

Bob Boughton

## **Introducing the ‘rough reds’: Invisible, international, and inter-generational**

**Bob Boughton** teaches adult education at the University of New England. He has written papers for recent Labour History conferences on the CPA’s role in the Aboriginal rights struggle, and on the ‘Advanced Chinese Methods’ of adult education taught to Australian communists in Beijing in the 1950s. A member of the CPA from 1975-1991, Bob helped organise the communists stream at the 2001 Conference, from which this monograph arose.

*If the union’s history for these few years seems to revolve around individuals, I have no excuse. Individuals create history, and when they are organised they create better history.*

— Murray Norris

**S**INCE the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) officially wound up its affairs in 1991, a steady stream of memoirs and reflection have emanated from some of its leading officials, which put considerable critical distance between the writers and the experiences they recall.

This collection is not like that. It unashamedly celebrates a tradition of rank and file activism by Australian communists and those who, while affiliated to other parties and organisations, associated closely

with the CPA. These stories are extremely important, not just for labour historians, but for labour and social movement activists who today are trying to maintain and build a militant opposition to globalising capitalism in Australia and the region.

What these stories tell us, among many things, is that often it is the 'invisible' people who do most to 'make history'; and they do it, above all, by being organised. When all the objective conditions have been described, when the influences of tradition and culture have been duly acknowledged, when all the social forces have been lined up on history's stage, their class and social character dissected, you still find, standing behind this good and valuable analysis, the organised militants. Unless labour history points a spotlight on these people and the work they do, it perpetuates a myth—that history somehow just happens, without the conscious intervention of organised and disciplined groups, the people who 'push the envelope' and help move society towards its future.

This is also as true of the writing of history as it is of its making. This collection arose from a lot of hard organising work, among ex-CPA members and their 'fellow-travelling' friends, prodded on in particular by one of the editors, Hal Alexander. Hal is a communist militant trained in the railway workshops, the CPA's Marx School in Sydney in the 1940s, and in China in the 1950s, and a mentor to many communists of later generations, myself included. Hal it was who convinced Brian Manning, Chris Elenor, Ben Bartlett, Drew Cottle and myself to make the Canberra conference of the Labor History society in 2001 an occasion for celebrating some vintage 'rough reds'. It was Hal who convinced his old mate and comrade in arms Kevin Baker ("The Oracle") to drive him to Canberra, and to chair the session. Kevin has his own history in the labour movement and was for a long time an organiser of the Missos Union. Kevin Cook would have come too, because Hal had asked him. But he was sick, so he agreed to be interviewed by Hal and Russ Hermann, and his story is now included. It was Hal who negotiated with Phil Griffiths, Rosemary Webb and others from the ASSLH Canberra, to

get this publication out. When I agreed to write the introduction, he even sent me a few suggestions for its themes!

One of the great things about Labour History conferences is the dialogue that occurs between working historians and the unionists and other activists about whom they are writing. This monograph takes this into print, setting up a conversation between the verbatim memoirs of activists and some detailed historical analysis. Drew Cottle's and Beverley Symons' papers fall more into the latter category, though both are also experienced activists, while the rest of the papers belong more in the former. One of the points of this introduction is to try to weave some of the connections between them all.

If the role of hard-working organisers is one theme that runs through this collection, then another is internationalism. As you read these stories, you will see that militant working class activism in Australia knew a lot more about 'difference', and for a lot longer time, than some of its contemporary postmodernist critics like to acknowledge. All but one of the authors is male, and only one is Aboriginal, but the actions they describe and the people who fill these stories are testaments to the solidarity that militants built across ethnic and international borders.

Drew Cottle tells the extraordinary story of three Sydney-based Chinese radicals, suspected by the intelligence services of being communists, who, assisted by the Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) and CPA officials, helped Chinese seamen, stranded by war in Australian ports in the 1940s, to form an Australian branch of the Chinese Seamen's Union (CSU). Like Rupert Lockwood's tale of Indonesian-Australian solidarity in the 1940s, *The Black Armada*, Cottle's detailed research shows how the waterfront activities of communist unionists played a crucial role in breaking down racial and national divisions within the international working class, helping build a unity which delivered the goods.

Brian Manning's story of the illegal radio operation he helped to mount in Darwin in the 1970s is another variation on this theme. Without that radio, Fretilin, the East Timorese independence movement, would

have been unable to maintain contact between its guerrilla forces fighting Suharto's army in the mountains and its external leadership in Australia, Portugal, Mozambique and New York. A rank and file waterside worker, Brian had already been in more historic campaigns than most people achieve in a lifetime, including helping to set up the Darwin Aboriginal Rights Council, which played a key role during the Gurindji strike and walk off in the 1960s. Brian, of course, was only one of many who made the radio operation possible, and, Chris Elenor, a recent 'pommie' immigrant who drove thousands of kilometres from Sydney to camp in the bush outside Darwin to keep the radio link operating, has also provided his version of these extraordinary events to add to the mix. Chris, his fellow operators Andrew Waterhouse, John Wishart, Dave Arkins, 'Cosmos' and Estanislau DaSilva (now East Timor's Minister for Agriculture), were part of a younger generation which came to political maturity in the antiwar and anti-colonial movements in the 1970s. The fact that some, but by no means all, joined the CPA, allowed something to happen which is another key theme of this book, and the underlying reason for its production. History and tradition are not about the past, they are about the future. Unless the stories are told and passed on, new generations will find themselves having to learn all the old lessons over and over again. One of the achievements of the CPA in its 'Indian Summer' of the 1970s and 1980s was that it made it possible for this 'baton-passing' to take place.

Hal Alexander and Ben Bartlett were passing 'batons' (is that what they were?) in a hyperactivist CP household in Sydney's Balmain, to which Chris Elenor was a regular visitor, when I met them all in 1975, the year I too joined the CPA. As Ben describes in his paper, younger and not so young communists like himself and Hal were already organising a rank and file paper, *The Health Worker*, in Sydney hospitals, when they turned a great idea, in part inspired by the new women's and Aboriginal health services forming at the time, into the reality of the Workers Health Centre which opened in the Sydney suburb of Lidcombe in 1977. While it

eventually succumbed to the forces of government and trade union bureaucracy, the Workers Health Centre remains a demonstration of what is possible when university trained activists have an organisation which allows them to work in direct partnership and under the leadership of militant workers organised on the job.

Unfortunately, there's no denying it, *A few rough reds* is a 'blokey' book. Not only is there only one female contributor, but Beverley Symons' story is about two more communist men, Tom Wright and Ron Maxwell, who won seats on Sydney City Council in 1953. But look more closely into Beverley's paper, before you dismiss it as another example of the patriarchal slant of CP politics. While this does not excuse communists or labour historians from the obligation to publish more stories of the many women who were so important in communist activism, the story shows that Wright and Maxwell, once on Council, campaigned on issues which these days are often left to the women's movement and the community action groups they keep alive, the 'bread and butter' issues that so affect daily life. These included children's playgrounds, bus stop seats, lights in residential blocks of flats, saving the Domain Baths, meal allowances for Council employees, school transfers for children of parents moving out of the city, and domestic electricity subsidies. Wright won two terms, Maxwell only one, but it was a remarkable achievement given that this was at the height of the Cold War.

Kevin Cook's story forms another link in this chain. Though it's not mentioned in Beverley's story, Tom Wright was a long time activist for Aboriginal rights. In 1938, under his Presidency, the NSW Labor Council passed its first policy on the question, and Tom authored several party policies, still acknowledged as among the most progressive working class statements on Indigenous issues ever made in this country. So when Kevin joined the NSW Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), then under CP and left ALP leadership, the union was already aligned to his politics, and when he moved to Tranby Aboriginal College in Glebe — itself a product of a 1950s alliance between Aboriginal activists and socialists in

unions, parties and churches — this connection continued. Kevin also tells the story of Tranby's own international links, with the East Timorese struggle, Vanuatu, Bougainville and South Africa, a story which reminds us that Aboriginal activists have been at the forefront of anti-globalisation politics in Australia for decades.

The biggest paper in this collection belongs to the mystery man, Murray Norris. A mystery man because, when we first began assembling the material for the Labour History conference, all we knew about Murray was that he had been an NAWU organiser in Darwin in the 1940s, and worked later on the waterfront there. His story was passed on to us by Bernie Brian, a Darwin-based activist and researcher doing a thesis on the NAWU, who had discovered the manuscript in the NT archives. Now, thanks mainly to Connie Healy in Brisbane, we have begun to learn more about this remarkable man, whose story speaks volumes about what is possible in the right conditions. We also hear that Chris Sheil of UNSW plans some time in the future to write a more detailed history. In the meantime, however, Murray's own words are reprinted here.

Clandestine comrades? Perhaps in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia, readers may find such a term dated, even quaint. But the fact of the matter, as Hal's reminiscences of the Red Belt days in Sydney's South and Botany in the 1950s shows, is that militant communists have always been under surveillance, and the best work has, more often than not, required a level of secrecy and security that means, when the stories are eventually told, the activists are not even visible. It is certainly the case that many of the key events in Australia's history have been chronicled with little, if any reference, to the people whose stories appear in these pages, and the thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands like them, who did the work over many decades to maintain and build movements for social and political change. If this little monograph does something to help contemporary activists and labour historians remember some of those people, its work will have been more than worthwhile.



**Ken Fry MHR, left, speaking to Fretilin in East Timor with radio operator, Brian Manning, right.**