The Red North

Queensland's History of Struggle

Jim McIlroy

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Introduction

By Jim McIlroy

The radical history of Queensland is not well known to most Australians. We are better acquainted with the image of the reactionary Joh Bjelke-Petersen regime and Pauline Hanson's racist One Nation Party as the symbol of Queensland politics in the national consciousness.

But there is another history of Queensland, one in which some of the most important class struggles and social upheavals in Australia have occurred.

This talk focuses on three special periods:

- The great shearers' strikes of the 1890s, the biggest industrial confrontations in the country's history, and a turning point in the direction of the labour movement.
- The "Red Flag Riots" of 1919, in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917, when right-wing gangs attacked a community of Russian Bolshevik refugees in Brisbane.
- The era of the "Red North" in the 1930s and 1940s, when north Queensland developed as the single strongest base of the Communist Party of Australia in the country, and Fred Paterson became the only communist ever elected as a member of an Australian parliament.

This, of course, is not the be-all and end-all of radical politics in Queensland, by any means. There have been many other progressive struggles and confrontations, including more recently the anti-Vietnam War campaign; the Springbok anti-apartheid confrontation of 1970; the protests against Joh's anti-street march laws in the 1970s; and the SEQEB (South East Queensland Electricity Board) industrial dispute of the mid-1980s, which became a challenge to the Bjelke-Petersen government itself.

Also, the hitherto hidden history of Aboriginal struggles against racial oppression in Queensland and other states is only now being brought into the open.

Jim McIlroy is a member of the Socialist Alliance. This pamphlet is based on a talk given at the Democratic Socialist Party's Marxism 2000 Conference held in Sydney, January 2000.

In studying the lessons of our past, the history of Queensland is particularly instructive, as the contrast between radical struggle and right-wing reaction have been nowhere more glaringly displayed than in this state.■

Top & bottom: Shearers preparing to confront police and army during 1891 strike.

The Great Shearers' Strikes of the 1890s

Established as a penal settlement to replace the American colonies lost to Britain in the War of Independence of 1776, Australian capitalism developed to the point where the demands of economic growth necessitated an end to the system of convict transportation by the mid-19th century.

"Free labour" took over as the basis of the workforce and, as the class struggle developed, so did trade unionism.

Essentially growing out of the early English trade unions, the Australian movement, in a period of chronic labour shortage, was able to expand and win some world-historic demands: the first eight-hour working day, for example.

The gold rush of the 1850s and 1860s gave a further impetus to the class struggle, with the demands of the miners for democratic rights (symbolised in the Eureka Stockade rebellion of 1854) providing a further stage in the political development of the workers' movement.

Australian capitalism experienced relative boom conditions for two decades, from around 1870 to 1890. But all that was to end, and a new stage in the class struggle commenced.

As Edgar Ross wrote:

> For several years there had been a large inflow of British capital into Australia to exploit its resources, extending the country's economic base from agriculture to manufacturing, bringing into being ports to handle the export of wool, beef, metals and sugar, and expanding communications generally, crossing the borders of the colonies. Conditions had matured for the forging of links in the employing class. Challenging it was a growing trade union movement, with shearers, miners and maritime workers in the vanguard. On the agenda was clearly a trial of strength along class lines. The moment for it came with the ending of relatively boom conditions and the development of an economic crisis throughout the world, reflecting itself in the decline of the price of

commodities upon which the Australian economy largely depended. (For instance the price of wool declined by 40% from 1888 to 1894.) Signs of the times were the collapse of land prices and the suspension of payments by banks.

The employers reacted to the failing economy by pressing for a reduction in wages, aided now by the presence of a reserve army of unemployed to bring pressure on the labour market. Workers moved to resist attacks on their living standards in a mood of militant revolt.[1]

Maritime strike

The first big clash occurred with the Maritime Strike of 1890, which spread from the shipping industry and wharves to encompass the pastoral industry, miners, transport workers and others, on a nationwide scale.

Its origin was the action of the shipowners in trying to prevent the Maritime Officers Association, which was campaigning for improved wages and conditions, from affiliating with the Melbourne Trades Hall Council. Trade union recognition was to be one of the central issues in the years of struggle.

Trade union leaders everywhere saw the actions of the shipping companies in August 1890 as being on behalf of the employers in general, and there was a ready response to the appeal by the Maritime Council for solidarity action.

Clashes occurred on the wharves and elsewhere between unionists and "free labourers" (scabs).

The struggle in Queensland then began to move to centre stage of a growing, open class war.

The Queensland Employers Association took the initiative in forming a union of all employers. On the workers' side, the Australian Labour Federation (based in Brisbane) on September 16, 1890, called for a general strike.

The Brisbane *Courier* cried, "The ALF has thrown off the mask and boldly raised the flag of national communism".[2]

At the height of the struggle, an estimated 50,000 workers were involved, with the strike committee organising large amounts of strike pay in support.

Reacting to the general strike declaration, the employers described it as "undiluted communism".[3]

But the unions were not sufficiently well coordinated, and the united front began to crumble, resulting in the strike being called off on October 27, 1890.

Prior to the Maritime Strike, several events had emphasised the intensity of the impending confrontation:

The London dockers' dispute, August 1889. A strike by 100,000 London dockers

and other labourers evoked widespread sympathy around Australia. The issues of guaranteed minimum pay and the abolition of contract work won strong support in this country, especially due to the writings of the socialist William Lane, editor of the Brisbane-based newspaper, *The Worker*. (Lane was to play a key role in the later events of 1891.)

Assistance from Australian workers totalling some 30,000 English pounds (more than $2 million in today's currency) contributed significantly to an important victory for the dockers — a milestone in the British class struggle.

The Jondaryan dispute, May 1890. This was a test case chosen by the pastoralists, which resulted in a win for the workers — and opened the way for the bigger battles to follow.

Pastoralists decided that at Jondaryan Station (on the Queensland Darling Downs, in the Toowoomba area) wool would be shorn by non-union labour. The Queensland Shearers Union and the Australian Labour Federation united to black ban the scab wool.

Waterside workers in Queensland prevented the loading of the banned wool onto ships, and the employers were forced to give in and sign an agreement with the QSU.

As Lindsay Mather, in his detailed account of the shearers' strikes, *The First Notes of the Drum*, explained:

> The Jondaryan Affair … proved to be of major importance in the great class struggle which followed, because it illustrated to the pastoralists in particular and to the capitalists in general the necessity of combining to fight the workers. It was apparent after Jondaryan that the capitalists were very conscious of themselves as a class and were determined to retain their dominant position as the exploiters at any cost.[4]

The Jondaryan dispute "meant many things to many people", Mather continued.

> To the bushmen [the shearers and rural labourers] — a great victory which tended to make them overconfident; to the ALF leaders it tended to mean that their first organisational test was over; to the squatters it meant a reappraisal, and a need for unity which they set about rebuilding.[5]

At this point, we should step back for a moment and review the development of union organisation.

The key development was the rise of the New Unionism, in comparison to the Old Unionism of the early days (from the mid-19th century on). The Old Unionism refers to the original craft unions, such as the stonemasons, boilermakers and blacksmiths, and engineers, which tended to be benevolent societies as much as unions.

New Unionism was based on semiskilled and unskilled workers. W.G. Spence, a key leader of the New Unionism, wrote: "There must be political organisation of the

masses and thorough industrial cooperation."[6]

The fight for the closed shop became a key feature of the New Unionism, and a new political perspective which, for many, meant workers' control and even socialism.

The new rural-based unions which moved to centre stage were the southern-based Amalgamated Shearers Union (ASU), formed in 1872, and the Queensland Shearers Union, founded shortly afterwards.

The Australian Labour Federation, based in Brisbane, set itself the task of unifying the country's unions for industrial and political action, but was never able to succeed in forming an Australia-wide organisation.

In 1894, all the bush unions united to form the Australian Shearers Union, which later became the Australian Workers Union (AWU).

Despite differences of perspective among the workers' leaders, as Mather notes:

> … there is no doubt the employers clearly saw the issue as one of class struggle. They believed that if Lane and the Australian Labour Federation were successful in their plan for the complete unity of labour, the logical and final goal (despite the protestations of union leaders to the contrary) would be complete change of society from the capitalist form to that of socialism.[7]

1891 battleground

The pastoralists selected Queensland as the next battleground and drew up a proposed agreement for the 1891 shearing season based on "freedom of contract", non-recognition of unions, rejection of the eight-hour day, and complete control of working conditions to the employer.

> The new year was barely born when the great [shearers'] strike, fanned by the winds of open class conflict, burst into flames, on sixth day of January, 1891.[8]

Right across western Queensland, shearers refused to sign the contract and the war was on. Strike camps were set up all across the west, and both sides prepared for an all-out fight.

What was different in Queensland at the time, which made the struggle so much more explosive and larger-scale? Mather explains:

> The ASU in the southern colonies had found it well-nigh impossible to defeat the pastoralists in 1890 when their position was much more favourable …
>
> In the NSW and Victorian sheep country there were almost 3000 sheds and, of these, a great number were owned by small graziers who were easier to deal with because of their relative independence from the Pastoralists Union and their belief in the myth of free enterprise and rugged individualism. On the other hand, there were only 150 sheds in the whole of Queensland. Knowing that they stood in a position of

> strength in all the colonies, it was not surprising the squatters rejected the peace overtures of the unionists.[9]

In other words, the structure of the Queensland wool industry, dominated by huge pastoral leases, created the objective conditions for a greater proletarianisation of the workforce and, overall, a bigger clash of class interests i.e., big capital versus big labour.

From early January 1891, "blackleg" or scab labour was brought in by ship, especially from Melbourne, where unemployment was particularly high at the time because of the 1890s depression, and the bush unionists moved to counter it

Confrontations occurred all over western Queensland, with armed bush cavalry riding to confront train-loads of scabs, escorted by police and troops (heavily armed, with weapons including Gatling guns and even cannon).

According to Mather: "The west was an armed camp for at the height of the struggle there were 1400 troops as well as the armed police and special constabulary, and opposed to them were more than 10,000 bushmen, having in their possession an estimated 800 rifles."[10]

Huge bush camps were established to house and organise the strikers. These camps were communally based and run by elected committees.

Food was bought in bulk and sold at or below cost, or free to those without money. Camp butcheries and shops were established.

Blue Bush Swamp Camp, the largest of its kind, was set up near Barcaldine, west of Rockhampton, in early 1891. (Barcaldine township had a population of 1200, compared to 1000 for the permanent strike camp nearby.)

At the entrance to the camp, two flags flew defiantly: the Southern Cross of Eureka, and another carrying the motto of the camp, "Freedom under the Southern Cross".

Military drill was carried out under the supervision of ex-soldiers. Order was maintained by a Union Vigilance Committee of 30 wearing red armbands, who patrolled the town and kept order there as well.

Sports teams were organised, and there was a drum and fife band, which led "the many parades the workers staged through the towns from time to time. A hut had been built for amusement and games and another as a reading room. Housed in a tent and later in a substantial hut was a comprehensive library of more than a thousand books and innumerable magazines …"[11]

Titles which were "hungrily consumed by the bushworkers of those days," according to Mather, included Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, on the one hand, and Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and other utopian socialist tracts, on the other.

A weekly newspaper, entitled the *Labor Bulletin*, was published from February 28, 1891.

In early March 1891, a general council of the Australian Labour Federation was held in Rockhampton. After lengthy debate, it issued a manifesto, which declared in part:

> There is an organised attempt being made by Australian capitalism to break down unionism, the immediate point of attack being the Queensland bush unions affiliated to the ALF. This attack is made by the whole capitalistic force of the continent, with the evident intention to extend it, if successful, to every organised body of wage-earners throughout the colonies. It is backed by the unlimited funds of the banks and the Federated Employers Association, it is endorsed by the Queensland government, and is justified by the misrepresentations and misstatements which always accompany the attacks of capitalism upon labour.[12]

This accurate portrayal of the cause of the conflict opened the way for the most militant industrial-political confrontation in Australia's history.

Mass meetings of support were held in cities and towns all across Queensland. Speeches and letters referred to the lessons of the Paris Commune of 1871.

One union leader warned that the country was " on the verge of a social revolution".[13]

Although tension was high, large-scale violence did not break out, however. And in late March 1891, the authorities acted ruthlessly and arrested key strike leaders, using armed police and troops. The leaders were charged with "conspiracy" and jailed in chains.

The show trial in Rockhampton, at which the accused were duly convicted and harshly sentenced, was a farce.

But, contrary to the expectations of the government and employers, the strike actually strengthened as a result of the persecution of the union leaders. The number of strike camps increased and burnings of woolsheds intensified.

Many pastoralists panicked: "The country is in a state of revolution", one wrote.[14]

Demands circulated among the strikers for Queensland to become a "workers' republic".

The high point of the struggle was the first May Day march in Australia, held at Barcaldine, on May 1, 1891, involving nearly 1500 strikers and their supporters.

Nevertheless, food was running low and strike funds were depleted.

Cracks began to appear in the strike front and, despite an overwhelming vote at a plebiscite of the camps to continue to reject non-union labour in April, the strike lost momentum.

The Strike Committee officially called the strike off on June 20, 1891.

1894: the third round

The bitterness of defeat resulted in a series of "spasmodic, running battles with the workers receiving the worst of it until finally open warfare broke out once more in 1894".[15] The 1894 dispute, although shorter in time, "generated more actual physical violence and class bitterness than was evident in the previous conflict".[16]

Strike camps were formed again, as the shearers refused to sign the agreement for the 1894 season. Some gun battles occurred, with few casualties, however. But a number of woolshed burnings took place. Most famous of these was the gunfight and fire at Dagworth Station, near Winton, which later led to Banjo Patterson's penning of Australia's unofficial national anthem, *Waltzing Matilda*.

Eventually, the strike was crushed and its leaders were jailed.

So, the great events of the 1890s shearing strikes ended in defeat for the workers.

It was turning point in Queensland and Australian working-class history. The conclusion drawn by the trade union leaders from the eventual defeat of this militant, almost insurrectionary, industrial action, was to form a political party.

They sat under the "Tree of Knowledge" in Barcaldine, and decided to form, unfortunately, not a revolutionary workers' party, but a reformist, parliamentary party — the Australian Labor Party.

The Amalgamated Workers Union was transformed over time into the conservative Australian Workers Union (popularly known today as "Australia's Worst Union"). Its dominant role in Queensland ALP politics over a century draws its origins to the defeat of the 1890s strikes.

Nevertheless, the gains of the strikes were that unions were eventually recognised, that the conditions of shearers and other rural labourers did finally improve, and that a tradition of militant working-class struggle was established.

Lessons of the 1890s strikes

A numbers of reasons for the defeat can be identified.

1. Disunity among the strike leaders and lack of a clear political and industrial perspective.

2. While key leaders, such as William Spence and William Lane, were excellent propagandists and agitators, and other leaders showed great organising skills, their politics varied from militant syndicalist to utopian socialist. Lane, disillusioned with the apparent failure of industrial struggle in Australia, organised an ill-fated expedition to establish a utopian socialist community in Paraguay!

3. The unity between the pastoralists (who realised that they faced a test case for the future of the class struggle in Australia and were determined to prevent a union

victory at all costs) and the entire ruling class and its state machinery, which utilised all its armed power, its class-biased courts and its media against the workers, was decisive in the final instance.

4. Political weaknesses among the strikers included racism, which was reflected in widespread opposition to Chinese labour, which divided the working class, and was a prelude to the White Australia Policy. Not all the strikers agreed with a racist attitude, and some attempts were made to organise Chinese labour onto the side of the strike. In addition, there seems little evidence of the role of women in the dispute.

5. Other commentators refer to tactical errors made by the unionists, including a premature launching of the general strike before the union forces were fully prepared, and an over-cautious approach by the union leaders to escalating the struggle at a later time, when this appeared necessary.

6. In 1894, in particular, the leadership had been severely weakened by the jailing of many leaders from the 1891 events, and the flight of many others, under William Lane's influence, to Paraguay.

7. The lack of a revolutionary Marxist leadership, capable of building a party to unify and carry on the struggles, was decisive in the end. Instead, the movement turned its attention to a false road — founding a reformist, parliamentary, liberal-capitalist party, the Australian Labor Party.■

Barcaldine, 1890: Striking shearers trying to hinder passage of scabs under military escort.

The Red Flag Riots, Brisbane 1919

The following account is based largely on Raymond Evans' book, *The Red Flag Riots: A Study of Intolerance*. He begins with an apt quote from the then Acting Prime Minister, W.A. Watt: "… strange things occur in Brisbane, now and then."[17]

Brisbane has generally been described until recently as a sleepy, boring, overgrown country town, not so much a genuine metropolis like Sydney or Melbourne. Yet that overall image contrasts with a history of some of the most tumultuous upheavals anywhere in the country.

Streetfighting broke out in Brisbane during the 1890-91 maritime and shearers' strikes. In 1912, Australia's first general strike occurred when tramway workers walked out over a demand for recognition of their union and pay claims, and solidarity action spread to the entire union movement of Brisbane and then statewide.

A strike committee established workers' control over all industries in the capital and, at the height of the struggle, some 25,000 people marched in the city, watched by 50,000 supporters. The strike eventually crumbled, but the workers later won most of their demands.

Background to the 1919 events

During World War 1, the anti-conscription struggle nationwide was fought with immense determination, involving an alliance of forces, most importantly represented by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or "Wobblies" as they were often called).

The second pro-conscription referendum of December 1917 had been fought most fiercely in Queensland (and was defeated even more decisively than the first referendum of 1916).

But by 1918, the IWW had been severely repressed in other states, with the jailing of the 12 Wobbly leaders in Sydney on trumped-up arson charges that year. In

Queensland, however, the IWW was still expanding its influence.

T.J. Ryan, the Queensland Labor premier of the time, had supported the anti-conscription cause. Queensland, as the last surviving ALP government in the country, was described by federal military intelligence sources as "the most disloyal state".[18] However, Ryan himself was overseas at the time of the 1919 upheaval, and Acting Premier Ted Theodore played a reactionary role in assisting the repression of the left during that year.

Antiwar sentiment had been growing in the community for some years, crystallised in the rejection of Prime Minister Billy Hughes' conscription referenda. And discontent at war profiteering by the wealthy, while "sacrifices for the patriotic war effort" were demanded of the workers and the poor, had deepened considerably.

Add to this the dramatic impact of the Russian Revolution of October 1917, in Australia as elsewhere around the world, and the recipe was there for a major clash of forces.

Moreover, a unique element had been introduced into the equation by the existence in Queensland of an émigré community of Russian exiles, around 4000 strong, some of whom were spread around the state, but the majority of whom were congregated in the boarding houses of South Brisbane (parts of which became virtually a "Russian ghetto").

Most of these émigrés, in contrast to the Russian migrant community in later years, were pro-Bolshevik. They had settled in Queensland almost by default: it was a Western outpost at the end of a tortuous escape route for political exiles under the tsar, via Siberia, in the post-1905 Revolution period.

Their Union of Russian Workers (URW) played a major role in the events of 1919. A catalyst was the May Day march, held on May 1, 1918, which was initiated by the URW.

A leading founder of the URW had been "Tom" Sergeev (alias Artem), who returned to Russia after the February Revolution, and became a member of the 15-person Bolshevik Central Committee which voted for the October insurrection. He died tragically in a train accident several years later.

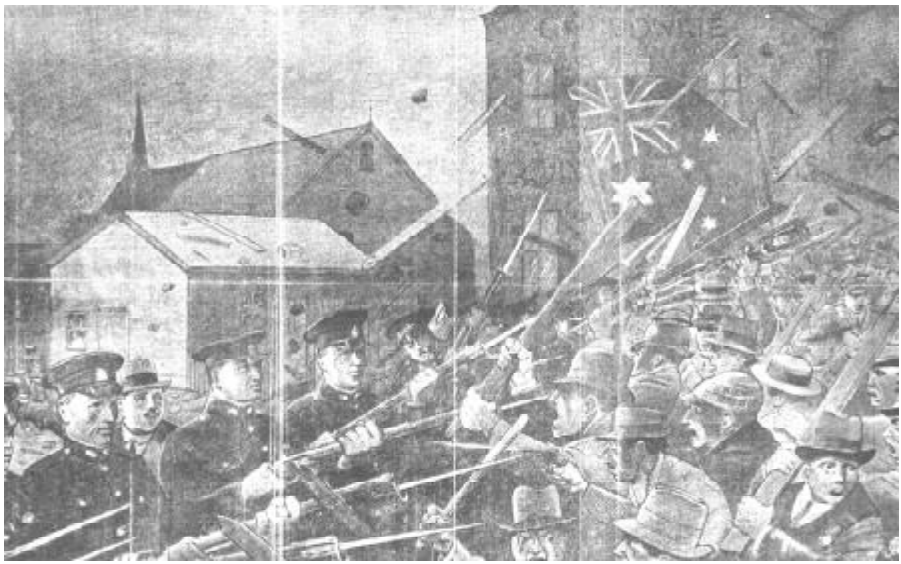
The URW worked closely with the IWW, and had nothing but contempt for the ALP and the union officialdom.

According to IWW spokesperson Norman Jeffrey: "The red flag stands for … revolution. The revolution must come; Bolshevism will never be stopped in Australia."[19] Red flags appeared over trades halls, and over workers' homes all around the country!

For a *Brisbane Courier* correspondent, however, the red flag meant "blood, fire, destruction and devil worship".[20]

In September 1918, the Commonwealth government banned the flying of the red

Right: "Tom" Sergeev (Artem) — Russian Bolshevik in Brisbane (1911-17). *Below:* Illustration from *Queensland Police Union Journal* of the "battle of Merrivale Street", Brisbane, March 24, 1919. Reluctant cops clash with right-wing "loyalist" mob intent on pogrom against radicals and Russians.



flag (joining a ban on the Sinn Fein flag), as the emblem of "an enemy country".

Queensland became divided into two camps, "loyal" and "disloyal", according to the conservative leaders.

"Loyalists" began to prepare and to arm themselves, led by the Returned Servicemen's League (RSSILA). Conflicts broke out in Hughenden, Townsville and elsewhere around the state.

The Russian workers' weekly paper, *Knowledge and Unity*, was suppressed by military intelligence in mid-November 1918, after an issue which declared: "We are all brothers fighting the one enemy, capitalism … fighting for liberty and for the red flag."[21]

However, as Evans notes:

> IWW ascendancy in Queensland in 1918-19 was still an important political and industrial fact, setting the state apart from the rest of the commonwealth. For, whereas the imprisonment of over 100 militants in 1916-17 and the deportations of more than a dozen in 1918 in the southern states and Western Australia had either muted or crushed this once powerful movement, the temporising approach of the more libertarian Ryan regime had allowed it to survive and largely prosper.[22]

The IWW philosophy of One Big Union was widely proclaimed and supported among workers in the state.

On January 26, 1919, a red flag protest march of some 1500 occurred in Brisbane, with banners such as "Down with Allied intervention in Russia" and "Down with the War Precautions Act".

Military intelligence then raided and wrecked the premises of the URW in South Brisbane, and the homes of Russian leaders, seizing books, banners, flags and the URW's printing press.

In angry response, the URW reconstituted itself as "a fully fledged Soviet committee — the Southern Soviet of Russian Workers"![23]

"What was there in carrying the red flag or the Sinn Fein flag? Practically little. But behind both there was *rebellion*", wrote conservative MLA W.H. Barnes in an intelligence report of April 1919.[24]

'Loyalist' pogrom

The crunch came in March 1919.

The URW, IWW and other militants staged a protest march on Sunday March 23, to continue the campaign against the WPA and to protest the repression. They carried red flags, banners, ribbons and badges in open defiance of the authorities.

The crowd, swelling to around 1500 or more, marched from Turbot Street, outside

the Brisbane Trades Hall offices, to the Domain (an open area for speech-making, situated on the riverside, where the Queensland University of Technology is now).

After three hours of radical speeches, the meeting closed with the singing of *The Red Flag* anthem.

Outraged by this display of defiance, loyalist mobs gathered at North Quay that night, organised by officers from the RSSILA. They attacked a Wobbly open air meeting, held regularly each Sunday night. They then surged across Victoria Bridge, yelling, "Let us clear this scum out of Brisbane"![25]

In South Brisbane, they rushed toward the "Bolshevik Headquarters" with the stated intention of "burning it down and assaulting the Russians connected with it".

"When the loyalists were within 250 metres of the hall [one of the main Russian leaders, Zuzenko] and several others emerged from a side lane and fired three shots in quick succession above the heads of the charging mob, scattering them in panic".[26] They retreated, and regrouped for another attack at a later time.

The capitalist press went berserk the following day. The *Daily Mail* headlined: "Bolshevik Outbreak: Police and Soldiers Badly Mauled" and other such distortions.

This culminated a conservative press tirade against Bolshevism lasting more than a year. The March 19 *Courier* railed that Bolshevism represented "the worst terror in the history of revolution", a compound of "madness and undiluted savagery".[27]

On the evening of Monday March 24, a huge mob of some 7000-8000 loyalists (mostly ex-servicemen) gathered at North Quay, on the Brisbane River, and, whipped up by calls of "take the law into our own hands", surged across the bridge to attack the Russian headquarters, now in Merivale Street, South Brisbane.

Armed police, ordered in by the state government, blocked the road, with bayonets fixed.

Stones and bottles flew, and the crowd attacked, as other mounted police rode into the melee. Many police and attackers were injured, gunshots were fired and some were wounded.

The Russian HQ was destroyed with missiles, but they themselves were in hiding elsewhere against what they described as "a pogrom" (similar to the anti-Jewish pogroms of the Black Hundreds in tsarist Russia).

In a frenzied rage, the reactionary mob attacked Russian homes and shops in South Brisbane, assaulting any suspected individuals in the street.

> "We are accustomed to any measures of victimisation", commented a group of Russians later, "because of tsardom in Russia, we used to suffer a great deal". Yet, "the cowardly and uncalled-for revolt by Brisbane reactionaries" had represented an intensification of former tribulations …[28]

The RSSILA, on the other hand, complained of a "hostile act" by police in curbing their assault on the Russian HQ, and warned that "unless immediate action is taken … [to suppress and deport the Bolsheviks] serious loss of life will be the inevitable result".[29]

This chilling threat shows the intensity of counterrevolutionary sentiment among some right-wing sectors at that time, some of whom seriously feared that Queensland was on the brink of "social revolution".

While this was no doubt rather exaggerated in reality, there was an intense class polarisation at the time. The impact of the Russian Revolution had been significant, and strikes and social turmoil were on the rise in the post-war period, in Australia and worldwide.

State and federal governments now colluded closely to suppress the radical movement. Show trials were held for the "crime" of carrying a red flag, and 15 people were jailed for terms of six months of more.

Russians were arrested, in preparation for deportation (although the British government opposed deportations of Bolshevik supporters from Australia back to Russia, as it could only help the Soviet cause against a then-faltering White-Allied invasion).

On the right, the existence of many returned soldiers, led by reactionary officers, frustrated and disillusioned by postwar unemployment and economic hardship, represented a potential base for fascism.

In fact, "the first of Australia's secret armies [the 'Army to Fight Bolshevism' (AFB)] was launched as a direct outcome of the Red Flag Riots".[30] Later, others, such as the White Guard and the New Guard of NSW, were to follow.

On the left, the movement began to revive again after the repression, from late 1919-20 onwards.

The Red Flag Prisoners wrote in a letter in May 1919: "We know that in the near future, the red flag of freedom … will once again float from the flagstaffs and the homes of the proletariat … Get wise. Unite."[31]

After a solidarity campaign outside the prison, and with the impact of hunger strikes and political organising inside Boggo Road Jail, the Red Flag Prisoners were eventually all released by September 1919.

Many red flag organisers and supporters became founding members of the Australian Communist Party, formed in August 1920.

This revival of the left laid the foundations for the next major period of radical history under discussion, the growth of the Communist Party in North Queensland — known as the "Red North".■

The Red North

The development and influence of the Communist Party of Australia in north Queensland represents another unique chapter of radical politics in the state, and in the history of the CPA itself.

"The Red North", as it came to be known, was so called because the CP grew and spread its influence there among the population at large to a greater degree than any other single region of the country, during the 1930s and 1940s.

This was reflected in the eventual election to state parliament of Fred Patterson in 1944, and again in 1947, as the only communist ever to win a parliamentary seat in Australia.

This development revealed some special features of the Red North of the time (meaning the area north from Mackay to Cairns).

Much of the material of this section is based on Diane Menghetti's book, *The Red North: The Popular Front in North Queensland*. She notes that in the early days:

> Organisation in Queensland was considerably in advance of its federal counterpart, which was plagued by the struggle between the old socialist parties competing for recognition as the official communist party … it is likely that the official branches in Cairns and Townsville, which were set up by a touring state organiser early in 1922, actually predated the establishment of a national party structure.[32]

In this context, it is notable that the journal of the founding Queensland organisation, known as *The Communist*, published in August 1920, became Australia's first communist newspaper for a short time.

It is also notable that the Bolshevik Union of Russian Workers was a founding section of the new Queensland branch of the CP, at the end of 1920.

By 1924, northern branches existed in at least Cairns, Innisfail, Townsville, Collinsville, Scottville and Mount Mulligan.

Growth was slow but steady during the 1920s. In 1933, the Queensland party reorganised into two districts — number 3 centred on Brisbane, and number 9, covering Mackay and all areas north.

By 1934, the growth of the party in the north was reflected in substantial support gained in federal elections by three party candidates.

Weil's Disease

Most importantly, the party played a key role in the struggle of the sugar workers, most notably over the issue of Weil's Disease.

In the dedication to her novel, *Sugar Heaven,* Jean Devanny, the Communist Party writer and well-known orator, wrote that the sugar workers' strike of 1935 over Weil's Disease was:

> Not a struggle for wages but for life; for the living labour forces upon whose backs the tentacles of the giant sugar industry of the northlands are fastened.[33]

Weil's Disease is a plague-like fever, spread by rats, which affected cane-cutters in north Queensland from 1933-34. Severe illness and some deaths occurred in that period, provoking a crisis in the canefields.

Caneworkers demanded the cane be burnt before harvesting, to remove the cane trash, which attracted the rats. Because burning resulted in a reduction in sugar content, the employers insisted on a lower rate of pay at this time.

The struggle occurred over the workers' campaign for burning orders and for limitation on the pay cuts. A fierce battle ensued, which finally resulted in orders for burning being handed down in 1936.

The dispute highlighted an intense struggle for leadership of the sugar workers

Jean Devanny with striking sugar workers, Queensland, 1935.

between the CPA and the right-wing Australian Workers Union officialdom, who constantly sought to sell out the workers and restrain the militancy of the campaign.

The CP's progressive role on an issue which involved the whole sugar industry; the fact that the bureaucratic stranglehold of the AWU leaders was much despised by the northern rural workers; and the anti-racist stance of the CP in supporting Italian and other migrant workers, were all critical factors in building its influence in the north.

Another overall factor which facilitated the growth in influence of the CP was the fact that the ALP had been in power in the state virtually continuously since 1915. The Labor Party's conservative policies had caused deep disillusionment among the working-class sugar and mining communities of the north.

This combination of entrenched AWU and ALP domination of the state created fertile soil for the CPA, which increasingly sank deep roots into the northern communities.

During the Weil's Disease dispute, an indication of the battle between the AWU and CPA is this example of coverage in the competing presses of the two organisations. The AWU newspaper, *The Worker*, headlined its report on the early days of the 1935 strike: "The Communist Party's latest stunt", while the CP's *Workers Weekly* alleged: "This [strike] action has been taken in opposition to the traitorous AWU officials, who have openly sided with the courts and the employers."[34]

A further aspect of the CPA's intervention which developed strongly during the sugar strike was work among women.

Jean Devanny played a key role in building this support, which led to the formation of the first Women's Progress Club in Innisfail to organise support for the strike. The WPC later spread to Townsville and other centres, and became a catalyst for the formation of other women's organisations.

Italian migrants

Another significant development was the CP's role in building a strong base among the non-Anglo sugar workers, in particular the Italians, and forging unity between Anglo and non-Anglo workers — a major achievement, given the history of racism in the region.

Whereas the AWU leadership encouraged hostility among Australians to the new Italian workers, claiming they were taking Anglo jobs, the CPA supported the migrant workers' involvement in the struggle. (Between 1921 and 1930, some 20,000 Italians had settled in north Queensland, mainly to work in the sugar industry.)

Many were fleeing Mussolini's fascism and were ready recruits to the CPA, but there were battles with fascist supporters as well. (A branch of the Italian fascist party

was established in the north Queensland.)

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 led to a strong solidarity campaign being launched by the CPA, which was particularly well-developed in the north. During this period, public meetings of the Spanish Relief Committee were held all over the north, with disproportionately large amounts of funds being raised. In addition, a relatively high number of the volunteers who went to fight in Spain from Australia came from the north Queensland region.

Women

Nationally, by the mid-1930s, the Communist Party had adapted, under the influence of international Stalinism, to the ideologically retrogressive position that women's struggles must be subordinated to the class struggle "in general".

According to Menghetti: "In North Queensland, however, a remarkably strong and independent women's movement grew up during the late 1930s and early 1940s."

This seems a "paradox", Menghetti notes, because "neither local party members nor the northern community in general were more liberal in their attitudes to women than other Australians".[35]

Jean Devanny described the north Queensland communists as "backward" in their attitudes to women.

Specific factors which influenced the growth of the women's movement in north Queensland included the important leadership role played by Devanny herself, the fact that the movement arose from the wives of the Weil's Disease strikers (rather than from any central party directive), and the rather more "relaxed" approach to party discipline adopted in the north, compared to southern regions.

The first Women's Progress Club was formed in Innisfail during the 1935 strike, followed by Tully, Townsville and others. While much of the WPCs' work was directed toward "social welfare" issues, they took up many other party campaigns including the anti-fascist struggle, support for the Waterside Workers' Federation ban on export of pig-iron to Japan, May Day, and other issues.

While the WPCs did do considerable work in "support activities", such as "street stalls and provid[ing] suppers at dances and balls", the communist women were "also engaged in direct political action, both as Communist Party representatives at women's functions, such as International Women's Day, and as office bearers within the party".[36]

The work of the WPCs was successful in gaining new "public utilities relevant to women and children in the district", including a free library and a children's hospital in Townsville. This work was crucial in laying the groundwork for a massive recruiting campaign by the CPA during the years of World War II, in north Queensland and

nationwide.

The Unemployed Workers' Movement, formed in 1930 by the CPA to organise the unemployed during the Great Depression, was a remarkably effective organisation, both in fighting for the rights of the jobless, and in recruiting to the party.

In north Queensland, branches were established in many towns, and carried on excellent work, campaigning around relief work for the unemployed, and against victimisation of the relief workers themselves. The UWM also built close links with the unions and provided direct financial assistance to the impoverished families of the region.

Fred Paterson established his base in the region in the first place as a lawyer, providing free legal representation to the unemployed and poor citizens.

Party press

Circulation of the party press was always a major priority of the old CPA. In the 1930s and again in the 1940s (following the un-banning of the CP after 1942), the Red North always had the second largest circulation of the national party paper, *Workers Weekly*, after the Sydney District. By the end of 1936, 3000 copies of each edition were circulated in north Queensland — making it proportionately the highest sales per capita in the country.

On May Day 1937, the region launched its own newspaper, the *North Queensland Guardian*, with the founding editor being Fred Paterson. Its first editorial declared it was to wage "a crusade against poverty; a crusade against war; a crusade against governmental tyranny and despotism". Circulation of the northern CP paper reached 5000 at one stage.

The signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 1939, which stunned CPA members, effectively ended the Popular Front period, which had begun in 1935. It led to the banning of the CPA and its publications, and forced a rapid reorganisation of the party's operations. The CP was forced to operate underground, following raids on members' homes and party offices, bans on CP meetings etc.

From June 1941, when Hitler's armies invaded the Soviet Union, the CPA line changed again — to support the Allied war effort against fascism.

Ironically, during 1942, when the party was still proscribed, popular support for the CPA increased markedly, and a national recruitment drive was highly successful. 1943 was the high point of Communist Party membership in this period.

Fred Paterson

"Electoral support increased remarkably during the war", Menghetti notes.[37] Paterson received over 47% of the vote in a two-candidate contest with the ALP for the state seat of Bowen in 1941.

Paterson had previously been elected to the Townsville City Council in April 1939, with 47 per cent of the vote. He was re-elected in 1943 with 67 per cent of the vote. Several other communists were also elected to the Townsville and Collinsville councils during this period — another degree of electoral success unique to the Red North in CPA history.

In 1943, Paterson received more than 20,600 votes in the seat of Herbert in the federal elections. In 1944, he was elected — as Australia's only ever communist MP — for the state seat of Bowen.

He was re-elected for Bowen in 1947.

Paterson gave up his legal practice and campaigned strongly for improved public educational and medical facilities for his electorate; as well as speaking vigorously for "the principles of socialism", wherever he was able to. He also gave regular reportback meetings to the community in towns and small centres around the Bowen region.

In 1948, the great Queensland rail strike broke out. The Hanlon Labor government


Guardian

ALD. F. PATERSON WINS BOWEN
FIRST AUST. COMMUNIST M.P.
OUTSTANDING EVENT
OF STATE ELECTION

VICTORY STRENGTHENS
FORCES OF PROGRESS

Forerunner Of Many, Says C.C.

Soldiers Like
Union Papers

BRILLIANT CAREER OF
ALD. FRED PATERSON

Communist Party's *Queensland Guardian* headlines Fred Paterson's historic win in April 1944 state elections.

moved to crush the strike, and Paterson spoke up strongly for the strikers. On St Patrick's Day, 1948, while observing a march of strikers and their supporters, Paterson was struck down by a police baton and severely injured — affecting him for the rest of his life.

In 1950, the ALP government gerrymandered the Bowen electorate to split strong CPA-supporting centres in two — and Paterson was defeated. It is notable that Labor's gerrymander system was later used by Joh Bjelke-Petersen to establish his reactionary rule over Queensland for two decades!

So, the period of the Red North effectively ended around this time, with the Cold War anti-communist crusade rolling back most of the gains and popular support won by the CPA in the period 1930-1950.

However, the lessons of this period deserve serious study by socialists today — both for their positive and negative conclusions.■


WHY ROAD BAN OFF-3

Brisbane Telegraph

LATE CITY

POLICE AND PICKETS

IN FIERCE CITY FIGHT

Police and pickets clashed fiercely in Edward Street near Central Railway Station this morning shortly after a march had left the Trades Hall. Batons were used and two men, one Communist Member of Parliament, Mr. Fred Paterson, were taken to hospital. Mr. Paterson's condition is serious. Full report of sensational incident on Page 3. Pictures below were taken at the height of the clash.

STOP PRESS

Brisbane, March 17, 1948: Cops attack St. Patrick's day demonstration protesting state government anti-trade union legislation. Communist MP Fred Paterson was savagely bashed.

Learn the Lessons of the Past

In conclusion, we have already noted that the history of Queensland, perhaps more than any other state, has illustrated the greatest extremes of the nation's politics — from many of the most reactionary aspects to a number of the most turbulent, even revolutionary, events.

It is especially important that we study the lessons of these progressive historical developments today, when right-wing trends have experienced a resurgence in regional Queensland in the form of the One Nation Party.

Each of the three periods discussed here represent a particular critical juncture in Australian political life.

The great shearers' strikes of the 1890s were the culmination of the first period of development of the Australian trade union movement, and the class struggle in general.

They were the outcome of the early phase of the growth of both the working class and the employing class of the country, a critical test of strength, in which the ruling class were determined to decisively tame the threatened expansion of union power, and working-class self-confidence and organisation.

The Queensland pastoral industry was the most proletarianised part of the crucial rural workers' sector, in which the future of the working-class movement was determined.

The defeat of that titanic industrial struggle led, correctly, to the conclusion by the unions that political party organisation was necessary. Tragically, however, because of a lack of conscious leadership, the movement took the parliamentary road as the way to go for the Australian labour movement.

We have suffered the consequences of this turn to the formation of the ALP as an electoralist party for all of the following century.

Hopefully, the new century will see a radical change in the political allegiance of Australian workers in a revolutionary socialist direction.

The Red Flag Riots of 1919 illustrate the turning point in international politics represented by the impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the end of World War I. A deep class polarisation occurred around the world and in Australia at this time. Revolutionary outbreaks occurred in many countries.

In Australia, the more muted form of this social upheaval is well indicated by the confrontation between the particular elements existing in Brisbane at the time. These included a unique pro-Bolshevik Russian community and a relatively strong IWW influence, on the one hand, and an aroused counterrevolutionary force, based on the disillusioned ranks of the ex-soldiers and their extreme-right officers, on the other.

The resulting clash, in the general context of social unrest and antiwar sentiment in the post-World War I period, shocked and galvanised the Australian political scene, and helped set the groundwork for the formation of the Communist Party of Australia shortly afterwards.

The period of the Red North of the 1930s and 1940s represents another special chapter in the history of the Australian working-class and socialist movements.

North Queensland possessed, and still does, particular social characteristics in the sense that Queensland is the most decentralised state — a higher proportion of the population reside outside the capital city, Brisbane, and in the regional cities such as Townsville, Cairns, Mackay and so on, than in other states.

The special, highly-proletarianised character of the Queensland sugar and mining industries provided the social base for the growth of the Communist Party in north Queensland in that period.

The existence of a strong anti-fascist and pro-socialist Italian community was another key element in the development of the Red North.

Another factor was the widespread hostility among working-class communities in the north to the entrenched right-wing ALP state government and AWU bureaucratic control of the union movement, which created fertile ground for the expansion of CPA influence — culminating in the election of Fred Paterson to the Queensland parliament.

This outline has not analysed in detail the problems and failings of the CPA in north Queensland (or nationally). Many of these derive from the twists and turns of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the process of Stalinisation of the CPA itself. These questions provide ample material for a longer analysis of the history of the CPA, which cannot be adequately taken up in this short account of this special development known as the Red North.

This account has attempted to emphasise some of the remarkable events of these three periods in Queensland and Australian radical history — events which are not

well-known even within the progressive movement today.

The purpose of such an account, published at the beginning of a new century of anti-capitalist struggle, is to assist our study of labour movement history, so that its lessons can better prepare us to understand and deal with new and surprising upheavals as they inevitably emerge from the class struggle.■

Notes

The Great Shearers' Strikes

1 Ross, *These Things Shall Be! Bob Ross: Socialist Pioneer — His Life and Times* (Mulavon Publishing: West Ryde, 1988), p. 30.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
4 Mather, *The First Notes of the Drum*, (self-published, undated), p. 43.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
6 Ross, *These Things Shall Be! Bob Ross: Socialist Pioneer — His Life and Times,* p. 19.
7 Mather, *The First Notes of the Drum*, p. 61.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
9 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
11 *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
14 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
16 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

The Red Flag Riots

17 Evans, *The Red Flag Riots: A Study of Intolerance* (University of Queensland Press: St. Lucia, 1988), p. 1.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
20 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
21 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
22 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 102.
24 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
26 *Ibid.*, p. 118.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
28 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
29 *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.
30 *Ibid.*, p. 178.
31 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

The Red North

32 Menghetti, *The Red North: The Popular Front in North Queensland* (History Department:, James Cook University: Townsville, 1981), p. 14.
33 Devanny, *Sugar Heaven* (Redback Press: Flemington, 1982), p. 5.
34 Menghetti, *The Red North*, p. 46.
35 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
36 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
37 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

The radical history of Queensland is not well known to most Australians. Reactionaries and racists like Joh Bjelke-Petersen and Pauline Hanson more readily come to mind. But the state has another history, one of stormy class struggles and radical politics.

Jim McIlroy's pamphlet focuses on three such periods: the great shearers' strikes of the 1890s; the Brisbane 'Red Flag Riots' of 1919; and the 'Red North' of the 1930s and 1940s when north Queensland became the strongest single base of the Communist Party.

Only by learning the lessons of the past can radical and progressive forces effectively prepare for the big struggles looming up as we slide inexorably towards ever-deeper austerity, environmental, social and political crisis.

Resistance books