

# Albert Langer



Recently *Lot's Wife* interviewed Albert Langer, a former Monash student, who became a household name in the late sixties because of his prominent role in student politics.

For the last 5 years Langer has been reluctant to speak to the press about his days at Monash, but on being approached to contribute to this Moratorium Commemorative Edition of *Lot's Wife* was amenable. He has recently been willing to talk with the Media.

Albert Langer and the Monash Labor Club first attracted national attention when in 1967 the Labor Club decided to collect aid for the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam, a guerilla army fighting against the occupying imperialist American (and Australian) forces.

The repercussions of this action changed the course of the fledgling anti-war movement and set the stage for ongoing turbulent confrontations between students and the administration of Monash university.

**Langer:** What really got things going at Monash was when we started collecting money for the NLF, which wasn't intended to be a particularly big deal university issue, but was meant to radicalise the Vietnam war movement. Everyone had come to see it as just a question of the United States having made a mistake, wanting peace and so on.

The atmosphere was very different to how it is seen now, with the Monash Labor Club having a very advanced position, seeing as being an imperialist war, and were in solidarity with the Vietnamese. So we started collecting for both medical and *unspecified* aid for the National Liberation Front, and that brought this huge public outcry, orchestrated by the newspapers.

It took off in a dramatic way. There were proposals from the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), to try us for treachery, but they decided not to because that was a mandatory life imprisonment, and treason had a death penalty.

So they brought in special legislation for "the protection of the defence forces", and the university

jumped in on that, and banned collecting money for the NLF on campus, just before the government legislation went through.

*How was the aid collected?*

It was all perfectly open — we set up tables on campus, and said "any donations can help". There was an immediate strong reaction against us: the overwhelming majority of students were dead set against it, and the DLP Club actually can take the credit for having called the first mass meeting of students at Monash university, to denounce it. It's what got it going. Previously, there was just a Student Representative Council (SRC), and no student meetings.

*How did that mass meeting go?*

Brilliantly — the motion to condemn us was defeated, and replaced with motions disassociating us, which we supported. We weren't claiming that Monash students were associated with us.

The same meeting also carried motions denouncing the Vietnam war. It was the first time that student meetings had condemned

the Vietnam war. At that time there wasn't even any SRC policy against it.

*When was the Monash Association of Students (MAS) set up?*

'68. That was when the university started bringing in the disciplinary statutes. The campaign against that completely bypassed the SRC and it folded up in the middle of it. There were quite a few people from the Labor Club on the SRC who proposed that it be folded.

*What prompted the disciplinary actions?*

It wasn't actually disciplinary action — what happened was that Monash started getting a reputation for radicalism, mainly because of the NLF aid campaign. The newspapers treated that as something that happened at Monash. And Matheson's (the Vice-Chancellor at the time), attempt to disassociate the university from it backfired by making it even more so. He took disciplinary action against the three of us (Mike Hyde, Albert Langer and Bill Dowling). And then there were disciplinary trials over that, and student meetings and so on. And that was a big deal. They ended up fining us \$20 each, which was paid by a collection around the staff, taken up by visiting lecturer Joan Robinson, from Cambridge, a Marxist economist.

So all that made Monash and the anti-war protests identified together. They decided to introduce this disciplinary statute that extended the definition of misconduct to actions on or off campus. This followed a whole lot of newspaper reports about "Why don't the university authorities do something about those students who are demonstrating", and so on. He

(Matheson) actually wrote a letter to one student at Deakin Hall who was arrested in Canberra, when one of the first conscientious objectors was put in a military prison. She was arrested at the demo up there and her address was reported as Deakin Hall, Monash University. So Louis wrote a letter saying "how could you do this terrible thing?"

It was quite clear that what they had in mind was a response to formal demands from the RSL and bodies like that, that the university should act against students who were demonstrating and getting arrested.

There was an immediate reaction to that, everybody saw it as a real threat: nobody would have a bar of it.

*So collecting money for the NLF gave the anti-war movement greater politicisation?*

It had two effects. It changed the character of the anti-war movement — everyone was moved to the left. Most people in the anti-war movement hadn't supported the NLF. It was a purely pacifist movement up till then, and it very drastically changed. Everyone moved on accordingly; people who were saying it was a *mistake* moved on to say it was *immoral*, and people who were saying it was *immoral*, moved up to say it was *imperialist*.

The moderates are always saying that if you take a moderate position it attracts support. But my whole experience has been that as long as you don't actually lose touch with anybody, if you take an extreme position and make that legitimate, other people move up to fill the centre, and the centre changes.

The other effect was on the uni-

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versity's actions. Suddenly the university became a political battleground. Previously, there wasn't really much connection between radical student activity and the administration. They suddenly made it an issue: there was a definite struggle for power between the university authorities and the left wing student movement.

*Did students come to see the relation between the university administration and the powers of the State?*

Yes — that was the sort of thing that we hammered constantly, and which most students would start off seeing as extremist propaganda, but then we would always come to the issue like Bolte. Matheson would go and see Bolte at the height of some struggle — there would always be threats of calling the police or something.

*Matheson was always on about this notion of academic freedom, and the university being cloistered halls where you had free debate.*

Well, the interesting thing is that we never prevented someone from speaking . . . It's always the image of student protest . . . Never did anything happen along those lines at Monash — there was never an occasion when the issue was that we had prevented "free speech". It would have, if an appropriate thing had arisen, but we were very careful to avoid those issues which students do react against.

We were always fighting a defensive battle — it was them who were trying to stop us. They were trying to stop us collecting aid for the NLF. On the one hand, it was an offensive action, we were taking the offensive: we were collecting money to fight the Australian army. But on the other hand, they didn't have to step in and ban it: they clearly were the ones who took the initiative to bring it to a head and have a fight over it.

That's what made it clear about the State and the university. It was so obvious, and Matheson kept stressing it, that he was doing it because of the reaction off campus. And we said, there you are — the university isn't the cloistered halls of academic debate, that universities are part of the education system . . . it does what it's told, and he proceeded to do what he was told.

*Did you find that it did make it clear to students? Did it cause any change to the way the university functioned in terms of the academic side, the courses?*

It did. There was always a trend in

the student movement that tried to take up that issue in terms of "student power", which the Labor Club never went along with. It was the New Left sort of thing, and there was a lot of it in American universities. It was often promoted in the press that the issue was "student power".

We, in fact, opposed that, saying quite clearly our aims weren't "student power", but a socialist revolution. We didn't see any particular reason why universities should be run by students, but that they should serve the whole community's needs.

It was a united front between the administration and the New Left groups which raised it. The university was desperately appointing student representatives to every committee it could think of.

One form of struggle to develop actually, was when the administration was expelling students. One thing done to counter it was MAS withdrawing student representatives from the university committees — by that time there were hundreds of them, and that really worried the administration. All those students just stopped going to those committees whilst students were expelled, and that really made the administration feel isolated. They had no communication.

But we never actually interfered with the function of the university. That's a slight myth. That's the sort of impression they created, that the university's normal functions couldn't go on.

Well, they couldn't because of the political atmosphere. Matheson actually said that in his book (See *Lot's Wife* No. 7, 1980), or on TV — "no, they never actually interrupted any lectures, but there was all these thousands of people milling about at meetings. It produced a strange atmosphere". That was the essence of it. The same would be true of a factory if you had mass meetings of workers every lunch-time with more and more threatening demands about the political situation in general. The management would feel it had to do something, even though people were churning out the spare parts just as before.

*How many students went out to the moratorium in May 1970?*

The overwhelming majority — the whole campus. That was the one time that lectures were actually interrupted. I'm sure the bulk of

them would have been called off: Law and Medicine would probably have been the exceptions.

What happened was the Union Building was taken over for a couple of weeks as an organising centre. We set up a whole row of Gestetners in an open space for anyone who wanted to do leaflets and things. It wasn't a matter of getting the students to go to the moratorium, it was a matter of using the university as a place to get other people to. We were sending people out to leaflet whole factories, and sending people down to the wharves.

By the time of the moratorium, it wasn't a matter of mobilising the mass of students to go, it was accepted that all Monash would go. It was more a matter of a whole campus being a base that organised other people.

*Moving on to the students that were involved, what sort of lasting effects do you think that period of radicalisation at university had on them?*

Well, actually that coincided with a general radicalisation of Australian society. People on the Left are usually very depressed about how apathetic the masses are and so on, and that's largely a subjective reaction they have because the people on the Left are moving forward. They tend to think others are moving backwards. You notice how conservative your parents and friends are. It's not because they are getting more conservative, but because you are becoming more radical.

If you objectively sum up the average political level now compared with the Menzies era, it's moved very sharply in a direction that's very against authority.

People just think more now than they did. And that would be true for most of those university graduates you can see among teachers. There's a different atmosphere in schools. The teacher unions used to not strike at all, they were professionals. It used to be a big deal if they had a stop work meeting, and now it is acceptable that teachers are, in fact, quite a militant group.

I'd say it had that effect on the mass of students; you can see it cropping up in a particular struggle. Things are quiet now — I'd say a fair way to judge whether it had any permanent effect would be what would happen if we had another Vietnam war situation.

*Do you think there's anything happening at the moment that could spark off, or contribute to, people being politicised in that fairly rapid way they were in the late sixties?*

Not at the moment. The uranium movement showed there's very widespread alienation with society. They were getting tens of thousands to march . . . I'd say it was more because people were dissatisfied with society that they marched over uranium, rather than it being something that they felt they really had to do something about, and just keep going until victory.

I'd say that the economic crisis hasn't happened yet. And when it does people won't be as passive as they were back in the thirties. I think in a World War too, people would be a lot more outraged by the whole situation than they were by the last two world wars.

But I don't think there's any specific issue now that people can feel as strongly about as they did over Vietnam. There will be quite soon — we're heading for another depression, another world war.

*What sort of role do you think students as a grouping do play in social change, in a revolutionary sense?*

They can play a very valuable role because they are quicker to react than most people. Students aren't nearly as stable as the working class, and that's got both its positive and negative sides. They can't really threaten the government, and they tend to be fairly lightweight with students going off after all kinds of fanciful ideas. Whereas, when the working class does move into action, the whole society is invariably shaken up.

I think that it's always been the case that students are the quickest to move. That's the nature of students — they are there to study things, to think about what's going on, they read the newspapers. You've got thousands of young people all on the same campus together, talking, arguing and discussing, with this ideology that says you're entitled to, when you're not supposed to at work. They also haven't family commitments, and can't get sacked from their jobs.

So on most occasions you've got students moving first, but if the working class doesn't move it won't actually change anything.

Phil Burnham & Jeannie Rea