The Great Coal Strike of 1949

By J. D. Blake
reject all of the proposals advanced by the miners.

The Chifley Labour Government was determined to use all its powers in defence of the coal owners and to make war against the miners. In provocative fashion industry was shut down on a wide scale in N.S.W. a week before the coal strike had even begun. Scores of thousands of workers were thrown out of employment as part of the policy of the Chifley and McGirr Governments to manufacture hostility amongst the workers against the miners and to isolate the miners.

It is now well known that this plot failed as far as it related to the miners; its sole effect was to inflict unnecessary hardship and misery on countless thousands of workers.

TREACHERY OF THE RIGHTWING LABOR PARTY LEADERS

All the events during the progress of the coal strike itself threw a clear light on the true nature of the Labour Governments. The strike provided the most concentrated exposure of the role of Social Democracy which has been experienced by the working class in Australia for many years. (Social Democracy is the theory and practice of the Labour Party leadership.)

In this situation the treacherous leaders of the Labour Party proved to be more useful to the Collins House monopolists than the Menzies Tory Party. The Labour Party leaders were able to mobilise all the rightwing elements and traitors in the labour movement in a way which Menzies would have found it more difficult to do.

Menzies himself has made it clear that in his view the policy pursued by the Federal Labour Government in relation to the coal strike was in fact the policy of the Liberal Party. Without doubt, Menzies could have added that Chifley did this job better than Menzies himself could have done it.

The fund freezing legislation introduced by the Chifley Government was one of the most vicious strike-breaking laws in Australian history. In their noisy speeches during the debate on the Act, a number of Labour politicians like Calwell said they had no intention of interfering with the workers' right to strike. Hypocrisy and cant could hardly be carried further! The Labour Government, the unions, sti...
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Labour Government freezes the funds of the unions, stifles financial aid to the mineworkers on strike, and has the audacity to say it is not strike-breaking, but on the contrary to defending the right to strike.

In implementing this vicious legislation the Labour Government brought into play its tried and trusted weapon against the working class — the Arbitration Court. The judge selected to wield this weapon was also a Labour Party gentleman with a record of demagogic utterances — Judge Foster.

Next stage in the struggle was the unprecedented proceedings before the Arbitration Court, in which the weapon of contempt was used to inflict savage gaol sentences on union leaders. In these proceedings there was no trial and no defence, a refusal to act as a common informer or to give information on internal union affairs to the enemy of unionism was met with a sentence of 12 months' gaol.

It was a Labour Government which did this. It was the noisy champion of human rights Dr. Evatt who invented this legislation and perpetrated this criminal violation of the rights of workers. But maybe the intellectual Dr. Evatt does not look upon workers as human.

The objective of these gaolings of union leaders by the Labour Government was to behead the unions on strike and leave the mineworkers without leadership in the struggle. This hope proved to be vain because the workers quickly threw up new leaders and commenced rapidly to improve their organisation throughout the coalfields.

Instead of weakening the fighting spirit of the mineworkers or their solidarity, the violent onslaught against them increased their fighting determination and this was revealed in the resounding votes for continuation of the struggle recorded at mass meetings in the middle of the strike. These votes were even more decisive than the vote at the original aggregate meetings which called the strike.

This militant fighting spirit of the miners forced the Labour politicians out of their secluded Canberra surroundings to stomp the coal fields and take the platform on the Sydney Domain. This series of Labour Party meetings (which were discontinued after the end of the strike)
showed the Rightwing Labour politicians in their true colours. In all their speeches they poured abuse upon the miners and upon the Communist Party. Coming forward as the ardent defenders of the coal bosses, they ordered the miners to go back to arbitration and accept the will of the coal owners, the Coal Board and the arbitration system acting on their behalf.

The vicious strike-breaking campaign of the Labour politicians reached its all time low with the gutter language of Calwell in his notorious Sydney Domain speech. In this speech Calwell threatened the establishment of concentration camps to place militant workers behind barbed wire a la Hitler.

In the same speech Calwell boasted with pompous pride that “We unloaded the Haligonian Duke”, in other words the Federal Labour Government came to the assistance of the Hollway Liberal Party Government in Victoria by using the navy to unload a shipload of coal declared black by militant unions in that State. The Labour Government came to the aid of a Tory State Government and Calwell is proud of it. Calwell boasted of treachery and revelled in his unity with the Victorian tories, thus clearly exposing the true role of the Labour Party leadership.

In the coal strike, the whole machinery of the Labour Party was set in motion with the object of strikebreaking. At the top of this strike-breaking apparatus stood the Federal and N.S.W. Labour Governments which proceeded to mobilise the A.L.P. State Executive, the Rightwing leaders of the A.C.T.U. and Labour Councils to defend the coal owners and make war on the coal miners. While the Fergusons, Clareys, Monks and Stouts were brought into action for their dirty work, Rightwing forces headed by Blair, were being thrown into action to disrupt the Combined Mining Unions Council, while on the Northern N.S.W. coalfields the Rightwing Labour Party agents, Crooks, Cockerill and Simpson, were assigned the task of disrupting the miners’ front from within.

Elsewhere the A.L.P. leaders threw into action those other shock troops of disruption known as the “Groupers”, who consist to a great extent of criminal elements and shady characters in the employ of the Security Police. In the full glare of publicity, the notorious Dobson story threw a brilliant light on the true nature of these anti-working class traitors failed completely, as real issue of the struggle arrived. The purpose of all this of the Labour Party Rights of the Labour Party leadership. They led the battle between the elements and the Communists the miners were alleged to lookers. These efforts of the Labour Party leadership. They led the battle between the working class and the Labour Party and the ardant defenders of capital enemies of the workers.

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exposing the true role of the A.L.P. Party leadership.

strike, the whole machinery of the Labour movement was set in motion with the aim of strikebreaking. At the top of the list was the S.W. Labour Governments' attempt to mobilise the A.L.P. Rightwing leaders of the Labour movement to declare a war on the workers and make war on the workers. The Fergusons, Clareys, and their ilk were brought into action to -work,- Rightwing forces were being thrown into the fray. The Combined Mining Lads the Rightwing Labour rooks, Cockerill and Simpson, were the task of disrupting and ousting the A.L.P. leaders from their positions.

The A.L.P. leaders threw into the fray the shock troops of the so-called "Groupers", who were involved in criminal activities, including the police. In the full glare of the notorious Dobson story, a light was thrown on the true nature of these anti-working class shock troops of the Labour Party leaders which parade under the high-sounding title of "A.L.P. Industrial Groups."

The purpose of all this furious activity of the Labour Party Rightwing was to sow confusion and divert attention from the real issue of the struggle and to create the false impression that what was happening was a battle between the Labour Governments and the Communist Party, while the miners were alleged to be mere onlookers. These efforts of the Labour traitors failed completely. The mineworkers in the process of almost eight weeks' bitter struggle learned the true nature of the Labour Governments and the Labour Party leadership. They learned that in battle between the working class and the capitalists, the Labour Party leaders are the ardent defendes of capitalism and the enemies of the workers.

MILITARY FORCES IN 1890 AND 1949

Betraying a cardinal point in the platform of its own Party which declares: "No troops to be used in industrial disputes," the Chifley Labour Government ordered the use of military forces in open cut mines to break the coal strike. Australian workers have bitter memories of the use of the army against the workers by tory governments in the strikes of the 1890's. In fact it was out of those bitter
ast weeks of the great struggle in the mining industry the situation was one in which the Labourists and the daily press were the Communists and militants pursue the struggle on the issues through to the bitter end, as intention was to break the mineworkers at the outer edges of breakaway movements for work in such a way that the dership and the Communist been left high and dry and of the strike-breaking activities. Secretary of the A.R.U. in railworkers had been preventing in solidarity with the various places black coal was by sections of the workers of their Rightwing leaders. signs of some weakening of the parts of the coalfields in but above all the disruptive of the Miners' Federation, but instead of this the skill and boldness of the Communist and militant leaders retained the initiative and the leadership in the hands of the best working class forces right through to the end, with the result that the plan of the Labour Government failed and the ranks of the miners are more solid than ever before, whilst the prestige of the Communist Party is the highest it has ever been on the coalfields.

Having failed to secure the objectives which they set themselves during the coal strike, Chifley, Evatt and Co. are now attempting to secure these objectives by other means. It is for this purpose that they introduced the amendments to the Arbitration Act taking control of union ballots and union affairs out of the hands of the workers as part of their plan to fascise the unions.

The working class must now launch a vigorous and protracted struggle against this and all other attacks upon their trade unions.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

The coal strike was of tremendous importance for the Australian working class. Firstly the workers secured in this struggle invaluable lessons on the true role of Labour governments, the A.L.P. leadership, or what is known internationally as Social Democracy. In contrast to this the workers saw the Communist Party as the only genuine working class party which demonstrated its skill, organising efficiency
and ability to lead great working class battles against capitalism.

Secondly, this great struggle established the fact that the Arbitration system has been made into a vicious bludgeon against the working class by the Labour Governments. There can be no illusions about the fact that as the economic crisis develops, this Arbitration system will be the chief weapon for imposing wage cuts, longer hours and worsening the conditions of the workers. As time goes on the workers will find themselves more and more in conflict with this weapon of the employing class.

Thirdly, the coal strike demonstrated that great working class victories can be won even though specific economic claims are not secured in the course of the strike. This is likely to be a more frequent feature in conditions of economic crisis. More and more the partial struggles face the workers with the great issue of the all-in-struggle against capitalism itself as the only way to a lasting solution.

Fourthly, the defence of unionism and the rights of unionists to regulate and determine their own affairs has now become a matter of first-rate importance for the whole Australian working class. The battles on this front which are such a long-standing tradition of Australian workers must be fought again with redoubled vigour.

Finally, the conditions have been created for developing the fighting united front of the working class. It is the great responsibility of all Communists to help Labour Party workers fully to grasp the lessons to be learned from the coal strike. These Labour Party workers must never be lumped together with their Rightwing leaders. These workers will more rapidly move over to the banner of united working class struggle to the extent that the Communists show vigour and understanding in organising and developing this united front.

In pursuing this united front policy, no time should be lost and no opportunity should be missed to bring all the best working class fighters, all the splendid militants who came forward in the process of the coal strike, into the ranks of the Communist Party.

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