"When my children joined the Party, a few years ago, I wanted to," Mrs McBryde said, with a smile and a burr of a Scottish tongue. "But they said I was too old."

She is a little scrap of a woman, has brought up a large family. Her hair is white, her face etched with many wrinkles; but her blue eyes have a youthful light and fire.

"Even at school, in Scotland," she remembered, "I wondered why some children had nice warm coats and good shoes, while others had no coats at all and ran barefoot. I didn't like going to church because it was the same there. Some people looked so well-fed and prosperous. Others so poor and miserably clad. I felt there was injustice somewhere — and hated it."

Mrs McBryde picked up her knitting. She was making a pair of socks for Danny, her youngest son.

"Rob and I were both very young when we married," she went on. "We had nine children when we came to Australia, hoping the struggle for existence would not be so hard. It wasn't long before we discovered that capitalism is the same here as in the old country.

"In the schools, in the churches and in the homes of the people, there were the same differences between the workers and those who live on the work of others. When my boys grew up, I liked to hear them talk about their trade union.
Communists Are Always Young

and the government of the country. We went to meetings with them about the Soviet Union.

"It was grand to know that somewhere, at Icast, my dreams about a way out of hardship and poverty for the workers had come true. Rob was always a little cautious about plunging into things, and afraid of the consequences if their bosses found out our boys were 'red ragers,' as he called them.

"Jock and I had great arguments about it — but Jock always won. I loved the way he would blaze away and leave his father nothing to do but agree with him. Of course, Rob knew the boys were right. He just was scared about their being 'commune-ists,' and losing their jobs.

"They went communist, I guessed. Alison and Peggy and their husbands, as well, and my little Nan. I was glad and proud for my bairns to be working for that bright future I’d wanted to work for before they were born. But it was just as well not to fash their father, I told them, until he understood that the Communist Party in any country is an advance-guard of the working class, the bravest, most faithful champion it’s got."

So busy and important they were, her young people, Mrs McBryde explained. Always going to study classes and meetings. A little mysterious, too, about what they were doing. They did not tell their mother very much.

Jock lost his job for taking part in an unemployed demonstration. He got another, almost at once. A better one, he said, though the wages were small. Sometimes, he got no wages at all.

But he always looked neat and trim. His mother saw to that. He pressed and cleaned his trousers, turned the collars and cuffs of his shirts, knitted and darned for him. Jock, himself, scarcely noticed when his clothes were shabby. His brothers and sisters did, and bought what he needed from time to time.

"They knew, though I wasn’t supposed to, that Jock was secretary of a new branch of the Party in our district," Mrs McBryde said. "He would say to me sometimes, looking grave and a bit worried: ‘May I have the sitting room for a meeting, tomorrow night, mum?’

"‘Of course, my son,’ I’d say.

"‘Could you see dad doesn’t come barging in on us?’ he’d ask. And I’d promise: ‘I’ll do my best, dearie.’

"One night, I just couldn’t bear being kept out of things any longer. Jock was at work in his room, and Nan typing for him. When I took them a cup of tea, I said:

"‘I’d like to join the Party, too, Jock.’

"‘You’re too old,’ he said.

"‘Nan thought I was hurt and disappointed. ‘Never mind, mother,’ she said. ‘There are always things you can do to help — like making rosettes for May Day and selling literature at meetings.’"

"Of course, Jack was very busy,” his mother apologised. “His mind was full of the newspaper he and Nan had to bring out next day.”

Mrs McBryde did as Nan suggested. She made rosettes for May Day and sold literature at meetings. For the next two or three years, she swept and tidied the Party rooms, cleaned the lavatories, minded the shop when nobody else could be found to do it, addressed envelopes, and made coffee and scones for socials. In every spare moment, she was reading Jock’s books and pamphlets, and learning all she could about communism.

It was not easy to find those spare moments, or time for everything she had to do, with a big family to cook and wash for, as well as keep the house in order, and a room always ready for visiting comrades who might need a bed for the night. But Mrs McBryde liked doing these things and feeling she could be of some use, even if she were "too old to join the Party."

When the war broke out Andrew and Geordie went off to the fighting in North Africa. It was all their mother could do to let her dear boys go into that welter of death and destruction. But she knew this war was different from others into which the working-class had been driven. She knew there could be no progress for the workers of the world until fascism was defeated.

"It’s alright, mum," Jock said. "I’d like to be going too."
But Andrew and Geordie will be fighting on one front, and I on another. I've got to stay here and see that fascist tendencies in Australia don't take advantage of the war to destroy what the boys are fighting for."

"Before long, it was clear what he meant," Mrs McBryde said. "The Menzies government made the Australian Communist Party illegal, and it looked as if men like the fascists in France were trying to suppress the most active anti-fascists in the country.

"Jock and Nan had to go away from home. The police came to ask me where they were. Of course, I didn't know."

"One of the detectives asked: 'What does your son do with all the money he gets from Moscow?' I showed him Jock's best suit with the seat nearly worn out of the pants. 'He gets no money from Moscow,' I said. 'Does that look as if he did?'

"I had cleared away all the newspapers and books which suddenly had become 'illegal.' The police didn't find anything they could use to hurt my barns — though they ransacked every room. I had to make all the beds again, and tidy the cupboards and drawers. But a comrade had got 'windy' the night before, and dumped a printing press in our backyard. I just managed to stow it away before the detectives arrived.

"It came in useful — that press. I learned to set-up type and print what Jock sent me. Then when he was arrested and sent to prison for 'having an illegal leaflet in his possession,' I went on printing leaflets for the comrades. Rob and I passed them on to another comrade, as we were told to do, and distributed some ourselves."

All this, Mrs McBryde was telling me with the quirk of a smile in her blue eyes, and often a flash of fire going with it. The click of her knitting needles never stopped.

"So absurd, it was!" she exclaimed indignantly. "There were Andrew and Geordie fighting fascists overseas, and Jock and Nan being persecuted by fascist-minded men here in Australia. It angered their father so much, he said: 'We're not going to have our sons stabbed in the back.' So we worked together all the time the Communist Party was illegal."

"When the Labor Party took office, there were no more persecutions. I handed over the press and all my books and papers to a responsible comrade.

"'How is it you're not a member of the Party, Mrs McBryde?' he asked.

"'I'm too old,' I said. 'At least the children thought so when I wanted to join, years ago.'"

"'How old are you?' he asked.

"'The same age as Joseph Stalin,' I told him.

"'And not too old to print leaflets and distribute them during a period of illegality,' he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"He signed my nomination paper and I was accepted by our branch. Soon after, Jock was released from prison. When he came home I showed him my card.

"'There you are, comrade,' I said. 'Your mother is not too old to join the Party, after all. And your father is treasurer of our branch!'"

"How he laughed! And gave me a good hug.

"'Gee, I believe it now, mum,' he said.

"'What?'

"'That Communists are always young,' Kisch said so.

"How could I have forgotten? He was talking about Clara Zetkin. She had the youth of the indomitable spirit,' he said. All true communists have that, because they know they're serving the greatest cause on earth — the freeing of mankind from exploitation, poverty and war.'

"Ah, well," Mrs McBryde sighed, "remembering that was the only thing helped me when Andrew and Geordie were both killed in the war. 'You must not let grief interfere with your work, comrade,' I told myself. 'Other mothers have lost their sons in this war — thousands and thousands of them — but many mothers do not yet understand what they must do to prevent future wars. You must help them to understand. It is a great thing to be able to work for the peace, welfare and happiness of all peoples.'"