

NATIONAL WINNER  
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THE ROLE OF AUSTRALIAN  
COMMUNISTS IN MAKING THE WORLD A  
BETTER PLACE

## **The role of Australian Communists in making the world a better place**

My great-grandfather was a member of the Communist Party of Australia and a Trade Union organiser. While browsing the National Archives of Australia as part of the History Challenge, I came across two ASIO files of my great-grandfather, one full of documents and the other full of photographs. The files spanned his entire adult life. This discovery prompted me to explore why such a file would exist. What I discovered was a neglected history of the significant role of Australian communism in forging today's society. Many of the rights and values that we take for granted today are the end result of the tireless struggle and work of Australian communists in the face of government harassment and ASIO surveillance.

***Julian Gillies-Lekakis***

## **The role of Australian Communists in making the world a better place**

Communists are generally portrayed as subversive, power-seeking individuals whose main aim is to gain control and smash the capitalist system. In most histories of 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia, the actions and alliances made by communists are portrayed as strategic plans to take over organisations or deceptively increase their own membership. Whilst it has been recognised that much mainstream reporting and history written from the 1920's onwards was influenced by paranoid and propagandist anti-communism, little has been done to redress these misconceptions in mainstream history and general public knowledge. Examination of the lives of Australian communists shows that the true nature and goals of their work have been grossly misrepresented. Examination of a variety of sources exposes a picture of Australian communists different from the monolithic 'bogeyman' offered by many mainstream history books. I have tried to highlight the vital role that these ordinary people played in changing our society and improving the lives of all Australians. Indeed many of the rights and values that we take for granted today are the end result of the struggle and work of Australian communists. Their tireless work and selfless dedication to their beliefs of equality and internationalism, even in the face of attacks from mainstream politics and harassment by ASIO, serves as an inspiration in our time of political self-interest and individualistic accumulation. Investigation shows that the generally accepted stereotype of, power-hungry, emotionless, ideologues served to us by western media and governments, is in fact exemplary propaganda that transcends generations. Rather, by exploring the lives of Australian communists, it is clear that they were an extraordinary group of people who worked tirelessly to make the world a fairer and better place for everyone.

Many successes of the union movement were due to progressive, communist union leadership and the effectiveness with which communists organised workers (Smith, W). From 1935 to the 1970s CPA members occupied leadership positions in a number of important trade unions, and were at the centre of many major industrial conflicts. In the '30s these included communists Bill Orr and Charlie Nelson (secretary and president of the federal Miners' Federation), Ernie Thornton (secretary of the Ironworkers' Union), George Frank, (federal secretary of the Carpenters' Union - later called the Building Workers Industrial Union), Jim Munro, (organiser of the Timber Workers' Union), Tom Wright (NSW secretary of the Sheetmetal Workers' Union), Jim Healy (secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation), Don Thompson (secretary of the Building Trades Federation, Victoria), Elliott V. Elliott (federal secretary of the Seamen's Union), J.J. Brown (Victorian state secretary of the Australian Railways Union), Clarrie O'Shea (Victorian branch executive and later secretary of the Australian Tramways and Motor Omnibus Employees' Association), and Sam Lewis (Teachers' Federation). (Percy, 1995)

It has been estimated that "[b]y the beginning of 1937 there were more than 20 communist trade union officials and upwards of 1000 communists holding executive or local union positions throughout Australia" (Percy, 1995). Many of these communists continued to be re-elected, remaining in their positions until the 60's and 70's. Communists through the 30's to 70's fought for changes that benefited working people regardless of whether these would result in the defeat of Capitalism. They were in the forefront of the struggle for workers to win improved working conditions, wages, rights, employment security, job safety and health regulations. During these decades many hard battles were fought in order to achieve the work conditions we take for granted today. The system of arbitration courts/commissions, meant that conditions won by one union were able to be passed on to other workers. By running test cases, the progressive communist-led unions paved the way for other unions, winning conditions like the 38 hour week, 4 weeks paid annual leave, paid sick leave and health and safety regulations that are the cornerstones of our employment conditions still.

Another focus of communists in trade unions was the politicisation of strikes. Examples of strike actions that pursued political objectives include actions to defeat anti-trade union legislation, opposition to the Vietnam War, opposition to the sacking of the Whitlam government and solidarity actions with workers in other countries. The solidarity between workers of different nations is an important aspect of trade unionism. Wherever communists have played a leading role in a union, this Internationalism has been a high priority. (John Gilles, 2017) Several communist-led unions were at the forefront of supporting the struggle against apartheid in South Africa from the 1950's onward. Australian communist Pat Geraghty, federal secretary of the Seamans Union of Australia (1978 to 1993), was a key, founding member of the Maritime Unions against Apartheid (MUAA). This organisation co-ordinated industrial action against ships trading with South Africa and an international oil embargo that was significant in the success of the struggle. (McDonald and Jennings, 2016). During the Vietnam War, the Anti-war movement received widespread support and leadership from the communist-led trade unions, as did campaigns to raise funds in support of the Cuban people against the US blockade of that country. (John Gilles, 2017). The solidarity and support given to the peoples of the world at various times of hardship and struggle has helped many people in other countries to improve their lives.

The CPA was also active in broader social issues within Australia. The CPA had a progressive policy on Aboriginal rights as early as 1931. The '*Communist Party's Rights for Aborigines Draft Program of Struggle against Slavery*' (1931) called for equal wages, the end of protection boards, equal rights of all aborigines with other citizens, the absolute prohibition of kidnapping aboriginal children, the right to self-determination and the handing back of land. (Communist Party of Australia, 1931). It should be remembered that this platform was very radical for the time, the Communist Party being the only organisations to openly challenge government policy. Up to the 1950's, the CPA was the only organisation in the labour movement that consistently supported the struggles by Indigenous Australians for an end to their oppression. Communists campaigned in support of the Pilbara strike by Aboriginal station workers in 1946 and Communist-led unionists backed strikes by Aboriginal workers in Darwin in 1950-51. The Communist Party also welcomed Aboriginal members at a time

when indigenous people were excluded from participating in most other organisations and events in Australia. (Boughton, 2001). During the sixties, key events in the development of Aboriginal Rights, were supported by CPA members. Brian Manning, a CPA activist and staunch member of the Maritime Union of Australia, was instrumental in setting up the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights. He also played a vital role in supporting Gurindji during the 1966 Wave Hill walk off. This struggle, supported by the trade union movement, was central in paving the way for Aboriginal land rights. During the struggle, Manning and CPA members such as George Gibbs supported the striking workers camped at Wattie Creek (Daguragu) by running supplies 600 miles to and from Darwin on an appalling dirt road many times. Without these people, the Gurindji strike action could not have been maintained. Communist activists in the trade union movement were also instrumental in raising funds to support the Gurindji throughout the strike, sponsoring an informative speaking tour of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Townsville and raising \$17,000 dollars to support the Gurindji claim. (Townsend Terry, Nov 2013). The actions of communists at this time contrasted dramatically with the unofficial apartheid throughout Australia. The CPA, were significant in raising the awareness of the mainstream Australian public to the indigenous plight and fostering an informed and progressive gradual change in thinking. Without their support key events in the struggle for Land Rights that Australians now celebrate would not have succeeded.

The CPA was also one of the most progressive organisations in Australia fighting for women's liberation from 1920-1960's. Their policy included "Full equity for women, to be promoted by: genuine equal pay, opening of all professions and jobs to women, .....provision of adequate child-care facilities...free access to all forms of birth control, and reform of abortion laws." (Communist Party of Australia, 1964). The first International Women's Day in Australia was organised in 1928 by the Militant Women's Group (MWG), formed in 1927 by women from the CPA. One member of this group, Edna Ryan, CPA member and life-long campaigner for women's and workers issues was also a founding member of Women's Electoral Lobby, and is credited with achieving equal pay for women. (Maher, 2017) CPA member Dorothy Gibson, along with socialist Jesse Street were pioneering women leaders of a peace movement dominated by men both before and after World War 2. Gibson worked as a full-time organiser for the Australian Peace Council (APC), which culminated in the Congress for International Co-operation and Disarmament in 1959. She continued her peace work into the 1960s and 1970s in the struggle against the Vietnam War. The Union of Australian Women (UAW), formed in 1950, also had many key communist members. This was a national organisation that campaigned for women's rights to equal pay and conditions, increased welfare services, for affordable childcare, for Indigenous rights, against Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and for nuclear disarmament. The UAW also vigorously protested against the South African apartheid movement. Life-long communist Audrey McDonald was the National Secretary of the UAW for many years and played a key role supporting the African National Congress through solidarity with the ANC Women's League, and was the guest of the ANC at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first President of a democratic, South Africa. The UAW also organised the first United Nations-sponsored international conferences for women in 1975, International Women's Year. These women paved the way for later struggles and achievements in the women's movement. (McDonald and Jennings, 2016.)

From its beginnings the CPA adopted an internationalist perspective that broke with the dominant working class racism and sectarianism of Australia's labour movement. From the 1920s onwards, it condemned the White Australia Policy of the government. Instead the CPA welcomed migrants from other countries and argued that once migrants arrived in Australia they should be fully accepted by the trade unions with the same rights and responsibilities as other Australian workers. Their policy also called for "respect and encouragement of the national identity, traditions, culture and community rights, of migrants" and "abolition of all discriminatory social and political legislation." (Communist Party of Australia, 1964) Because of its internationalist outlook, the CPA was always a multi-ethnic party with many of the new migrants taking up membership. (Jordan, 2013). When migrants started to work in the late 1940s they would most likely come into contact with Communist union activists in their workplace. Many went on to become union leaders like George Zangalis, organiser and then president of the Australian Railways Union. Others like Giovanni Sgro who joined the communist-led Painters' Union also worked recruiting migrants to the CPA. A life long communist, Sgro was founding President of FILEF (Federation of Italian Migrant Workers and their Families) and an elected Member of the Victorian Parliament representing the Australian Labor Party for Melbourne North Province from 1979 until his retirement in 1992. Because of their communist membership, many of these migrants were denied Australian citizenship for over twenty years and were unable to travel back to see their families because they were denied re-entry rights (Kukulja and Arkley, 2016). Like many other ordinary Australians that were members of the Communist Party, these people were harassed by various governments and were targets for ASIO surveillance.

Australian Communists laid the foundations of Australia's modern economy and society. Central to their struggle was the dignity and rights of all people. Australian communists were ordinary people who envisioned a different future and worked to effect meaningful change. Passionately concerned about peace, equality and respect, they fought for social justice throughout their entire lives without consideration of self-interest. Their policies, ahead of their time, are now celebrated by mainstream Australia as signs of our progressive society. At the time however, their struggle to achieve these goals often put them at odds with mainstream Australia, attracting harassment by governments and ASIO. Regardless of this they continued their struggle for future generations. Communism is still a dirty word that is largely misunderstood by Australians. Though people think of themselves as well educated these days, most people would not believe you if you told them that the rights they take for granted today are communist policies fought for by previous generations. Selfless devotion to a moral cause is not so common today, yet there is not one person in this country untouched or unaffected by the lifelong work of Australian communists. The least we could do is give them credit where credit is due.

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<http://www.reasoninrevolt.net.au/objects/pdf/a000219.pdf>

Argues that indigenous Australians are the most persecuted people on earth. Discusses their lack of political rights, the persecution of aboriginal women, and the 'starvation rations' which they are provided. It presents 12 demands "on behalf of black and white workers of Australia."

Communist Party of Australia, *Australia's way forward: program of the Communist Party of Australia, 1964*

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Document outlining the political platform and policy of the Communist Party of Australia.

\* NB State Library of Victoria

Manning, Brian. 'An activists account of the Wave Hill walk-off.' Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture. 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2002.

[http://indigenoustrights.net.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/384149/f81.pdf](http://indigenoustrights.net.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/384149/f81.pdf)

A Personal account by Brain Manning (CPA member ) of the Wave Hill Dispute, detailing the role of the North Australian Workers Union (NAWU) in supporting Vincent Lingiari's cause. It details Manning own involvement from the beginning of the dispute, providing needed food supplies to sustain the Strikers in their struggle, to the presentation of the leasehold title to the Gurindji at Dagaragu in August 1975 Mannings account also details the vital work of other unionists and CPA members such as George Gibbs and Dexter Daniels.

Shayler, Gray and Frew, 1931. 'Communist election manifesto,' Melbourne. Reason in Revolt: Source documents of Australian Radicalism.

<http://www.reasoninrevolt.net.au/objects/pdf/a000469.pdf>

Sets out the Communist Party position for the 1931 federal election

### National Archives of Australia (Digital Files)

National archives of Australia: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Central office; A6119, Personal files, alpha-numeric series, 1934 – 1955; 5410, GILLIES, Douglas John Volume 1, 1934 – 1955.

Link:

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=12836025&isAv=N>

File of documents including descriptions of my great-grandfather, minutes of meetings he attended, details of his movements, correspondence regarding searching his residence, documents regarding people he associated with.

National archives of Australia: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Central office; A9626, Photographic material (including photocopies of photographs) created by ASIO, 1958 - 1978; 456, GILLIES, Douglas John, 1958 – 1978.

Link:

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=30821402&isAv=N>

File of photographs of my great-grandfather including photographs of him outside buildings, walking down the

street, with my great-grandmother, with my grandfather and grandmother and photos of him in meetings taken through windows.

### **Oral History Interview**

Gillies, J, personal communication, 20 July, 2017

Interview with my grandfather John Gillies, who was personally involved with the CPA and Trade Union movement since the early 1960s

## **Secondary Sources**

Botsman, Peter, '*Serious Love - Working Papers*' [PDF]

[https://www.workingpapers.com.au/files/papers/serious\\_love\\_0.pdf](https://www.workingpapers.com.au/files/papers/serious_love_0.pdf)

Discusses Tom and Audrey McDonalds life's work - Tom worked in the Building Unions and was the founding father of the CFMEU, achieving 4 weeks annual leave and superannuation for workers. Audrey was a founding member of the Union of Australian Women who actively fought for women's rights, peace and anti-apartheid.

Boughton, Bob, 2001 'The Communist Party of Australia's Involvement in the Struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Rights 1920 – 1970' in *Labour and Community: Historical Essays*, edited by R Markey, University of Wollongong Press.

[ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=labour1999](http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=labour1999)

A comprehensive study analyzing the CPA's role in fighting for aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders' rights. The text thoroughly details the entire journey of their struggles; from the original activism in the 1930's to the formation of the FCAA (federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement) and its vital role in supporting indigenous rights.

Jordan, Douglas, 2011. '*The Communist Party of Australia, Politics and the Trade Union Movement*', 1945 – 1960 [PDF]

[vuir.vu.edu.au/16065/1/Douglas\\_Jordan\\_PhD.pdf](http://vuir.vu.edu.au/16065/1/Douglas_Jordan_PhD.pdf)

A very long paper (later published as a book) that discusses the CPA and trade unions, analyzing their work in various areas of progressive social change including peace activism, refugees and indigenous rights. It argues that communist union activists played a crucial part in changing the face of Australian industrial and general politics, and that the impact of the CPA's union activities remains as a key factor in the evolution of the Australian labour movement, Australian politics and Australian society.

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[www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/06/12/unwanted-australians-giovanni-sgro](http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/06/12/unwanted-australians-giovanni-sgro)

Account by Giovanni Sgro of his experiences as an Italian immigrant and member of the CPA. Denied citizenship for 20 years by ASIO, and also denied a re-entry pass back into Australia when he wished to visit his sick mother in Italy, he finally become a member of the ALP and an elected member of the Government of Victoria who worked for the rights of migrants and refugees.

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McDonald, Audrey and Jennings Peter, 2016. 'Australian Unions and the fight against Apartheid', · Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House.

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This text details the leading role played by many Australian Unions led by CPA members, in initiating protest measures against the racist South African Government

Percy, John. November 14, 1995 'The CPA and the unions' in *Green Left Weekly*

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/cpa-and-unions>

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Smith, Warren. 'A brief history of Australian unionism and the role of the Communist Party'. New Age Pub, Surry Hills, N.S.W.

[www.cpa.org.au/resources/australian.../brief-history-australian-unionism-n-cpa.pdf](http://www.cpa.org.au/resources/australian.../brief-history-australian-unionism-n-cpa.pdf)

A detailed article that looks at the CPA and Trade Unions, and the relationship between them throughout their history. Includes discussion of many individuals and many personal quotes.

Townsend, Terry, Nov 2013. 'Brian Manning (1932-2013) and the Gurindji `walk offs' in *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*. [excerpt from *The Aboriginal Struggle & the Left*, Sydney: Resistance Books, 2009.]

<http://links.org.au/node/3581>

This is an excerpt from Terry Townsends book 'The Aboriginal Struggle & the Left' (Sydney: Resistance Books, 2009.). Printed as a tribute to Brian Manning at the time of his death, it highlights his important role in the historic struggle of the Gurindji people for their rights.