karl) the workers also depended on the existence of the industries in this area for the wages to

buy the food, clothing and shelter necessary to sustain and reproduce life and ongoing generations of wage labourers.

Railway workshops, tram/bus depots, power generation, textiles/clothing, manufacturing, breweries, oil refineries, hospitals, construction, brickyards, glassworks, foundries, the airport, and more: these enterprises were often at the centre of working class struggle for higher wages, shorter hours and to improve working conditions, none of which were won without the bitterest of sacrifices. On the other hand they were synonymous with lockouts, victimisation of militants and Communists and wholesale sackings once the ruling class had sucked the maximum of profitability from the labour of its employees.

If, in pursuit of higher living standards or in defence of the existing, workers in one industry or factory took direct action it was to all the others they looked to and gained support. In the postwar forties/fifties some very bitter strikes took place which won certain concessions because of the determination of participants on the one hand and the period of expanding capitalism on the other in which the bourgeoisie were forced into concessions driven by labour shortages and competition.

So for a period it was possible to win higher wage rates, shorter hours and less onerous and dangerous working conditions. How odd that it all is being lost. How correct were those that warned that the honeymoon was fleeting. That the real gains lay in the expanding unity of the workers and that the future demanded the abolition of the wages system itself. Socialism.

While workers were linked through the trade union movement this could be either an asset or liability, depending on the political direction of the respective union bureaucracies.

A vital key was the existence of union shop stewards and in a purer sense the shop committees. Union stewards were mostly elected by the members, sometimes appointees of union officials. Distinctions or blurrings between the two forms varied.

Shop committees transcended craft/labourer union divisions. Sections of workshops elected representatives on the basis of capability, numbers involved etc. In my area of Eveleigh the shop committees were mainly led by 'unskilled' workers. We saw them as future bodies in a new society. Soviets if you like.

The Shop Committee movement also helped the breakdown of divisions between industries. There were inter-workplace and inter-industry connections. Exchanges of experience. Contacts. These provided the framework for solidarity actions, money collections, picket lines or provision of food and clothing in times of severe strike action. One enemy one struggle.

Industries like the Railways and GMH [General Motors Holden] formed combined central councils to coordinate the work. Understandably some union bureaucrats regarded all this as a threat to their hegemony. Quite rightly too. That was the beauty of it.

But there's more! Unlike the trade unions, traditionally shackled to the ALP and reformism the Shop Committees were free political agents. That is not 'open ended' ('freedom for ALL', including exploiters?, asked Brecht) but with clear goals of a truly independent political position for the class.

So they were free to promote 'non union' politics – The Suez Canal for Egyptians, Oz out of Korea, Vietnam and so on. As well as a plethora of other political local issues. Health, transport, education. Attitudes on every issue regarded as the precious domain of politicians and their hangers on. Highly dangerous indeed if you include, at one stage, a trade union movement largely in the hands of notorious Communists and other no good bastards intent on overthrowing the system.

So how did all these actions and ideas come about?

The spontaneous upsurge of the downtrodden poor? Not bloody likely.

While ideas might well lag behind changes in material conditions

and a good kick in the guts is a great thought provoker the movement has to be given common ideological purpose, a linking together of the whole chain as Vladimir Ilyich and others suggested.

This was provided by a Communist Party, seeking to relate Oz reality to the new awareness of Marxism as the tool of the oppressed. The rest they learnt the hard way, in practice.

In consequence, over several decades the industries spoken of before and many other places became centres of Party influence and with Party cells or contacts in all of them. These Communists were encouraged to the view that practice without theory is sterile and theory without practice is blind (ta again, Karl).

In Newtown, Redfern, Alexandria, Waterloo, Marrickville, Sydenham, Mascot, Botany and elsewhere the primary task was to educate workers to the bigger issues. Using their own experience as the starting point, factory bulletins, written or related by the workers inside, would be produced often with no regard to libel, distributed at the factory gates by local Comrades (to protect the identity of the authors).

These roneoed missives were named by the Comrades on the inside in keeping with the place. 'Metters News', 'In the Running' (railworkers), 'Crystal Clear'(ACI glassworks), 'Bronze Worker'(Austral Bronze), 'The Honey Pot' (apropos of the tapped keg, the one with the nail in it at the Brewery). General Motors, Bunnerong Power, Hospitals, Textiles and all the many others that made up the Red Belt had their own underground Party-produced bulletins that were shitstirring, knowledgeable and hated by the employers and hangers on. Rough and ready does the job. As they would say at the gate, 'Who's arse are we biting this month/Here's a couple of bob for the cause/Meet us at the Oxford after shift, we've got some good gen for next issue' was the go.

The industrial cells or branches (there were dozens of members in the Railway workshops alone) met regularly to discuss the job and wider political issues. Off the job they met in local homes of other Party

members after work and Newtown, Redfern, Marrickville, etc. were central to this. Houses were depots for *Tribune*, stocks of paper from the back of trucks, flatbeds and so on. The locality branches dealt with street issues while regarding their main task as helping to build in the workplaces. Fortnightly education circles were organised, sometimes combining several factories or a whole industry. Tutors from the Sydney District Office or experienced on-the-job workers guided these study groups. No airy, fairy political mumblers this lot. Realpolitik ruled OK? How to change the bourgeois moulded think-frame to one where the working class could see and act upon its own initiatives and for a fundamental change in production relations.

All this goes some way to explain the strengths and prestige given to the CPA in what became known as the Red Belt.

Enter ASIO. Set up by the Chifley Labor Government in 1948 and refined by the Menzies Government its aim was supposedly to protect us from foreign spies and agents, particularly of the USSR. A partial truth continually espoused by the likes of David McKnight and others. ASIO loves them! In practice its main purpose was to spy on the labour movement with no regard for whether the victims were CPA members or ALP or non-party.

Information (down to minute personal details in some cases) were placed on file and made available to Government agencies *and* employer groups and individuals. Names, where working, what said etc. Unexplained sackings followed, often precipitating defensive and debilitating strike action.

One classic in my ASIO files reports a weekend meeting of Communist workers from industry in this area. Descriptions of individuals not known to them previously are given along with other information as above. In similar vein ASIO even listed names and/or descriptions of the most innocent who were merely counting scrutineers for Communists in polling booths in the Grayndler electorate and carrying out an expression of the much vaunted democratic process.

Then came the anti-Communist referendum.

True to its hearty history in earlier free speech fights, Newtown and surrounds became a battleground. People would spend their non-working hours to leaflet, attend rallies, harangue crowds, provoke discussion and argue the point. And they won! They made Australia a better place for all of us. We are heavily in their debt.

So ASIO was not just about Russian spies, about Ivanov, Mick Young—a good mate of mine, who when Secretary of the SA ALP and I was the Party organiser, we worked hand in glove together on matters concerning the interests of the working class.

It was mainly about destroying the influence of Communists, ALP and other militants in industry. I joined the Party, aged seventeen, when it was illegal and deeply underground. In my ASIO files from 1941 to 1969, which Jack Rice couldn't jump over, there was a mid-fifties meeting of industrial Comrades in the Red Belt in the Pensioners Hall, Redfern. The names of those present. Their factories, what Union, whether Shop Stewards, and personal details. Example. Young man of Mediterranean appearance, not known to agent, who spoke passionately about something or other.

Wally Cunningham from Malleys was in the chair and said Comrades should disperse after the meeting and not go to near pubs as this meeting was under surveillance. It was under surveillance all right. There was a bastard in there!

This information is fed to employers and led to the destruction of lives and families of people who were fighting for all of us. I loved those Comrades. For about ten years I was their Party organiser. So ASIO is the instrument of the ruling class.

One of the great unknowns was Tom Burke. He reckoned that 'them as writes about history are part of it.' His back ruined by an overturned road grader in Katherine and only partially mobile, he gave his whole life and savings to the Party. He asked me to come up to Minto

Party School where he was staying. He'd got a dozen beer and a few old Communists mates – Bill Britten, Pottsie, and other larrikins. After we'd sunk a few he turned to me and said, "When ASIO says the party is now respectable, it's fucked!"

How true.

I would like to tell a story on a lighter note. Some have asked me how the Actors Union was going. Great confusion. There are, were, two Hal Alexanders. Hal was a great comrade except his real name was Ron Williams. Hal Alexander was his stage name. He was Secretary of Actors Equity and for over twenty years the ASIO dickheads could not decide whether I was organising big cultural exchanges through the Soviet Embassy (Bolshoi and all) and other countries, or him getting busted in 'adventurous' escapades.

I was in China for most of 1957 at the Beijing School of Higher Party Education. Whether all this makes me a Stalinist or a Maoist, take your pick. Someone sent me a press clipping about a Liberal Queensland Federal Member, Pierce, who claimed that the Secretary of Actors Equity was a notorious Communist which shows the extent of Communist influence in the trade union movement.

Eddie Ward, Labor member for East Sydney, who knew me and I him, got up and said this was a slander on a decent trade union leader. Which was Eddie's own brand of anti-Communism. Later Pierce got up and said that he was wrong and would like to make an apology. Two apologies in fact.

One to the Secretary of Actors Equity for calling him a Communist and the other to the Communist for accusing him of being an actor.

Very clever for a bourgeois.