

Editorial

Welcome to the June 2021 edition of *SEARCH News*. Once again we have an edition full of high-quality analysis, reports and reviews.

Highlights include Natalie Lang, ASU NSW and ACT Branch Secretary, on the We Won't Wait campaign; new NSW AMWU Secretary Cory Wright on the Hunter Jobs Alliance, as well as reports from young Queensland and Western Australian comrades on how they are waging - and winning - campaigns for just transition and renewable energy projects.

We also have a report on the work of the SEARCH Voice Treaty Truth Working Group, which has been busy encouraging SEARCH members to ramp up their support for a First Nations Voice to Parliament that is enshrined in the Constitution.

There are reviews of a fascinating NYC art exhibition by 20th century communist artist Alice Neel, and a new book on the history of Russian and Baltic migration to Australia titled *White Russians, Red Peril*, and we pay tribute to two comrades who contributed far more than their fair share to the cause – Vera Deacon and Steve Cooper.

ACT SEARCH Committee member Chris Warren makes the case for a four-day week to be part of the progressive agenda, and David Bunn writes 'from a Melbourne wine bar between lockdowns, with a thumbnail dipped in red', to outline a progressive agenda that all SEARCH members could surely get behind.

And there has never been a greater need for unity across the left to fight for progressive change, as we see the Federal government failing to protect those it is supposed to, on four clear fronts: on the pandemic; on the treatment of refugees; on 'robodebt' and on climate change. Once again our second largest city was in lockdown as the government's vaccine rollout and quarantine strategies have failed.

Then there is the government's needless cruelty in the case of the Biloele-based Murugappan family. Young Tharunicaa (3) and Kopika (5) Murugappan are the only two children still in Australian immigration detention. Tharunicaa has been being medically evacuated to Perth after being hospitalised on Christmas Island with a suspected blood infection, where she and her family have been held indefinitely as the only internees since 2019. The mistreatment of this family, especially young Tharunicaa as she needed urgent medical treatment is an

afrofit to common human decency – utterly beyond the pale.

There are actions in train all around Australia to show solidarity and protest the inhumanity of our government's decisions. For the latest events, see the [Solidarity with Biloele page](#), as well as your local refugee action groups.

In a similar vein, the Robodebt fiasco has exposed the Federal government's persecution of the very people it is supposed to be helping. The Robodebt class action bought by Gordon Legal has been settled at a cost to the government of around \$1.2 billion, yet they have continued to persecute people receiving payments even after being found to have acted unlawfully. You can take action along with other SEARCH members in the Living Incomes For Everyone campaign - see the recording of their latest event, a people's response to the Budget, [here on their Facebook page](#).

Finally, on the world stage at the G7, we see the government's greatest failing of all. PM Morrison has again proven to be unwilling and incapable of meaningful action on climate, even as other major capitalist countries move to profit from new technologies and investment opportunities. This lack of leadership at the Federal level makes even more urgent the kind of local action outlined in the reports on climate action initiatives in Queensland and WA in this edition of *SEARCH News*. We hope they galvanise and inspire you. 

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We won't wait!

Natalie Lang



ASU members and comrades march as part of the We Won't Wait campaign.

In Australia a woman dies every week because of family and domestic violence. Family and domestic violence is the leading cause of death, disability and illness among women aged 15-44 years, greater than cancer or heart disease. Domestic violence can happen to anyone. 800,000 women and 1 in 20 men will experience family or domestic violence this year.

In NSW alone, police respond to about 40 domestic violence incidents every day.

To escape a violent relationship, you have to take time off work. Many of the services that support women and their children are only available during business hours. Without paid leave, people experiencing violence simply don't have time or resources to find a new, safe, place.

People experiencing violence require time off to visit a police station to file a complaint, attend court hearings about AVOs and assaults, find emergency accommodation, meet with solicitors, meet with financial counsellors, change the school arrangements of children, speak with specialised support workers and counsellors.

The Australian Services Union is the union for workers in women's services and is leading a campaign for 10 days paid domestic violence leave to be included in the

National Employment Standards, and available to all workers.

The ASU's We Won't Wait campaign calls on all political parties to support 10 days paid family and domestic violence leave to be included in the National Employment Standards.

Family violence is a workplace issue, and tackling family violence is union business. Paid Family and Domestic Violence Leave will help save lives. It is shameful that we must fight for it, but we will. We will win because to fail is unthinkable.

The ASU was the first union to successfully negotiate a domestic violence leave clause into a collective agreement in Australia. Now, more than 1.6 million Australian employees are covered by these clauses in their enterprise agreements or awards.

ASU members are on the frontline of domestic and family violence, working in women's refuges as domestic violence workers, advocates, counsellors. The ASU Women's Services Subdivision, chaired by ASU member Sam Parker, identified the need for 10 days paid domestic violence leave as necessary allowing people experiencing violence to keep financial independence.

Sam is a domestic violence worker in Western
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Sydney, advocating for women and children who have experienced domestic violence. Every day she supports women to live safely, free of the threat and injury of domestic violence. The service Sam works for receives 150 referrals each week from police who have attended domestic violence incidents.

Sam says “It is not enough to state that domestic violence is unacceptable, and a scourge upon our community. We need more than words.”

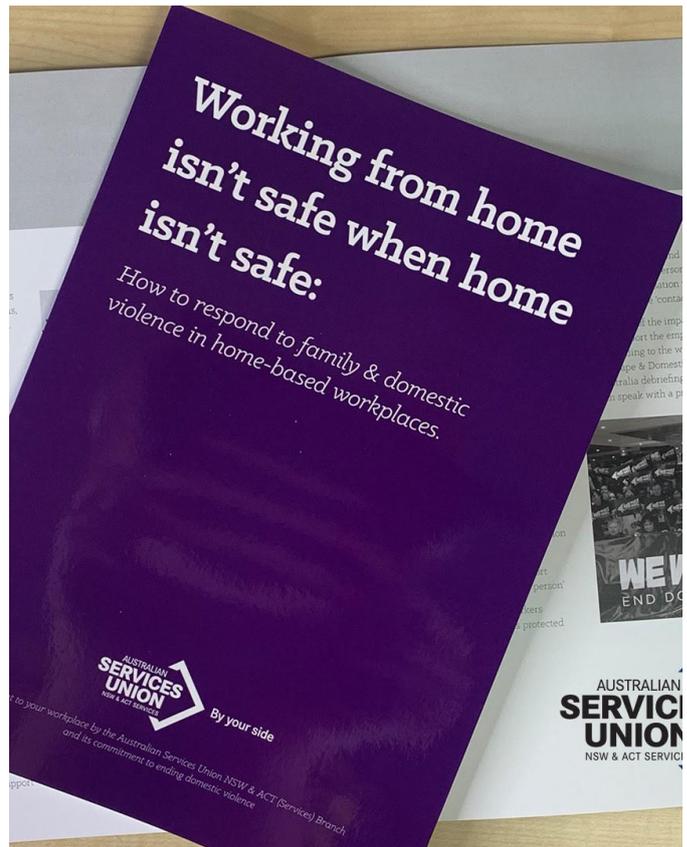
The campaign is supported by the ALP, the Greens and every state and territory government. The Federal Liberal Government is the only hold out.

In 2018 the Turnbull government legislated 5 days of unpaid leave. However, having economic independence and job security is critical to ensuring that any worker experiencing violence can take the steps they need to leave.

The NSW Attorney General and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Mark Speakman, told Guardian Australia that paid leave “is critical in providing financial stability to people experiencing domestic and family violence.”



ASU NSW Secretary Natalie Lang



Women need to know that their workplace is committed to supporting them through paid leave to speak out, seek help and take action if they are experiencing domestic violence.

We can't wait, because women can't wait. Reports continue to show that there has been an alarming increase in violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as changing how many people work COVID-19 has led to increased physical isolation, financial stress, higher levels of unemployment, underemployment, increased workload with no extra pay, increased alcohol and drug use and an increase in domestic and family violence.

In response, the ASU has developed a new guide to “Working From Home - when home isn't safe”.

The ASU will continue to campaign for 10 days paid domestic violence leave until every worker can access this life saving leave. ∞

Natalie Lang is the Secretary of the Australian Services Union (NSW Branch).

Enough! Women organising against Sexual and Domestic Violence.

Jane Durie and Jacquie Widin

An inspiring recent forum (Setting the Agenda: Achieving Meaningful Reform for Women in NSW, 28 April 2021) organised by Jenny Leong (Greens NSW MP) – brought together a panel of mainly young women from a range of backgrounds and areas of work to discuss key issues for women.

The forum came about in the wake of the allegations of sexual assault at Parliament House that surfaced earlier this year; the women's march and increasing media attention to domestic violence and sexual assault. The forum was an opportunity to keep these issues alive.

The panel members were:

- Erin O'Leary (Youth survivors for Justice)
- Dani Villafaña (organiser for School Strike for Climate and Girl Up)
- Saxon Mullins (Director of Advocacy at Rape and Sexual Assault Research and Advocacy),
- Dhanya Mani (Changing our Headline)
- Chanel Contos (Teach us Consent)
- Jaime Evans (Women's March Sydney)
- Dr Amanda Cohn (Domestic Violence Border Network)
- Dr Karen Williams (Doctors against violence towards Women)

For over an hour and a half participants listened to sharp critical analysis and insightful knowledge of current issues facing women in Australia today. These women are working at the forefront of practice, advocacy, campaigning and servicing in their different fields. A highlight of the forum was hearing the voices of young women who are articulate, clever and committed to bringing about social change with a focus on gender inequality.

Throughout the forum the panel members spoke through the lens of the inter-relationship of race, class, gender and sexuality and all speakers demonstrated a high level of political analysis which centred these inter-relationship.

Jenny organised the forum around two main questions:

1. What are the shifts in your advocacy in the last few months?
2. Setting the agenda – what needs to change? - a collective to do list...

In posing the first question Jenny gave panellists the opportunity to voice their responses to the recent events including

- Brittany Higgins' allegations of rape at parliament house and what this exposed about the unacceptable sexual and gendered behaviour of many male politicians
- The unacceptable and vicious murders of women

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Write for us

Member contributions are always welcome.

Submissions are accepted any time of the year, for both the quarterly publication and online.

If you have a piece you would like to publish in SEARCH News please email:

admin@search.org.au

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by intimate partners and ex-partners, exposing the dangers women in domestic violence face when trying to escape

- The extent of sexual violence against young women exposed by the recent survey conducted by Chanel Contos

A number of the panellists highlighted race and class as points of difference for women experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault, compounded by institutional policing responses. For example, the historical (and continuing) relationship of police with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women impacts the willingness of these women to report domestic violence and sexual assault within community.

Another area of discussion was the privilege of being white. It was recognised that not enough has changed for women of colour and white women need to be aware to the space they take up that closes down the voicing of different experiences. The takeaway from this is that there is not a single way forward, we need multiple pathways to address these issues.

In response to setting the agenda there was no shortage of suggestions for what needs to be done:

- Enthusiastic consent laws
- Resourcing women’s rape crisis centres, women’s refuges with particular attention to regional centres
- Recognition of coercive control as a criminal act and its significant role in domestic violence

- Police stations staffed by women police officers and for all police to be trained in dealing effectively with domestic and sexual violence
- Changing the laws that currently favour the alleged perpetrators in sexual assault cases

It was exciting to hear how young women made the links between their campaign work in climate activism, gender and inequality issues. They strongly pointed to the links between race, class and gender and a number of times called out the evidence of white and class privilege. They also drew attention to the failure of the government to see COVID as an opportunity to address inequality, rather the government has overseen an increase in the inequality of women in the workplace which is critical to financial independence for women.

What is very impressive about the work of the women panellists, is the day-to-day work of women, for example doctors in their surgeries (and many other areas of practice) confronting and responding to violence against women that then develops into campaigns around gendered violence.

What’s next for SEARCH?

How can SEARCH contribute to ongoing debates, campaigns and activities to keep up the pressure on politicians to take action against gender inequality?

Join us for a discussion on how SEARCH can contribute to this critical work - details of the SEARCH forum will be sent to all members. ∞

Subscribe to the [SEARCH Foundation YouTube Channel!](#)



Hunter Jobs Alliance

Cory Wright

In my role as the NSW Secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, I speak to and for workers in power generation, coal mining and heavy industry in the Hunter.

It's hard to escape discussions about what a "decarbonising" world will mean for these industries. In my conversations with members, it's clear that expert analysis about the impacts of investment shifts, technology change and emissions policies can be hard to match up with the day-to-day experience of locals going about their lives and their work.

But evidence is mounting that substantial economic change is on the way. Workers can see the signs in their workplaces. As a lifelong resident of the Hunter, I can see it too.

Rapid changes in domestic energy generation – including the scheduled closure of all four local coal fired power stations – are already having impacts on workers and creating challenges for critical sectors such as aluminium smelting.

Locals know how this story goes. Closures such as BHP and the Kurri smelter, which saw the loss of good, union jobs, are still fresh in many people's minds. I saw the impact on communities firsthand while working as an organiser in Newcastle. But there are things we can do to make sure workers and communities aren't left high and dry.

The first step is to recognise the challenges facing our region. The Hunter is a great place to live and work. We have many advantages, and much to be proud of. The task at hand is to keep it that way over the coming decades.

While the issues are becoming more prominent, as a community we are struggling to find a way to have a common sense conversation around coal and energy.

This distracts us from planning for the future, it deters investment, makes it more difficult to put a case to governments to support the region through change, and leaves important local issues open to politicisation.

The current approach from governments also leaves many major decisions about regional economic change and investment primarily to business interests. Boardrooms will focus on the imperatives for their businesses. Government, supported by the community, needs to pro-

vide direction, investment, and clear expectations that the welfare of workers and the community is the priority.

In an effort to move the conversation towards a more constructive one that focuses on addressing the economic changes we know are coming down the line, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Unions, along with other unions and local environmental organisations, have formed the Hunter Jobs Alliance.

The Hunter Jobs Alliance has heard a clear message from local workers. Concrete, practical action, and a positive vision are the priorities. At our official launch in Maitland, the Jobs Alliance will be laying out a proposal to address the economic challenges facing the Hunter.

First off, the Hunter needs a local, collaborative statutory body to plan for and support the community to adjust to economic change.

Secondly, coal royalties should be reinvested in job creation and worker support, through ongoing allocation of dividends from the NSW Generations (sovereign wealth) Fund.

Thirdly, we need funding and delivery of evidence-based actions to support workers and attract job-creating investment.

Finally, the region needs a clear standard that creates expectations of companies undertaking large-scale closures and retrenchments to ensure workers get the support they deserve.

Other regions like Collie in Western Australia are already rolling out action plans to address these same challenges. Now it's the Hunter's turn.

The Hunter Jobs Alliance is ready to get to work, and looks forward to engaging with local workers, government, community and business to make sure we are planning ahead.

By coming together, we can help secure the Hunter's future as a prosperous and sustainable region to live and work. 

Cory Wright is the Secretary of the AMWU (NSW Branch).

This article first appeared in the Newcastle Herald.

Collie Just Transition Plan

Alex Cassie

The Collie Just Transition Plan, released in December 2020, was one of the good news stories of the last year.

This Plan was developed and written by the Just Transition Working Group, a body established to bring together unions, employers, community leaders, government and others to develop a plan to protect the jobs and future of the town of Collie over the next 15 years as we see a decline in the demand for coal. It is happening within the context of the Distributed Energy Resource Roadmap (DER roadmap), which plans for the future of WA's SWIS electricity grid.

The intention of the Plan is to make sure that in the transition away from coal, the community of Collie can go from strength to strength. The Plan is focused on the four areas the Working Group knows are essential:

- Maximising opportunities for affected workers;
- Diversification of the local economy;
- Celebrating Collie's history and promoting its future; and
- Ensuring ongoing commitment for the Just Transition.

The town of Collie was created for the coal industry, which has powered WA for a century. The coal mines supply coal for the local power stations and smelter, and not for export use. The community is full of skilled workers who for generations have kept the lights on in WA. Now we are increasing the use of renewable energy, and the demand for coal is decreasing, it should not mean that people are turned out of work and regional towns are left to empty. For many of the workers, their other choice is to 'go FIFO' on the mines up North – a choice that means trading away family life, mental health, and community involvement for a steady pay cheque.

Another option is possible, if workers are provided certainty in town. An early marker of success was the MoU between Synergy (the Government-trading enterprise) and representative unions to retrain, redeploy, and/or pay redundancies to any affected staff from the first scheduled closures of Muja power station units. These Synergy employees have now started on their individually planned transition processes.

A successful Just Transition can demonstrate that we can have local well-paying jobs as well as a good outcome for the environment and our energy bills.

A Just Transition achieved through a community-led process can demonstrate much more: that we can use the economy to build and support the communities we want, rather than having a community created to support the economy.

How did this come about?

The Working Group itself was established after the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and other unions and community groups pushed the approach that nothing should be decided about Collie's future, without Collie's input. A peak turning point was when community meetings organised by unions were gaining far greater attendance than formal consultation processes with Ministers. This sent a clear message that Ministers must listen to the community, rather than vice versa.

A year's worth of writing the plan, parallel to the work the unions were doing with Synergy on the MoU, followed. The release of the Plan, signed off by the Premier, was a real milestone that should be celebrated. But now the work begins to make sure the plan gets done.

What now?

The Working Group has identified several key industries it would like in the mix for Collie's future. These are based on what would work in location, support the skills base, provide employment, and is desired by the town. In addition to diversifying the economy with expanded tourism, several new industries are also slated as possibilities for the region. Eco-concrete, battery storage unit manufacturing, wind turbine manufacturing and other new technologies are possible, and would keep Collie at the centre of a power system that runs more than half on renewables already.

But to have any of these established in a meaningful way by the time needed to pick up employment from other industries, the Government must be willing to get far more involved in strategic economic planning than it currently shows itself to be.

There is \$80 million dollars in the Collie Futures Fund, but the market-based approach of 'we open the doors, you come to pitch' is not going to move new industry into the region in the time required. We believe that using the tools of government procurement and appropriate local content incentives for strategic projects we could get further into these new industries much more rapidly.

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Time pressures

The timeline of the transition is more generous than was possible for the La Trobe valley. But it's still going faster than written in the plan. Coal workers at Premier coal mine have already seen their shifts cut from 12 to 10.5 hours in response to a lack of demand. This is enough to start make people wonder if they should stay around for the axe to fall, or go FIFO early. Contractors at Synergy, who don't fall under the MoU although representing half of the workforce, are asking themselves the same questions as they see their workmates head off to retrain.

On a larger scale, there is another time pressure – getting left behind in the boom of renewables manufacturing. Australia is already perhaps irreparably behind in the fabrication of EVs. We have a chance of making battery storage units for homes for hot and remote locations, a speciality of WA manufacturers. We could create wind

turbines here which would create a demand for Australian steel – and perhaps a green steel industry. But none of this is possible if we let the free hand of the market decide. Thankfully, there is one powerful little town in the South West of WA who is willing to fight for that work.

SEARCH held an online forum to discuss the Collie Transition Plan on 19 May AMWU State Secretary Steve McCartney, local delegate Sean Emmett and Alex Cassie, AMWU WA Community and Political Organiser. You can watch the recording of the event on the SEARCH Foundation Youtube channel at Collie Transition Plan with AMWU WA. 

Alex Cassie is a member of the SEARCH Committee and the AMWU WA community and political organiser.

How we're 'repowering' and decarbonising North Queensland

Gianni Sottile

As I write, workers are preparing a massive stretch of land west of Warwick to become the first publicly owned wind farm in Australia. Cutting through the tide of neoliberal orthodoxy, the people of Queensland are building a utility that will power 70,000 homes. And this is just the beginning.

The explicit goal of energy policy for two decades has been to shove the state out of the power game, enabling Origin, AGL and other private companies to reap oligopolistic profit out of an industry that had always been a public service (and, not to mention, a bastion of militant unionism).

The last decade is splattered with tales of valiant defeat for climate campaigns. Queensland's renewable revolution will not be one of them. This is a story about how socialists can win big, and win a brighter future.

In Queensland a coalition of socialists, Labor Party activists, and unionists got together, to fight against that status quo. We designed a clear demand, organised majorities within the ALP, and won not only that wind farm, but \$750 million dollars to build more renewables, and an explicit commitment to keep public ownership as we transition to renewables.

In 2016, as Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN)

convener I, and other young socialists in the ALP, wrote a motion for state conference to amend the platform to require the government to plan for a low carbon economy. I'd been asked to be a proxy for an ALP Conference delegate who had gone to teach in Burma, and I knew the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) a bit from the ALP Left. So I asked an organiser of the ETU, Stuey, to second our motion.

After a little bit of tweaking to make everyone comfortable, the platform was changed to adopt the motion, unanimously. I was a bit surprised - there was no right wing groundswell against the idea the state should provide for workers, and plan for the economy. And there were unions, especially the ETU, open to bigger arguments. We started thinking - what can we do with this alliance of branch members and progressive unions?

We got together and did some power analysis - in the ALP, there's unions, branches, and parliamentarians, who each have some specific role and authority. We knew that we needed policy that would meet unions' industrial needs, as well as providing serious action to address the climate crisis to win over branch members. And it needed to be popular, to get the government elected. So we needed the right demand. That demand was to build \$2 billion worth of public renewables in North Queensland. This would help decarbonise the economy, create a class

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of workers in a conservative area who benefited materially from good jobs in renewables, and the profits of that energy would go to fund schools and hospitals.

But, it was going to cost a lot. We had to get ready for the 2018 conference if we were going to win.

We started by getting our motion, to Repower North Queensland, through our ten most sympathetic branches to get it on the agenda. We spoke to the ETU, who committed right away. We built up a network of activists throughout the party who got the motion through more and more branches.

And we started running up against obstacles. Good MPs, good ministers who were fellow travelers and supported the same kind of politics as us, started saying that it was not going to get through. We were told “the Premier doesn’t want it, the Department says we can’t do it, it’s just too much - think about the credit rating!”

We stuck by it - as the weeks went by, we kept organising, we visited more and more branches, and more and more branches passed our motion. The other energy unions committed. At one meeting of a right wing branch in Brisbane’s north, a LEAN activist won the motion by one vote, against the protests of a Cabinet Minister.

Other unions came on board as well - Left and ‘Old Guard’ faction aligned unions committed, and LEAN activists kept branches passing our motion. We stood by our claim, and we went into conference with more than 60% of the conference delegates locked in behind us.

On the Saturday morning of Conference, in the coffee shop of the Townsville casino, we sat down with the Energy Minister. They would create a new renewable energy company, government owned. It would deliver 1 gigawatt by 2025. They couldn’t commit to an amount yet - they wanted to save it for an election commitment. We accepted that deal, and the Premier announced it live on TV.

In the 2017 election, Queensland Labor ran on creating CleanCo, a new generator. With the relationships and solidarity we created through acting together, we kept them to those promises. A few years later, a coalition of environment groups and unions won a further \$500 million for CleanCo.

Even during the culture war over coal, this commitment to public ownership of renewables has become stronger. And by 2025, there will be wind farms, batteries, and solar farms across Queensland, run by union members, and owned by the people. By organising together, align-

ing progressive and industrial goals, and campaigning for bold policy, socialists won public renewables in Queensland. And this model is not limited to climate action - if you are committed, you can mold an issue so it appeals to your key constituencies.

Some folks like to say you can’t change something from the inside. I reckon to swallow that is to simply accept that things just can’t change. The history of socialist achievement is a history of working class coalition building. By joining forces, in strength and solidarity, we meaningfully and (hopefully) lastingly changed the direction of a Labor government. The alternative, to my mind, is a type of aimless alternative electoralism, where the next election is always more important than the last as nothing is achieved in the meantime. I’m not patient enough to wait on an 18 year plan to transform politics. And the climate simply doesn’t have the time to wait either.

Unite, fight and win! ∞

Gianni Sottile is a SEARCH member from Brisbane.

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Notes on a four day work week

Chris Warren

Since trade union victories in establishing the eight-hour working day and the weekend over a century ago, reductions in working hours for the working class have been only incremental. The 40 hour working week was adopted in 1947 and, in 1983, the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission introduced the 38 hour week, which is still the standard nearly 40 years later.

Despite massive technological innovation and productivity across the economy - including substantial mechanisation, automation and developments in information technology and communications – this has not corresponded with increased time to devote to areas of life outside the workplace.

The rate of exploitation of workers has massively increased since the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Our wage rates have not corresponded with productivity increases. We work harder and smarter, yet we have no extra money and no extra time to show for it.

We should make a claim for a 20% reduction in working hours retaining full pay and benefits. We should make this claim in all areas in public and economic life – but particularly in Enterprise Bargaining Agreement negotiations.

A key fight for trade unionists has been to revitalise our movement and reconceptualise how we strategise and bargain for higher wages, better conditions and secure work. We look to rewrite industrial relations laws in favour of workers and secure state-led investment in industry policy.



A key aspect of our vision for the future must be that we want more time for ourselves outside of the workplace. There is a reason why the weekend and eight-hour day movement are such sacred parts of our movement's history. Recreation and rest were never a given, they had to be fought for.

The same protests that come from bosses against a four-day week and benefits were made when the weekend was proposed. There is nothing new in their tired old arguments.

Over the next decade, we must take radical action to decarbonise our economic system to secure a safe climate future. We must switch from fossil fuels, make massive investments in renewables and engage in regenerative work to protect and restore the ecosystems upon which we depend.

Solving climate change is not just a technical fix, though - we must also consider that a sustainable system should involve us working less, with larger parts of our time and lives de-commodified outside the economic sphere.

The Four Day Week has the potential to be a substantially feminist proposal. The gender wage gap is significantly amplified after a woman has a child, due to an inequitable division of labour in parenting. Working mothers will have an extra eight hours to spend with their children while remaining on level footing with other workers.

Men will also have the same extra time to spend with their children and in the domestic sphere – which will support (as part of the broader feminist struggle) a re-configuration of the existing inequitable division of labour to ensure that men take a fair share of parenting and domestic work.

The union movement will struggle unless we build in radical proposals like this into our claims and campaigns. Across the board, we are struggling just to secure wage increases above inflation. It's noble work in difficult conditions, but we've got to start inspiring through a real vision for systemic transformation. We should adopt the Four Day Week as a component of that vision. ∞

Chris Warren is SEARCH Committee member from the ACT.

From an inner city wine bar; written with a thumbnail dipped in red.

David Bunn

A lot of people in a lot of wine bars have tried to solve the problems of the world, including us. So it was no surprise when the Prime Minister announced that the world's problems will not be solved in inner-city wine bars.

No surprise, but we had a surge of hope. Uluru is as far as you can get from the inner city. We reckon Mr Morrison could act on his own advice and adopt the Statement from the Heart made at Uluru in 2017. It wouldn't solve everything, but it would be a fantastic start. It's a very big year when a fundamental injustice is recognised and a remedy attempted.

Then we could all adopt our First Nations' peoples' custodial approach to our country and our planet, and look to act together on climate change.

Kurri Kurri is not inner city and Mr Morrison reckons it's one of the places where he'll find solutions. He's going to build a gas-fired generator there. Didn't the inner-city commentators pile on him! Most plainspoken was Alan Kohler who says categorically it won't be built.

But we should take heart from the PM's unexpected preparedness to see Government build and operate productive assets in public ownership. Pandemic has changed a lot of things. Conservative governments have thrown out all that small-government ideology, and they're making free with the public purse (as long as conservative governments are doing the spending).

We grabbed the wine list and starting jotting on the back. We listed what should be done while you're driving the Federal Budget into a \$164 billion deficit, with low interest rates and deficits for the foreseeable future.

- Make child-care and early education free. Remove some of the impediments to entry or return to the workforce and start acting against educational disadvantage where it starts. It pays for itself in the medium term, although our cost-benefit calculations got a bit smudged when we spilt the GSM.
- Support rapid transition to a decarbonised economy – fund social and workforce programs which support workers to relocate and retrain. Also fund regional development programs for the same purpose.
- Further support that transition, and for humanity's sake, increase support payments to the unemployed, people living with disability, and to students. For a start make them equal to the level we all knew we

could afford, for the social good, during the 2020 COVID response.

- Get Government back into the business of supporting manufacturing – mRNA vaccine manufacture is a start, but there's plenty of other industries in which publicly owned or supported manufacture is vital to national security and self-reliance. Instead of a gas-fired power station generating 10 jobs let's build a national electric vehicle manufacturer in the Hunter.
- End homelessness, again. We did it in 2020 – because it was self-evidently good for all of us to get vulnerable people into shelter. It is still good for all of us. We didn't bother with a cost benefit on this one.
- Make life safer for the victims of domestic and sexual violence – we're talking about rewriting laws, about funding refuge and safe places, and the associated supports.
- Drive down casual employment, especially cash-in-hand rip-off employment, by implementing schemes that penalise underpayment of wages (with or without malicious intent – we reckon that employers get a lot less prone to make mistakes when they lose money by them); that create government-administered funds, contributed to by employers, which pay accumulating benefits like long service leave, particularly in industries marked by fragmented engagements. There are models for this in some industries and some states already.
- For god's sake fund the NDIS! Fund it so people living with disabilities can have a decent life. Fund it so people working in the sector get decent pay and stable employment and so attract and retain people to the sector.iii
- While you're at it, work with States and Territories to fund mental health services adequately.
- Fund aged care to the level proposed by the Royal Commission. How can we do less? And take aged care out of the hands of for-profit providers. By all means nationalise wine bars, but please start with aged care, before we get there.

We're running out of blue sky and the backs of envelopes, but we've got the feeling that we've only started.

David Bunn, from a Melbourne wine bar between lockdowns 

Morrison Government under pressure to support equitable access for vaccines as Big Pharma makes billions

Dr Patricia Ranald

Under current WTO rules pharmaceutical companies have 20-year monopoly patents and control the global production of COVID-19 vaccines, and governments must negotiate supply and prices with them. Rich countries are first in line. It is clear from the delays in delivery of vaccines even to countries like Australia that current global manufacturing capacity under these monopoly rules cannot produce vaccines at the scale needed. Public health experts have estimated that the majority of the world's people in low-income countries will not have access to vaccines until 2023 or later.

Lack of access to vaccines is not only a humanitarian crisis in countries like India but also poses a threat to all countries, because rapid spread of the virus results in more virulent mutations which will spread back to countries like Australia and prolong the pandemic.

In October last year South Africa and India, supported by over 100 other governments in the WTO, and the World Health Organisation, initiated the call for the temporary suspension or waiver of WTO intellectual property rules for COVID-19 treatments, equipment and vaccines, to enable the maximum global production and distribution of these items at affordable prices. Countries like India, South Africa and Brazil are leading producers of generic medicines and have the manufacturing capacity to produce vaccines at the scale needed for distribution locally and regionally.

On May 5 the US announced that it would support a waiver of WTO patent rules on COVID-19 vaccines, despite intense lobbying from pharmaceutical companies. The Morrison government continues to protect the profits pharmaceutical companies and has still not supported the waiver, but Labor and the Greens have announced support for it.

The US has now started discussing the waiver with India and South Africa, and the European Parliament has passed a resolution supporting the waiver. The WTO Trade-related Intellectual Property Council meets in the first week of June, and there is a global campaign for government to support the waiver before this meeting.

Adding impetus to this campaign, a research report published on May 20 by the Peoples' Vaccine Alliance has found that at least nine Big Pharma executives and in-

vestors have already become new billionaires since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the excessive profits made by pharmaceutical corporations with monopolies on COVID vaccines.

The report reveals that between them the nine new billionaires have a combined net wealth of \$19.3 billion, enough to fully vaccinate 776 million people in low-income countries 1.3 times over. Meanwhile, these countries have received only 0.2 per cent of the global supply of vaccines, because of the massive shortfall in available doses, despite being home to 10 per cent of the world's population.

In addition, eight existing billionaires— who have extensive portfolios in the COVID-19 vaccine pharma corporations - have seen their combined wealth increase by \$32.2 billion, enough to fully vaccinate 1,380 million people in India.

It is a scandal that vaccines developed with massive investments of public money are contributing billions to the private wealth of a handful of individuals while millions face second and third waves of the pandemic without access to vaccines. This broken system needs change. The Morrison government and other governments should put public health before private profit and support the changes to WTO rules. ∞

Dr Patricia Ranald is the honorary convener of the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) and an honorary research associate at the University of Sydney.



SEARCH Voice Treaty Truth Campaign Working Group Update

Deborah Durnan

In November 2020, the SEARCH AGM passed the following resolution:

That this annual meeting of SEARCH members resolves that our Foundation will make the Voice Treaty Truth campaign its first priority over the next twelve months, and directs the incoming Committee to plan, coordinate, implement and evaluate a program of activities in all the centres where SEARCH has members to build the widest possible support for this campaign.

In early 2021, the new Committee agreed to set up a VTT campaign working group, co-convened by Jacquie Widin and Bob Boughton, to implement this decision. The group's terms of reference are available from the SEARCH website.

The working group has met monthly by Zoom. In terms of actions, we are supporting the campaign outlined by the two First Nations organisations which are collaborating to build the widest possible support in Australia for the key demands of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. These are the From the Heart campaign (<https://fromtheheart.com.au/>) and the Uluru Dialogue group (<https://ulurustatement.org/>). SEARCH members are encouraged to visit their websites and Facebook pages for detailed information and resources which can be used to build the campaign.

Our first main action was to encourage members to make submissions to the Federal government's interim report on the Indigenous Voice Co-Design Consultation into the structure and functions of the First Nation's Voice. The

SEARCH VTT group ran a workshop to assist members to develop their own submissions and also drafted one which the Committee approved and submitted on behalf of the Foundation. These submissions included the key demand for the constitutional enshrinement of a First Nations Voice to Parliament.

To mark the fourth anniversary of the national meeting of First Nations peoples at Uluru which on 26 May 2017 adopted the Statement from the Heart, SEARCH is asking our members to write to their local MPs/Senators and the PM to call on them to support a resolution to the Federal Parliament to hold a referendum in the life of the next parliament, to enshrine the First Nations Voice in the Australian Constitution. The link below provides a guide for a letter: <https://fromtheheart.com.au/write-to-your-mp/>

To this end, the VTT working group organised a 'phone bank' on 1 June to make contact with all SEARCH members, to ask them to take this action. On 1 July, we are organising a Zoom meeting open to all SEARCH members to discuss the politics of this campaign and what we as a socialist organisation can specifically contribute. This meeting will include a briefing from First Nations leader Pat Anderson, who was a Co-Chair of the Referendum Council, the body which organised the nationwide consultations and the meeting at Uluru. We will send notice to members of this event in due course. ∞

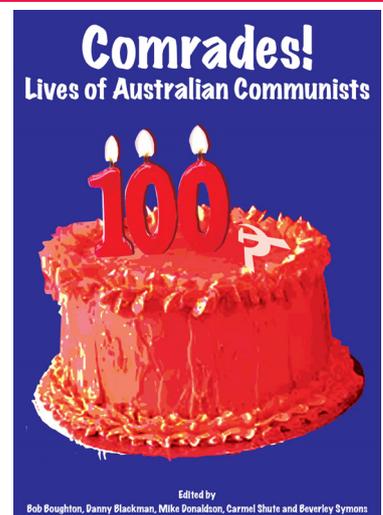
Deborah Durnan is a SEARCH Member and writes on behalf of the SEARCH Voice Treaty Truth Campaign Working Group.

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Review: *White Russians, Red Peril: A Cold War History of Migration to Australia*

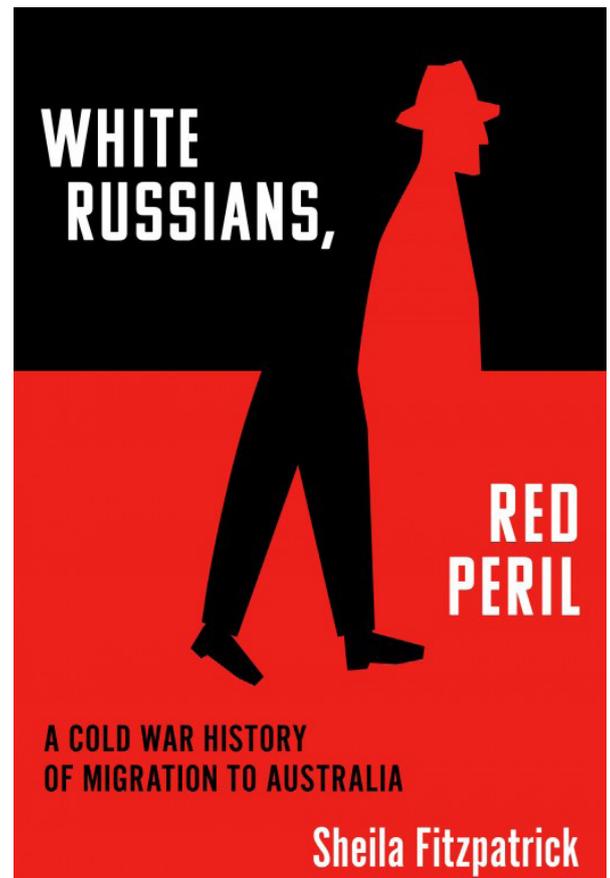
Phillip Deery

By Sheila Fitzpatrick | La Trobe University
Press | \$34.99 | 350 pages

In the 1950s the young daughter of a Russian migrant was taunted with “DP means dirty pig” at a Victorian primary school. But DPs, or displaced persons, meant something different to countless human casualties of the second world war: the chance of a new life. Most had been uprooted from their homelands and forced to work as factory labourers in Germany or occupied Europe. Some, especially from Ukraine and the Baltic countries, had collaborated with the Nazis, and more than a million Russians, primarily émigrés but also Soviet defectors, wore the German uniform and fought under German command. All had been in mass resettlement camps, and it was from these camps that Australia selected vast numbers of its postwar migrants.

The first boatload arrived in November 1947; the last in 1952. They included a great many people who had altered their names and nationality. Masking their Soviet citizenship, they claimed they were Polish, Latvian or Belorussian, or simply “stateless,” claims that immigration officials were often unable to verify or invalidate. Disguising identity meant avoiding repatriation to the Soviet Union. Some also masked the fact that they were Wehrmacht volunteers rather than “forced labourers,” as they claimed. Immigration minister Arthur Calwell might have wished to discourage professionals, intellectuals and Jewish DPs, preferring “horny-handed toilers,” but, as Fitzpatrick wryly notes, many sailed to Australia under false colours and then “underwent a remarkable transformation from proletarian to educated middle class.” This dissembling extended to former Nazis entering Australia (some of whom removed SS tattoos), an issue sidestepped or denied by Calwell’s department.

Sheila Fitzpatrick brings to this remarkable cold war story of migration her prodigious skills as a historian and her international reputation as a distinguished scholar of the Soviet Union, especially the Stalin period. (There is even a “Fitzpatrick school” of Sovietologists in the United States.) Her *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (1999) was path-breaking and her *On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (2015) won the Prime Minister’s Literary Award



for Non-fiction in 2016.

With *White Russians, Red Peril*, her tenth monograph, Fitzpatrick draws on research in archives in Australia, China, France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States. Her familiarity with the State Archive of the Russian Federation, recounted in the wonderful *A Spy in the Archives* (2013), enabled unique access — through repatriation reports from an undercover Soviet agent in Australia — to poignant accounts of desperately unhappy Russian DPs in Australia. Her use of Russian-language newspapers and periodicals in Australia permits insights into, among other things, obscure right-wing organisations such as the Russian Anti-Communist Centre, which from 1950 held their “Day of Irreconcilability” celebrations on 7 November to coincide with the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Anti-communism is a recurring theme of the book. The broader cold war environment in Australia is only fleetingly examined, although she notes the potent influence of anti-communism in explaining, for instance, the otherwise astonishing readiness of the Returned Soldiers’ League to support the entry of former Ger-

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man combatants. Rather, the emphasis is on “White” Russians — a slippery term that embraced first-wave prewar émigrés as well as Belorussians — for whom the cold war transformed disaffection with the Soviet Union into an anti-communist crusade. The superb opening chapter, “Displacement,” provides a historical context to a White Russian community that was far from homogeneous. Indeed, the serendipitous choices and complexities of fates and identities (evidenced here and in Fitzpatrick’s 2013 *Mischka’s War*) make generalisations impossible beyond three distinguishing features: commitment to the Russian Orthodox Church, concealment of national identity and wartime collaboration, and strident anti-communism.

Part two of the book concerns “China” Russians, centred in Harbin and Shanghai, the bulk of whom resettled in Australia from 1952 to the early 1960s. Prewar, Harbin was a thriving quasi-Russian city, with Shanghai home to 20,000 Russians. Very few were pro-Soviet. With the occupation of Manchuria, a minority became active collaborators with the Japanese forces or members of the Russian Fascist Party. In describing their wartime lives, postwar departures and resettlement experiences, Fitzpatrick here relies more heavily on secondary sources. But the narrative, as elsewhere throughout the book, is illuminated by an array of vivid biographical vignettes. These bring alive the lived experience (and memories) of individuals caught up in larger historical upheavals. Thus we hear Natalia Melnikov, fresh from Harbin, who spoke for the many who felt isolated and alien in 1950s Australia, plaintively asking, “So this is Australia... How does one get used to it?”

But for both European and Chinese Russians, the Orthodox Church was a comforting haven in this new country. Despite its internal fractiousness, its role in absorbing migrants into the Russian community was pivotal. It also played a part in espionage. Fitzpatrick has identified, again from the Russian archives, at least two Orthodox priests who were Soviet agents, and plausibly suggests that ASIO sought to recruit other priests as informants.

ASIO features in part three of the book, “Resettlement in Australia.” Numerous White Russians offered their services to ASIO, as did activists in the militantly anti-communist National Labour Union. These overtures were mostly rejected by ASIO, which continued to see Russians, whatever their political complexion, as potentially the most dangerous group of migrants. In the early 1950s the possibility of a third world war

seemed real. The foe would be the Soviet Union and local Russians its fifth column. Having a White Russian monarchist father who had been decorated by the tsar and had fought the Reds in the Russian civil war didn’t shield Nina Christesen (née Maximov) from interrogation by Australia’s royal commission on espionage or subsequent suspicions of communist sympathies.

No history of Russians in cold war Australia would be complete without the Petrovs. Fitzpatrick confirms what Vladimir Petrov told the royal commission in 1954: that his brief as a colonel in the KGB was to cultivate a network of Soviet penetration agents within the White Russian community. Fitzpatrick is correct to say that Petrov was singularly unsuccessful (unless one counts, as he did, his apparent recruitment of double agent Michael Bialoguski or the ambiguous Lydia Mokras, both habitués of the Russian Social Club).

But Evdokia Petrov, a captain in the KGB, may have achieved more. A forthcoming article will suggest that she recruited an anti-communist Latvian who collaborated with the Nazis and arrived on the first boatload of DPs in 1947. ASIO was unaware of this but was, of course, aware of White Russians’ noisy presence at Mascot airport when Soviet couriers dragged Evdokia towards a Moscow-bound plane, and their demonstrations outside the royal commission when she testified.

White Russians, Red Peril is full of fascinating detail. Some examples: the first marriage of a future Whitlam government minister, “Diamond Jim” McClelland, then a Trotskyist, was to a pro-Stalinist Russian; Jennie George, a future ACTU president, was born Eugenie Sinicki to Russian parents in a DP camp; Labor MP Les Haylen doxed in suspected communists (not Nazis) working on the Snowy Mountains scheme; and a shadowy White Russian organisation was exotically titled Federation of Zealots of the Sacred Memory of the Tsar.

This is an engagingly written book, sweeping in scope and erudite in analysis. It will stand alongside Fitzpatrick’s previous work as one of her finest accomplishments. The last five pages — on how Russian migrants balanced accommodation to Australia while retaining a sense of Russianness — are a model of wise judgement and shrewd synthesis. For anyone connected to the Russian diaspora, as well as historians of the cold war and migration studies, this is an essential read. ∞

Phillip Deery is Emeritus Professor of History at Victoria University, having published in the fields of cold war history, intelligence, communism and the labour movement. This review was first published in Inside Story.

Biography: Alex MacDonald

Dean Wharton

Alex Macdonald was a Communist Party of Australia (CPA) official and trade union leader from the 1930s through until the late 1960s. He was an amiable and personable character who was proud of the Left and drew respect, if not support, from across the political spectrum. He played a prominent role in many of the industrial and political conflicts experienced in Queensland during his active years. He also steered trade unionism into areas such as indigenous rights, gender equality, student activism and the peace movement during an era when Queensland crept gradually towards being a police state.



Alex was born in Greenock on the Firth of Clyde in Scotland, in 1910. His father, a carpenter in the shipbuilding industry, served on the management committee of the Greenock Central Co-operative Society and it was through this socialist organisation that the family were able to obtain housing. Alex may have observed at close hand the revolutionary fervour that was widespread throughout the world at the end of the First World War. During that period, Glasgow was known as ‘Red Clydeside.’

The revolutionary situation came to naught. A few years later, at fifteen years of age, without work and escaping family problems, he became the second of four siblings to leave for Australia. On arrival he trained in Scheyville, west of Sydney for three months as part of The Dreadnought Scheme, but this led to no permanent work.

He then spent several years travelling around Australia looking for work. By the end of the 1920s he was in Perth and considered returning to Scotland. Although he would not see his son again, Alex’s father judged that the economic situation in Scotland was so severe that Alex was better off staying where he was. Alex moved back East. He recalled to his daughters how desperate the situation was for itinerant workers like himself, “...after the Saturday night dances in the country hall, when they put the scraps of food out in the bins, afterwards (we) would go and raid the bins, looking for food.”

By the early 1930s, Alex was in Queensland. In Mackay he witnessed the stand-off between authorities and the Unemployed Workers Movement organised locally by his comrade Ted Roach. By 1933 Alex had moved

to Brisbane and joined the CPA. Mick Healy pointed out the shared background of all the travellers, “Alex Macdonald was one of the leaders at the Crystal Palace (camp)... We got our early experiences, our convictions, on the track. Very few of the Unemployed leaders had any background of militancy. It was life itself.”

Alex proved himself within the CPA, and was on the State Committee within three years. By 1939, he was on the Central Committee meeting in Sydney.

That same year he married Molly Neild, an active member of the party and future key figure in the Union of Australian Women. Molly had grown up alongside her first cousin, Jack Lindsay, author of *The Blood Vote*, whose father was Norman Lindsay.

Alex obtained a position as an ironworker on the docks in Brisbane and joined the Federated Ironworkers Association (FIA) in 1940. Within two years he was elected Queensland branch secretary.

The 1948 Queensland Railway Strike was based on genuine wage injustice but became an anti-communist crusade. The appointment of Alex as the Secretary of the Strike Committee was regarded as “the real turning point in the direction and leadership of the strike” according to comrade Doug Olive. It was during this strike that Fred Paterson was attacked by a Special Branch officer, a beating he suffered the consequences of for the rest of his life. In 1949 Alex joined the ACTU national executive.

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Alex MacDonald (L) with Ho Chi Min (C)

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The FIA had been under the control of the CPA since 1936, but the Groupers were successfully using the courts to challenge the validity of the election of CPA officials. The writing was perhaps on the wall regarding Alex's FIA position. He stepped into the 'vacant' position of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council (TLC) Secretary in December 1950. He had been an executive officer of the TLC from 1943 and was elected Secretary unopposed. The FIA was subsequently taken over by The Groupers and remained under their control until the early 1990s.

The Groupers were exposed as anti-Left, pro-Catholic reactionaries in 1954. In consequence the AWU temporarily re-affiliated to the TLC. The nine-month long 1956 Shearers Strike was thus co-ordinated by the TLC. The AWU would later say of Alex that he "was the brains and guiding hand (of the TLC), particularly in matters affecting its approach to the industrial well-being of the workers throughout the state, their wives and families."

In 1964 Alex stood alongside Pat Mackie and helped co-ordinate the bitter Mt. Isa Strike. Put simply, the strike was about union victimisation and the fact that take-home pay for workers at the highly profitable mines was less in 1964 than it had been in 1952. Even the Queensland Employers Foundation questioned the State Governments over-reaction to the strike with civil liberties suspended, a night curfew and the airlifting into the town of hundreds of police. The dispute ended with a mixed result for all concerned.

From August 1964 anti-Vietnam War demonstrations were initiated at the University of Queensland. Tem-

porarily the radical student movement replaced the CPA as the hate figure of the Establishment. When Brian Laver, representing the students, and Alan Anderson, a CPA member and plumbers union representative, approached Alex for support in establishing a youth group, the FOCO club, he offered them the use of one floor of the Trades Hall. Headlines proclaiming FOCO as the 'most evil' place in Brisbane divided the leadership of the Trades Hall with Jack Egerton (later knighted), the ALP President of the TLC, and other prominent ALP activists, hating the group.

Alex had been worn down by the battle over the student movement and troubled by the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the consequent response of the Queensland branch of the CPA, and the national organisation, to censure the Soviet Union, but the deterioration in his health was sudden and largely unexpected. In the coming weeks he had expected to be present at the ACTU Conference where his manoeuvrings had arranged the appointment of Bob Hawke as ACTU President (a fact that Hawke subsequently recognised on numerous occasions). Alex died of a myocardial infarction on 18th August 1969 at the age of 59.

Thousands of mourners attended Alex's funeral, where a piper played the MacDonald lament.

Alex's legacy has been varied. Humphrey McQueen has referred to him as a "working class intellectual." The Equal Pay Committee he organised, which perhaps best illustrated the progressive CPA positions Alex took during his tenure as Secretary, was wound up following his death by his newly appointed ALP-affiliated successor. As a Marxist, Alex had a huge interest in the history of the Queensland labour movement and his collected material forms the basis of the University of Queensland's Fryer Library TLC collection, some 637 parcels and boxes of items. A library was dedicated to him in the 1980s at the QCU building (subsequently removed circa 2006), and an annual Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture forms part of the Brisbane Labour History Association's calendar. ∞

Dean Wharton is Editor of The Queensland Journal of Labour History.

Alice Neel and the CPUSA

Miranda Samuels

American painter Alice Neel (1900 – 1984) is known to have had a poster of Lenin in her apartment throughout her life.

I learned this from Neel’s biography, which I read after visiting Alice Neel: People Come First at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the first museum retrospective dedicated to her formidable career.

The exhibition, which runs through August 2021, comprises a broad range of Neel’s irreverent portraits which depict the people in her circles at different stages of her life: her neighbours, comrades, friends, and family, the majority painted while a long-term resident of New York City and an active member of the Communist Party USA.

It is uncharacteristic for major American arts institutions to make explicit the communist ties of major twentieth century artistic figures. Yet Neel’s retrospective as well as another recent exhibition, *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, attests to the influence of Marxist thought and communist affiliation to American modern art.

While the exhibition does make mention of Neel the communist, the collateral text associated clearly at-

tempts to soften the edge of her politics. The blurb states that Neel was “a champion of social justice whose long-standing commitment to humanist principles inspired her life as well as her art”. This vagueness is also found in Phoebe Hoban’s biography of Neel which emphasizes commitments to various social causes in language that reads as anachronistic. Ben Davis (author of *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*) writing for *Artnet*, notes that the curators of the exhibition have been quick to emphasize that Neel’s politics were non-dogmatic and independent. However, Davis points to a quote by Neel that suggests otherwise: “Reagan has said the government doesn’t owe anybody anything. In the Soviet Union you get free medical care—everything is free. There the government owes you everything.”

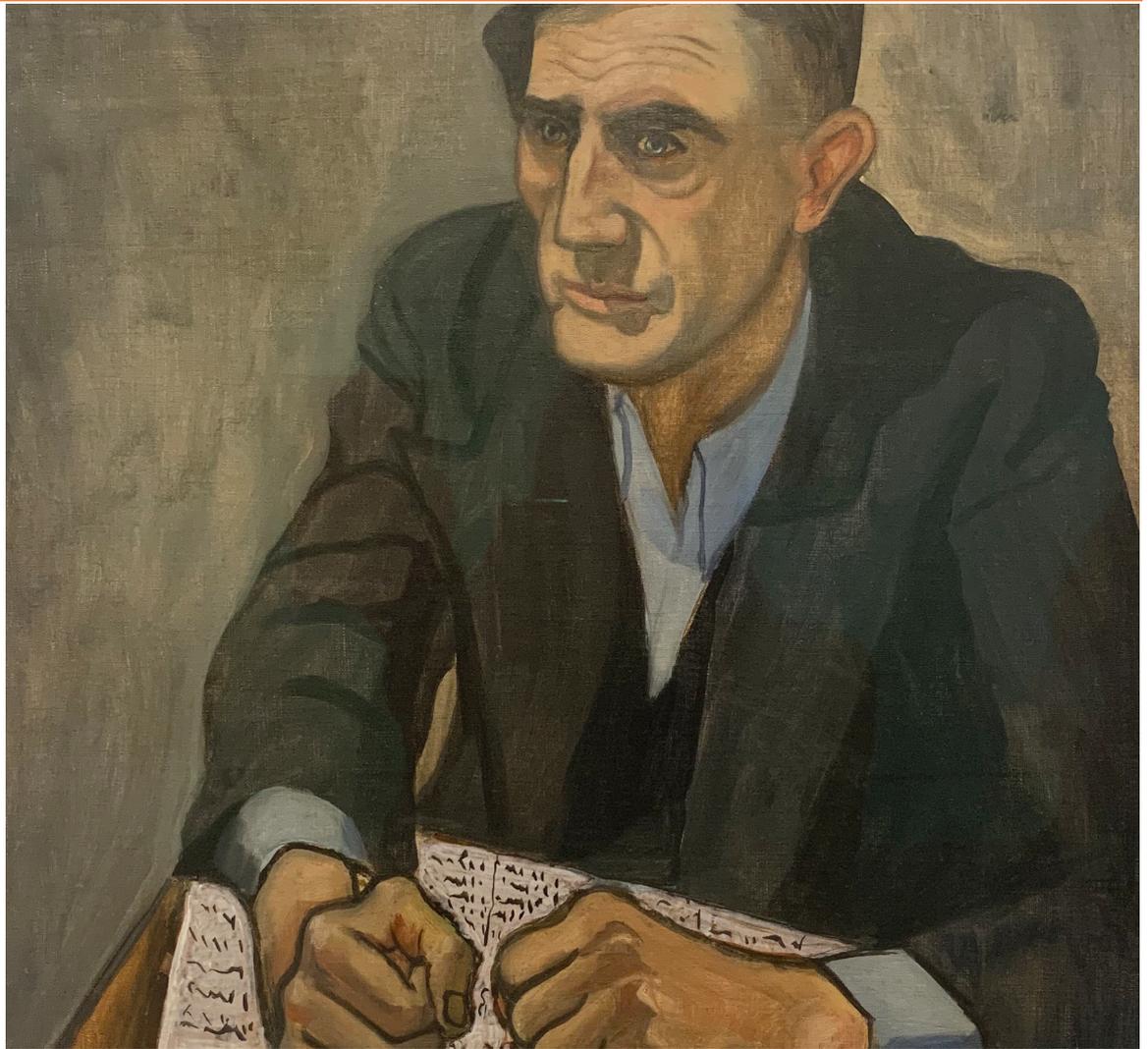
The show is curated thematically, with works loosely grouped together based on thematic concerns extrapolated from Neel’s work. One of the largest groupings of work is the section titled ‘Counter / Culture’. Here, curators have grouped together paintings of “individuals who pushed social, political, and cultural boundaries, from bohemian poets and labor organizers to queer performance artists and feminist trailblazers”. Such a statement implies Neel was somewhat epicurean or at least eclectic in her political orientation rather than the committed communist she was. A curator or institution more sympathetic and acquainted with Neel’s politics might have opted against grouping all of the ‘political’ subjects in one section and instead chosen to use Neel’s own politics as a broader framing device for the show.

Framing of the exhibition aside, amongst the paintings in this section are some striking portraits of notable communists, including a painting of Pat Whalen (1884–1942), a Baltimore based union organiser who is painted at his desk leaning on a copy of the June 16, 1935 *Daily Worker*. Whalen organized dock workers, developed a reputation for his innovative strike tactics during actions in the midst of the depression, and, according to *The Washington Socialist* was known for a particularly aggressive campaign

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Neel’s ‘Death of Mother Bloor’ (1951) on exhibition (Photo: Miranda Samuels)



Detail from Neel's portrait of Pat Whalan (1935) on exhibition. (Photo: Miranda Samuels)

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against racism in the harbors, using direct action to confront segregation laws. It is likely Neel met Whalen in Communist meetings with the International Workers of the World. Neel's painting, *Pat Whalen* (1935), emphasizes his clenched fists resting firmly on the desk in front of him, rendering them disproportionately large and with a thick blue outline characteristic of Neel's style. The composition of the work is also typical of the way Neel liked to situate figures on the canvas, in her tight cropping of Whalen's body and the warped perspective that gives the appearance he is going to fall out of the frame. The effect is dramatic and unsettling as Whalen appears at once powerful and precarious.

Other paintings of communist figures include her work *Death of Mother Bloor* (1951), which depicts Ella Reeve Bloor, one of the leading women of the CPUSA who organized farmers during the Great Depression, in her casket. She also painted *Mike Gold* (1894–1967) and *Phillip Bonosky* (1916–2013), in 1952 and 1948 respectively, amidst the paranoia of McCarthyism and the beginning of the Cold War whose own cultural agenda of abstraction expressionism was polar opposite to Neel's brand of realism.

Around the time that Neel joined the party in the 1930's, she was being supported by the Federal Art Project, the visual arts arm of the Works Progress Administration which was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. The Federal Art Project was a novel arts policy that employed artists (including Rothko and Pollock in their early careers), it gave Neel a monthly wage in exchange for completing and handing in a painting to the program administration every six weeks. As Davis summarises, the Communist Party's enthusiasm for the New Deal's cultural programs may have been what led Neel to join.

Despite the curators' seeming attempts to play down the impact of the CPUSA on Neel's work, joining the party was the beginning of a lifelong affiliation for Neel. Emphasizing her political persuasion does not detract from other aspects of her life and nor does it overshadow her aesthetic innovation. Rather, it allows us to see her formidable commitments – political, artistic and others – as undergirded by a unifying materialist logic. ∞

Miranda Samuels is a SEARCH Member currently based in New York.

Vale Steve Cooper

Chris Ray



Steve Cooper, centre, with fellow members of the 1974 Australian trade union fact-finding mission to Chile, Jim Baird (left) and Henry McCarthy (right).

In May, the people of Chile delivered a blow to their right-wing government by electing a left-leaning constitutional assembly. It will draft a new constitution to replace the one written under army general Augusto Pinochet, who overthrew Chile's democratically elected Marxist president, Salvador Allende, in 1973. Pinochet's political heirs suffered further defeats in May's regional and municipal elections, which saw a communist elected as mayor of Santiago.

The result would have delighted Steve Cooper, a member of the Communist Party of Australia and SEARCH Foundation who did important work to expose the crimes of the Pinochet junta and mobilise Australian and international support for its victims.

Steve died on 7 May at the age of 93. He was a crucial member of an Australian union delegation that visited Chile in March 1974, seven months after Pinochet's US-backed coup.

The visit was made possible by an outstanding act of solidarity by Sydney airport workers who refused to service a LAN Chile aircraft. That left the plane and the airline's president, a junta general called Stuardos, stranded on

the tarmac. In return for letting the plane go, a desperate Stuardos agreed to invite the Australian union movement to send a delegation to Chile to see for itself "how much happier the people are now," as he rather naively put it.

The delegation returned to Australia with a comprehensive account of military repression. Their findings, written mainly by Steve, contributed to worldwide condemnation and isolation of the junta and the release of prominent political prisoners. The visit did much to build a Chile solidarity movement in Australia.

Steve was born in 1928 and grew up in Sydney's south-eastern beachside suburbs. His parents – father George, a hat-maker, and mother May, a nanny – were English immigrants from Manchester. Steve remembered George as a man left "permanently embittered and introspective" after service in World War I.

A studious boy with a fascination for history, Steve grew up in the shadow of World War 2. He recalled his Coogee primary school headmaster standing in the playground, against the backdrop of a partly built air raid shelter, to address pupils on the fall of Singapore to the Japanese army in 1942. A happier memory was getting news of the German army's surrender at Stalingrad in

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1943, which boosted popular goodwill towards the Soviet Union.

On leaving school, Steve became a pharmacy apprentice and joined the CPA, when it had active suburban branches in Sydney's east from Vacluse to Botany, along with factory branches with dozens of members.

In 1956, communist parties around the world were rocked by news of Nikita Khrushchev's report to the 20th Congress of the CPSU – his so-called secret speech denouncing the personality cult and purges of his predecessor, Joseph Stalin. Khrushchev's co-leaders blocked publication of his report but it was read to party and workplace meetings throughout the USSR.

Steve, a self-effacing man who disliked talking about himself, was uncomfortable with the elevation of any individual over the collective. He had read widely on the Soviet Union and was not entirely surprised when Khrushchev's revelations reached Australia.

He later said he was more disillusioned with what he regarded as the CPA leadership's attempts to stifle discussion of the issue, which contributed to him leaving the party for a time. Despite a stint in the Labor Party, which he described as "like being on milk and water", he never shed his ideology and principles.

Steve travelled extensively overseas, including three months in Allende's Chile, where he witnessed the punishing impact of US sanctions and other measures aimed at sabotaging the Popular Unity government's socialist reforms.



Chile solidarity campaign, c.1974

His travels added to his theoretical understanding of imperialism; he had the knowledge, experience and empathy to recognise Western "humanitarian intervention" as a cloak for self-serving regime-change operations in countries such as Libya.

In "No Truck with the Chilean Junta!", a study of Australian and British union solidarity with Chilean workers after the coup, author Ann Jones quoted Chilean trade unionist Luis Figueroa as saying that news of the Sydney airport ban "swept through Chile and from that moment, lives began to be saved in Chile." Without the Australian union action, "It is possible that we may not be alive," he added.

Jones identified Steve as the first person to suggest the possibility of leveraging the aircraft ban to mount a union fact-finding mission to Chile. The Australian delegation included AMWU officials and CPA members Jim Baird and Henry McCarthy, Brian McMahon of the Transport Workers Union, Ron Masterson of the Plumbers Union, interpreter Carmen Bull, and Steve, a rank-and-file member of the Miscellaneous Workers Union, which made him its representative. They went to Chile with the endorsement of both the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and its rival, the World Federation of Trade Unions.

The delegation secured guarantees from the junta that it would have access to prisons and there would be no reprisals against anyone they interviewed, including jailed trade unionists and former members of Allende's government.

Steve's first-hand knowledge of Chile proved invaluable. He was able to revisit workplaces and communities and compare their circumstances to those of a year before. At one factory, Steve discovered that about a third of the workforce had been sacked and workers he had previously met had been killed. At a metalworking shop, Steve observed that there were several newly appointed 'union representatives', and only one of the old union committee he had met previously. Anoth-

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er factory had been under workers' control when Steve visited in 1973. When the coup took place, the army attacked and killed many workers. Steve found that none of the workers he had met remained at the factory when he returned in 1974.

The delegation visited a shantytown where Steve had been welcomed a year earlier. He told Ann Jones: "I walked on into the settlement and asked a worker about Sergio, Vicente and the twelve others I knew, and he told me they had all been shot. It just felt like the end of everything."

Steve and other delegation members had secret meetings with members of banned trade unions and the underground resistance. "The men sitting across from Cooper shared some of the shocking and painful stories of the terror of life under the dictatorship," Jones wrote. "Workers had been executed in their workplaces and military personnel killed families and burnt houses if their search for arms was resisted. The men said 'there was a lot of torture. At the national stadium some ... were shot. They pulled out fingernails. They castrated men. They violated and raped women and pushed pisco bottles into their vaginas.'"

On returning home, the delegates took part in meetings across Australia which reached thousands of people and generated media publicity. They produced a newspaper, distributed internationally in seven languages, which outlined the delegation's activities and findings and relayed messages from Chilean trade unionists. They lobbied the Whitlam Labor government, which subsequently refused LAN Chile landing rights in Australia. The New Zealand government followed suit. You can see photos from the trade union mission and Chile solidarity campaign by [clicking here](#).

The delegation reported that strikes were treated as treason, union elections were banned, all union meetings had to be attended by a representative of the military, and any real union work was carried out underground at the risk of detention or death. There were more than 40 concentration camps in Chile, the delegation established. These findings contributed to Chile's expulsion from the International Labor Organisation.

Steve worked at a variety of jobs, including several years as a wharfie. In the 1970s he became a research officer for the AMWU, where, among other roles, he helped to research and analyse wage rates paid across hundreds of dissimilar workshops in the metal industry.

This work set standards of measurement and analysis



Steve Cooper in Chile with the Australian trade union delegation in 1974

ahead of those of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission and also of the employers, said former AMWU organiser Don Sutherland. "The AMWU used Steve's data and analysis in their appearances in the commission to win higher wage rates across the metal industry," Don said. "(AMWU leader) Laurie Carmichael praised Steve's dedication and the quality of his work and said he was one of the finest people he'd ever worked with."

After retiring from the AMWU, Steve studied and wrote on areas of communist history as diverse as the pre-war CPA's attitude to the Labor Party and the influence of Lenin's 1922 New Economic Policy on contemporary Chinese socialism. He researched the fate of 154 lesser known CPSU cadres in the purges of the 1930s (including many who perished and others who emerged unscathed) and recorded his findings in handwritten notebooks. He never used a typewriter, let alone a computer, and his penmanship left no white space – a habit formed when paper was scarce.

He had a dependable memory and wrote long, absorbing letters on complex subjects until shortly before his death. With Steve there was no such thing as idle chat; make a casual remark on, say, Chinese state-owned enterprises and you risked receiving a substantial paraphrase of the three-volume selected works of Deng Xiaoping.

Before meeting his long-time friend and companion Judith Charles, Steve was married twice, to Lois and Patricia, both of whom died tragically. He spent the last two years of his life in a nursing home at Bonnells Bay on the NSW Central Coast. ∞

Steve's ashes will be scattered at a ceremony in Sydney at noon on Monday 21 June, in the Biddigal Reserve, off Ramsgate Avenue at the northern end of Bondi beach, near the children's pool. Meet at one of the covered picnic tables.

Vale Vera Deacon OAM: A Free Woman of Newcastle

Greg Giles

Vera Deacon was born in Mayfield, near the banks of the Hunter River, in July 1926. Her father, Norman Pember, laboured in the BHP steelworks while her mother, Ellen ‘Nell’ Pember, cared for her growing family and made-do in often tough conditions.

When Vera was a toddler Norman, who worked in the coke ovens, was badly burned. He received some financial compensation and tried to open a fish and chip shop – ‘a chipper’ – but sadly he failed. The family moved to Dempsey Island in the Hunter River estuary. There they grew vegetables and caught fish. In the depths of the Depression, they moved back to the ‘mainland’ to increase Norman’s chances of finding work.

Dad’s hope of getting more work was not met. He sold fish, five on a string for one shilling, battling and ‘scrounging’ as he called it. The dole scarcely fed us, let alone paid rent. Soon we went to live in the Shortland Unemployed Camp in the bush, and then briefly in a house on stilts, one of about seventeen built on Platts Channel. Then we settled in a ‘trog-lodytes’ den carved into the Mayfield West Hill. Later Dad paid five pounds for a whitewashed bag house in the main camp.

In 1939 the young teenager and the family moved back to the estuary, this time into a cottage on Mosquito Island. She hitched a ride to school on the milk launch each day. A bright and curious student, she loved to read.

When January 1940 came Dad asked me stay home to help Mother as she was still not well. Mother resisted but I loved her, and I knew she needed help. It was hard leaving school at the minimum age of 13 years and 8 months, but I managed to replace that

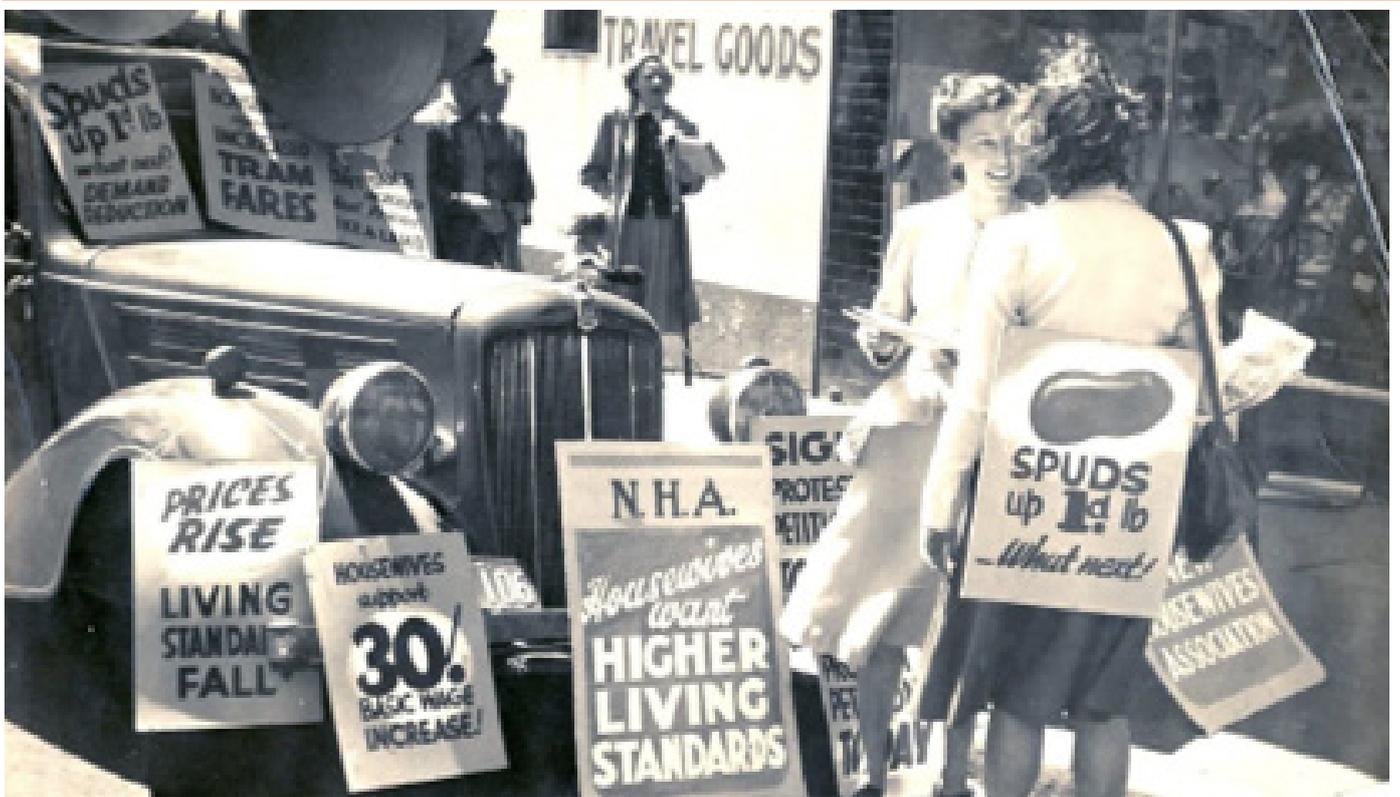


knowledge stimulation with the ABC radio and The Children’s Hour and, when the Argonauts Club was formed, I joined and became Rower Number 23 in the good ship Menelaus. As I rowed my little green boat up the creek, I felt I was an Argonaut and sang the Club theme song: ‘Row mighty Argonauts, row, row, row!’

Her rowing prowess was further tested when she found work in a Mayfield produce store in 1942. She rowed to-and-from work every day and later, when she enrolled in a Technical College evening course, she would be rowing home in the dark at 9pm.

With the morning mists curling around the islands

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The Campaign Against Rising Prices by the National Housewives Association, Redfern, 1949. Vera is speaking to Freda Brown (back to camera) while Daphne Gollan speaks on the microphone.

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and The Works I rowed to work each day, across and back, enjoying the camaraderie of the river men and the steel workers who dubbed me The Old Salt, teasing me for my muscles. The river had certainly melted away my puppy fat until I was lean and long like a greyhound.

In 1944, aged 17, Vera went with her father to a public meeting calling for a second front in Europe.

The meeting was chaired by a small and smiling blue-eyed woman called Min Wilson. I was fascinated. I had never seen a woman in that role before, so assured and persuasive as she introduced the speakers: Bill Gollan, a schoolmaster and local President and Stan Deacon the Secretary of the Newcastle District Communist Party of Australia. Both were impressive speakers. But it was the brown-eyed Stan Deacon's words that embedded deeper ideals in my mind. I recognised something passionate and uplifting in this man's belief in winning the war, in building the peace and creating a better life for humanity. Min asked the audience to consider joining the Party. With Dad and ... eight or nine others, I did. I have never regretted this decision as the Party became my university because it took me into diverse experiences of people, places, ideas and wider education.

A few months later Vera was recruited to work in the

Party's Newcastle office. Here she revelled in the company of the men and women who came to pick up Tribune and pay their dues, and she learnt political skills from union and community activists.

As part of my development, I was asked to chair workshop meetings. My first at Cardiff Loco was nerve-wracking. I survived and gradually improved.

In mid-1944 Vera's mother, Nell, lost her eighth child close to term and Vera and her mother wept together. The CPA Newcastle District Women's Committee, led by Marie Gollan, had that very year researched and written up an Infant Mortality Rate Research Paper which was published in the Communist Review of 1945. After the high levels of production over the World War II years, Newcastle was one of the most polluted environments in the country and had a high infant mortality rate. Nell would later join the CPA when her children were 'off her hands' and she became a committed participant in all its women's agendas.

By 1946 Vera was a member of the CPA Newcastle District Women's Committee. As well she was active in the Tech College students' union and the Australian Union of Students. She stood as the Communist Party candidate for North Ward in the 1947 Newcastle Council elections. She initiated a

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campaign against the smoke nuisance in Mayfield and presented a petition of 2,000 signatures to Newcastle City Council.

She had also fallen in love. Stan Deacon and Vera married in May 1946. Stan left his Party job to find work in industry, but his militant reputation was well known, so work in Newcastle was hard to find. They moved to Sydney in 1948 where Stan got work on the trams and, later, became a bus driver.

Vera found work in the Post Office, and she and Stan lived a busy life sharing the raising of their two young daughters Daria and Deborah, Party activities, and union and community organising. Vera was a member of the New Housewives' Association and secretary of her local Parents & Citizens Association. She wrote articles arguing for free medicine and in favour of natural childbirth and campaigned against rising prices. She spoke on the Party stump in the Domain and was a regular contributor to Tribune. Her ASIO file observes that she must be involved in subversive activities as she "was often up late at night typing".

Her love and talent for writing led her to write sto-

ries, often based on her experiences in Newcastle such as "The Men Who Make the Steel". In 1954 she joined the Realist Writers Group and later became a committee member of the Australasian Book Society. She won the Mary Gilmore Literary Competition for writing in 1957.

In the 70s and 80s she was involved in the peace movement, the campaigns for nuclear disarmament and for an end to the Vietnam War. She welcomed the resurgence of the feminist movement and its fight for equal pay and to fully recognise the contribution of women to political, social and cultural life.

Stan died in 1993 and, with the children grown up, Vera retired from the Post Office and moved back to Newcastle in 1997. She lived in Stockton, within sight of her childhood island home, now the biggest export coal terminal in the world. She was outraged by the dredging and pollution that had destroyed the islands, now become one - Kooragang Island. She recalled that even in her childhood, industry was having its effects. After a successful day's fishing her father found his catch was tainted with the taste of tar.

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Vera Deacon OAM, having just been presented the 'Freeman of Newcastle' medal by Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes (R) in September 2019 (photo: City of Newcastle website)

The fish were inedible. It was a bitter moment for Dad; the river was his lifeline. I never forgot his despair and from then on saw the river and our world more deeply. I must have been five or six. It was my first lesson in ecology, although such a word was unknown to us then. Dad and his fishing, prawning, oystering and farming mates all spoke about 'looking after the river', 'putting back into the soil what you took out': they were by instinct organic farmers.

She volunteered on the Kooragang Restoration Project to restore and protect what remained of the estuary islands. She was a regular and popular participant in the community tree-planting days on the island, where she enthralled younger volunteers with tales of her life there in the 1930s.

Vera's passion for history, especially the local history of her formative years in Newcastle, saw her make a modest but, in her circumstances, very generous donation to Newcastle University to set up the Vera Deacon Regional History Fund "to support and encourage regional history through the acquisition, preservation and study of valuable regional historical resources". Her initiative prompted others to donate, and has resulted in projects to digitise old photographic, sound and video records, to identify and map Aboriginal place names, and research the history of the 1830s Ravensworth homestead, among other things. She also made a significant donation to the SEARCH Foundation to assist in their

project to digitise the *Tribune* archive at the State Library of NSW.

Vera's rich and varied life, her commitment to social and environmental justice, her near-photographic memory of the past, and her natural warmth and enthusiasm when among friends made her a regular invitee to speak at the Newcastle Writers Festival, the University, and other civic occasions.

She, and her-later-in-life partner Malcolm Bailey, never missed the chance to catch up with their old Party comrades at the Newcastle SEARCH AGM and other reunions.

She was recognised by the Hunter Valley Broad Left in 2014 with an Outstanding Service award at their annual dinner. She became a 'Freewoman of the City of Newcastle' in 2019 and was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in 2020 "For service to community history, and to conservation". In December 2020 she received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Newcastle, a fitting book-end to her oft-interrupted formal education that began in the depression camps of Mayfield.

Vera died suddenly, of a brain aneurism, in Newcastle on Monday 17 May 2021. She was 94. ∞



Vera at the award of her Honorary Doctorate of Letters, with University of Newcastle archivist Gianni di Gravio, December 2020.

SEARCH News

Content and accuracy of contributions is the responsibility of the authors.

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