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The current situation and some issues concerning the work of the CPA (M-L)

*REPORT TO CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE
COMMUNIST PARTY OF AUSTRALIA (M-L)*

THE 1980s – GRIM ECONOMIC TIMES FOR THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE

The current crisis in world capitalism, which began in the mid-1970s, is deepening year by year. Steel production in the U.S. has dropped below 40% of capacity; in Japan below 50%. Even the giant monopolies cannot escape the possibility of collapse. AEG-Telefunken – one of the multinational corporations at the core of the West German capitalist 'miracle' – has gone to the wall. So too, has the American giant International Harvester. After all the misery it has inflicted on generations of workers, farmers, small manufacturers and dealers, now its turn has come. In the capitalist countries mass unemployment, on a scale not seen for half a century, has arisen. In most of the developing world, hundreds of millions of people are plunged even deeper by the crisis into an unimaginable abyss of suffering. Compounding this grim picture for the people of the world is the threat of global war between the superpowers.

In Australia the crisis is being sharply felt in all its major manifestations. There are mass sackings, widespread unemployment, suppression of wage levels, anti-worker inquisitions and provocations, attacks on democratic rights and a determined denial of Aboriginal land rights. Small farmer and small business bankruptcies abound. Public funds are being collected and dispersed on the principle of a carrot for the rich and a stick for the poor. Millions of Australians are living in poverty. Millions more are in serious economic difficulties.

For Australian Communists these times carry special responsibilities. There is much work to do. Maximum service must be given to the Australian people in all their struggles against the crisis and the threat of war. Politically the current period is very fertile. Capitalism is being exposed in all its barbarism. The illusions it can generate in times of lesser crisis or in its short-lived booms are not so easily maintained. People fight to hold back the severe effects of the present crisis. Increasingly they also call into question the very nature of a system whose history is pockmarked by boom and bust, extremes of rich and poor, squandering of resources and war after war.

The experience and knowledge of the Communist movement has much to offer the Australian people in these days. Marxism long ago unravelled the central laws of human history and in particular, those that explain the general workings of the crisis-prone capitalist era. Rich practice on how to tackle the task of bringing major social change to Australia has been accumulated over 60 years. That is not to say the Communist movement knows everything and has never made mistakes. Quite the contrary. There are tens of thousands of things yet to be learned from detailed study and from practical work amongst the struggles of the people. Numerous errors and shortcomings exist. Often one mistake has been corrected only to lead to the making of another mistake. Nevertheless what it does say is that amongst all the various political forces in Australia the Communist movement is the one that has consistently searched for a way forward from economic hardship and instability, from neo-colonial dependence and from the horror of war. The conditions are ripe for that search to

cover much new territory in the coming years. How should it proceed?

CORRECT ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STAGE OF THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE ESSENTIAL

One critical point is to make an accurate, cool-headed appraisal of the actual stage in which the mainstream struggles are presently placed. This involves analysing reality rather than romanticising. In the past, Australian Communists and the earlier socialists were too quick to persuade themselves that the next morning's sunrise would herald the collapse of capitalism and the dawning of a bright new day. Many assumed that the Great Depression must spell the immediate end of capitalism in Australia. It was unthinkable to most Communists that the yoke of capitalist exploitation could remain tightly on the people after the defeat of fascism in the 1940s. Similarly, the struggles against U.S. aggression in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and the popular outrage against the U.S.-manipulated overthrow of the Whitlam Government in the 1970s were quite widely analysed as being indicative of major advance towards the overthrow of the existing political order. The current economic crisis might also be hastily assessed in much the same light.

These would all appear to be over-estimations of the situation. In fact, it is not evident that at any point in its young capitalist history Australia has experienced revolutionary crises comparable to those that occurred in various parts of Europe in the 1840s, the 1870s, the first few years of the 20th century, 1917-1919 and 1944-45, and in much of Asia after 1945.

The clarification made in recent years by Australian Communists that they are not working in an immediate revolutionary situation is a very substantial advance. If all the work proceeds from the assumption that revolution is just around the corner, serious errors will be made. The Communist Party can become isolated; its strength dissipated rather than built up. Golden opportunities can be lost if we pass by the rich fields where the people are struggling and fly to a lofty mountain peak above the clouds.

The current stage of the Australian people's struggle can best be described as the defence and extension of national sovereignty. This is not because Communists or anyone else decree it to be so. It is because of Australia's own particular historical development. Tasks of capitalism remain uncompleted. Remnants of the colonial era need cleaning out. Solid unification of the Australian nation as one indivisible entity needs to be achieved. National sovereignty, internally and in Australia's dealings with the world, needs strengthening. New attacks that threaten to undo gains already made need to be beaten back. The defence and extension of national sovereignty has many aspects — constitutional, legal, ceremonial, diplomatic, political, economic and cultural. It embraces the struggles to defend living standards, protect democratic rights, win Aboriginal land rights, foster national institutions, sever all formal entanglements with Britain, develop an extensive national cultural and consciousness, preserve the natural environment, build up a more independent defence capability and contribute more as a nation to the struggle for world peace. It includes many other aspects.

These struggles take place within the bounds of capitalism. All of them pound on the door of imperialist domination of Australia. All of them lead to the next stage of the people's struggle — the overthrow of imperialist power and the establishment of a people's political order. Yet setbacks will occur if it is presumed Australia is already at this latter stage, let alone at the stage of socialist revolution. If the correct stage is not properly assessed many magnificent struggles of the people can be arrogantly dismissed as 'backward and meaningless' or attempts can be made to bludgeon the wrong content into them. This can do great damage. The influence the Communists might have had to properly shape the development of the struggle and to sink deep roots in Australian society will be denied.

The Communist movement can play a leading role in giving flesh and substance to all the struggles around living standards, democratic rights and national sovereignty. It can inject greater political consciousness into these movements and hasten progress towards the next stage.

Two points of elaboration need to be made. Firstly, not everyone who raises the banner of Australian national sovereignty should be taken at face value. There are more than a few villains around who speak loudly about 'strengthening Australia's independence' while their every action is to undermine what there is of that independence. The most blatant example is the phoney patriotism expressed in the television advertisements of the mining and energy multinationals. Then there are the cases where one foreign monopoly group when squeezed by another foreign monopoly group, suddenly shouts loudly about its great contributions to Australia. In a much greyer area is the range of local business organisations whose loyalty to Australia is hot-and-cold, reflecting the frequent shifts in their contradictory position.

Secondly, to say that Australia is not in an immediate revolutionary situation does not mean that Australian Communists abandon their commitment to revolutionary ideas and goals. Exactly the opposite. The whole work should be geared towards leading the present stage on in to the next. Communist should try to deepen their own grasp of Marxism and find ways of popularising Marxist ideas amongst the people. The economic crisis is turning many people to the Marxist outlook. It will be a great loss if such opportunities are not taken up. The stage of the struggle should also be kept under careful review. There is always the possibility that the situation may change rapidly into a revolutionary one and that one stage may quickly roll into the next.

FURTHER THE AUSTRALIANISATION OF OUR WORK

The tendency by Australian Communists to make over-estimations of the political situation stemmed largely from shortcomings in developing a truly indigenous style of work. The first two decades of Australian Communism developed under the umbrella of the Third Communist International. That this International (and those before it) made major contributions to the spread of Marxist ideas, the construction of Communist organisation and the cultivation of the international spirit, is undeniable. That the insistence

on maintaining one international centre for the world Communist movement diverted many member Parties from coming to grips with the concrete conditions of their own countries, is also apparent.

Even after the formal dissolution of the Comintern in 1943 this bad tradition of looking abroad for guidance or direction did not die. The gaze now focused on new guiding organisations that had been established in Moscow.

The great upheavals in the world Communist movement of the fifties and sixties necessarily diversified the foreign centres to which attention now turned. It did not fundamentally alter the old mentality. Australian Communists now looked to Beijing, Hanoi, Pyongyang, Tirana, Havana, Belgrade, Bucharest and elsewhere as places where answers might be found. This model and that model were talked about as being 'suitable for Australia'. In a similar vein the political line of various Communist Parties in several southern European capitalist countries and national liberation struggles of a number of Third World countries were suggested on occasions as offering a way forward for Australian revolutionaries.

Mighty inspiration and rich material lies in all these foreign experiences. But there is no package of answers to be found in any of them. Whenever Australian Communists have tried to apply a foreign solution or a cocktail of foreign solutions to Australian conditions, it has not brought progress. Like all countries, Australia's social jungle is unique to it. If anyone has a chance of finding a way through, it is those who live and die amidst the undergrowth of its floor.

The strong emphasis on foreign centres and trends has retarded the growth of an Australian analysis and method of work. To some extent it has also made Australian Communists targets of fun. Their complex, rival foreign entanglements have seemed largely incomprehensible to much of the people. It is even worse when different groups of Australian Communists side with different groups within one foreign country. Doubtless these problems are exploited by anti-communists. Often it is possible to explain to many people something on what the divisions are all about. Nonetheless in all the jokes and jibes

made on the subject there is a message that must be heeded. People are asking — more in despair than in hostility — how do you Communists expect to find a way out of Australia's mess if half the time your minds are on the other side of the world?

In looking at the question of Australianisation, it should not be construed that all experience in the past draws a blank. It is too easy in identifying current problems to act as if one has stumbled on something completely new. Right back into the history of Australian Communism there was advocacy of finding an Australian path. In more recent years some Australian Communists have turned to some very serious study of Australian reality. A considerable body of valuable material now exists in many papers, journals and books. The CPA(M-L)'s own material and experience built up now over two decades, already contains much that seeks to break free from overseas obsessions. Indeed one important step in further Australianising our work is to draw together the valuable data and analysis that already has been made on Australia, inside and outside the Communist movement. Beyond that, many areas of Australian history, political economy and sociology need much deeper work. The particular functioning of Australian capitalism, the living conditions and outlook of the different sections of society, the corporate geography of the multinationals in Australia, the alliances and rivalries between different monopoly groups, the links between different monopoly groups and the various political parties and factions within the parties, the interlace of the bureaucracy with monopoly and political circles, the particularities of the Australian class structure and class relations, the position of the black people, the ethnic divisions of Australian society, the variety of Australian cultural content and form, the full range of Australian people's organisations — these and many more areas need to be pursued.

It may all look a bit daunting. But it should not be imagined that such questions can only be tackled by amassing vast amounts of documents or by carrying out elaborate research projects. Documents do need to be collected and research projects, big and small, are required. But often

the best material is gleaned from daily life. From a position in a factory, an office, a school, a public utility or in the community, it is often possible to tap many of the currents that go to explaining society's workings. This is especially so if one is observant and sees past the apparently mundane to the things of significance. If many such observations are pieced together it is possible to build up a composite picture.

If Australian Communists can gain a deep grasp of their country it will greatly facilitate the development of a political line and political policies that really take root in Australian conditions. If our mind is largely on Australia we will wholly speak and act using Australian idiom and according to Australian custom. What is more, if we can demonstrate we know Australia in fine detail, we will win the respect of the people. It will be said: "If you really want to know what's going on in this country go and ask the Communist Party and read its newspapers".

To strongly emphasise Australianisation is not to embrace the other extreme of xenophobia (fear of things foreign). Australian Communists need to know the world too. Much of what happens in Australia's economy emanates from abroad. The struggle by Australians for peace is tied up to the international strategic balance. Millions of Australians retain family and cultural ties in other countries. There is also much to be learned from the experiences and the approach taken by progressive movements around the world. Above all, Australian Communists uphold proletarian internationalism. In many cases it is possible to mobilise public opinion and material support for the national struggles of peoples in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Latin America. The situation is now also reasonably favourable to influence Australian foreign policy towards assisting the Third World struggles.

UNITY OF THE ANTI-MULTINATIONAL FORCES

In the current economic depression, the Australian people are demanding a unification of all the political forces opposed to the multinationals. There is impatience in the rank and file of many trade unions, political parties and

community organisations about the unending warfare amongst the forces of the left. The monopolies laugh while different political groups and tendencies squabble on the shop floor. The standing of Communism amongst the working class has been quite seriously damaged by the schisms of the past quarter century.

The differences that occurred in the Communist ranks in the early sixties were of major substance. Many of them remain and may take a long time yet to resolve. Nevertheless where co-operation can be found on major or minor matters it should be actively pursued. Nothing should be done that aids the multinationals' attacks on living standards and national sovereignty. Nothing should be done that gives comfort to the superpowers' war plans. Nothing should be done that isolates the Communist movement in general from the people or impedes the spread of Marxist ideas. For too long it has been too easy to hurl insulting epithets around the left. The desire for unity has been through a terrible devaluation. Working relationships have been too easily broken off. At times it was even common to feel good about having 'finished' with that lot or 'abandoned to the dustbin of history' that other lot. With isolation travelled virtue – or so it seemed, until things were looked at in the cold hard light of morning.

Certainly the intensity of the problems reflects the bitterness of past disputes and the substantial matters of principle at issue. Perhaps some attitudes introduced from the youth rebellion of the sixties and seventies compounded differences in the left. This first new generation of the post-war era surveyed the bourgeois world that had been re-built for it from the rubble and found it sorely lacking. They rose against its hypocrisy, its emptiness and its foreign wars. With boldness, brashness and great courage they questioned all, assailed all – university chancelleries, the streets, Prime Ministers and Presidents. They were impatient days. Many expected radical change by year's end. There was little time for the careful handling of different viewpoints, the unification of the broadest forces or the delicacies of a person's feelings. Sooner or later many of the young fighters opted for one or other of the established left forces. Often the choice was fairly

arbitrary. Many of them went on to make substantial further contributions. Given the rough-and-tumble of its background, it was hardly surprising that this new generation eagerly took on board the pattern of differences that already existed in the left. Such differences were seen as natural and often axes were sharpened with new vigour!

Distorted ideas about the intrusion of the class struggle into the Communist Party also fanned the rampant flames of disunity. Undoubtedly there are plenty of instances where the bourgeoisie does capture a Communist Party ideologically from within; be the Party in power or out of power. But the tendency at one stage to elevate every difference of opinion to the level of a two-line struggle did quite a bit of damage. Far from the point at issue being one that could be worked out amongst comrades, it became a life-and-death question as to whether the proletarian line would triumph over the bourgeois line or not. In such a struggle there could only be victor and vanquished.

The search now for common ground should extend well beyond the Communist movement. It should certainly embrace the ALP. It is a fact that the ALP contains within its ranks some of the finest people from the working class and from other social strata. It is also a fact that the ALP is consistently supported by a big majority of the working class and by a substantial solid portion of the middle class. There is no other political force in Australia that has its influence amongst the working people. It can also be said that the ALP is quite a nebulous body with many different trends and organised factions under its roof.

In the past the handling by Communists of relations with the ALP membership has been very patchy. There has been some good experience and some not so good. Often Communists have been over eager to point out the bourgeois origins and class role of the ALP. They desperately wanted to isolate the ALP from the working class. In their efforts they often only ended up isolating the Communist Party from the working class. Practical unity should be sought with the ALP membership on the whole range of issues affecting living standards, democratic rights and

