

years, helping to form the Melbourne University Labor Club in 1925 and the Victorian Labor Guild of Youth in 1926, then organising and speaking for the British Labor Party in Manchester and in British University circles, in the faith that the Labor Party would bring socialism. So the shock was a severe one.

THE YEAR OF HORRORS

Then came the year of horrors, 1931. In January, Labor Prime Minister Scullin returned from a softening-up visit to London. A so-called "committee of experts" met—a group of officials and professors chaired by Sir Robert Gibson of Toorak, head of the Commonwealth Bank Board, and a rigid Tory. This committee produced a plan to meet Government deficits by cutting public servants' wages, old age, invalid and war pensions and all other social services (a plan that had, in fact, been dictated by Sir Otto Niemeyer of the Bank of England on his visit to Australia the year before).

In February a meeting of the Commonwealth and State Premiers took place. It lasted three weeks. It received the plan of the "committee of experts", made some proposals which the banks rejected, and dispersed after deciding nothing. This, after the Federal Labor Treasurer Theodore had spoken of "the possibility of collapse, public panic and financial smash, if not social upheaval of a very serious and desperate character."

The best of the Labor politicians of the day, Frank Anstey, wrote after the February meeting:—"The banks... demand the execution of their starvation policy, else they will refuse banking credits to all Governments that fail to come to heel. They present themselves as a super-Government." Sure enough they did, and finally the Bankers' Plan, after becoming the Experts' Plan, became the Premiers' Plan of June, 1931. A Federal Labor Prime Minister and four State Labor Premiers joined two Nationalist Premiers in signing the Plan, which included heavy cuts in pensions and social services. A cut in interest payments was included but this meant little, because the bondholders had been gaining hand over fist through collecting fixed interest in a period of falling prices.

The Premiers' Plan was based on the principle that property comes before human life. This principle was proclaimed in its starkest form a month earlier in the pulpit of Wesley Church, Lonsdale Street, by R. G. Menzies who said:—"Rather than that Australia should fail to pay her honest debts to her bondholders, I would prefer to see every man, woman and child in Australia die of starvation in the next six months". (May 3, 1931)

I had seen poverty and exploitation. I remember in Ancoats, Manchester's worst slum, visiting a terrace of four houses with four small rooms in each, a family in each room, some of them large families, some of them having a sick member in bed, a terrace typical of many others. I had been in South Wales when one third of the miners were unemployed, and in other centres of grinding poverty.

But I had never seen anything worse than the mass of acute poverty and sheer hunger which suddenly descended on tens of thousands of Australian homes in 1930 and 1931.

During 1931 I had a temporary job as University Extension lecturer on the north-west coast of Tasmania. Back in Melbourne in September, I was forced to look at the world more fundamentally. I could see that it was utterly wrong that masses of people should starve amidst overflowing abundance. I was convinced workers should organise and fight for work, food and their elementary rights as human beings. "If Capitalism can't keep people alive shouldn't they fight for a social system that will? If a capitalist shuts his factory down why shouldn't the Government take it over and operate it?" Such questions crowded in on me.

MY APPROACH TO COMMUNISM

For many years I had been sympathetic to the Communist Party and favoured co-operation with Communists in Labor Party activities. I remember going to the Communist Party May Day tea in Melbourne in 1927. Over in England I often voted with the Communists at University Labour Federation meetings. Before leaving Tasmania I addressed the Latrobe Labor Party Branch

in support of the Soviet Five Year Plan. But I was faced with a question I had never asked myself before: Should I become a Communist Party member?

I knew that the Communist Party had taken a firm stand against the starvation policies. It had led the Unemployed Workers' Movement, a fine, fighting movement of thousands of unemployed who were not afraid to demonstrate and resist evictions. This movement helped to organise a march of ten thousand up Collins Street to Parliament House late in 1930. The march was to protest against the "bag hand out" to the unemployed (an insulting hand out of miscellaneous groceries in a paper bag), and to demand a regular weekly order which would give them at any rate some choice of purchase. The police, who were very free with their batons in those days, decided to leave that demonstration severely alone. A quivering Cabinet Minister granted the demands of the ten thousand marchers.

The Communists helped also to organise the fight against almost daily evictions of unemployed families. Houses were protected, crowds of neighbours assembled, furniture put out on the streets was put back again, till finally the police opened fire on eviction fighters in Cuthbert Street, Reservoir. This and other incidents led to the granting of an 8/- per week rent allowance to the unemployed.

In 1930 a new leadership had been elected in the Communist Party. J. B. Miles had become General Secretary, and Lance Sharkey editor of the Party's paper "The Workers' Weekly." The former leaders, who held that Australia was an exception, that it would miss the economic crisis, and that the Communist Party should support a Labor Government and not stand its own candidates, had been overwhelmingly defeated at a National Congress at the end of 1929. In the year of struggle 1930 the Party's membership increased four-fold in 12 months. At one stage unemployed workers were actually queueing up at the Party's headquarters at 217 Russell Street to sign their application forms.

While in a midway position I was approached by 3KZ Labor Hour to give a series of talks on Socialism

in place of Jim Hannan who had just been taken off because he urged his listeners to support the Communist International. I accepted, and met the Labor Party secretary, Mr. Duffy, who was very keen I should toe a "correct" line. Vic Stout, never a Communist but a militant then as he became again in his later years, followed me out into the passage saying: "Make it hot! Make it hot!" I probably exceeded his wishes — and certainly offended Mr. Duffy very seriously—because I virtually repeated Jim Hannan's offence and made it clear by the end of my series that I regarded Communism as the hope of the future.

The Communists had a clear theory about socialism. It meant the ending of capitalist rule, the taking of power by the working class, ownership and control of industry by the people and the building of a classless society. And it would be won by mass struggle. This was in sharp contrast to the attitude of the Labor Party leaders who had been forced to accept the Socialisation Objective in 1922, but who kept this objective in the background and in a crisis were obviously out to save capitalism.

PERCY LAIDLER AND THE FRIENDS OF THE SOVIET UNION

About this time, I went to hear Percy Laidler speak at a theatre in Box Hill. This dynamic little man, who helped found the Communist Party, but did not finally join it, had given splendid help to all the progressive movements of his long lifetime, from the old Socialist Party, the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) and No Conscription Movement onwards. A powerful speaker with a fine organising brain and great courage, he had as important an influence on me as on many others. His magician's shop at 201 Bourke Street (he was not only a magician but a teacher of magicians) was a place where some people went to see him perform tricks and others went to discuss political questions. It was a place where you could always go for a kind of second political opinion similar to a doctor's "second opinion" on a medical case. Percy was a level-headed adviser who would often have a useful independent