

## **Ray Harrison Metalworker in the Redbelt**

April 2005

### **Introduction**

The Communist Party emerged from the war and the immediate post war years as a very powerful force in Australia and influenced politics across the whole spectrum of social life. Often in hidden as well as overt ways.

The vital expression of this was in Party organisation in industry where on the job activity resulted in many gains for the workers and a challenge to the ideology of the ruling class and the hegemony of ALP reformism such as to constitute a real threat to the capitalist system.

This led to a situation where the most decisive major unions were led by Communists and like minded 'fellow travellers' including ALP forces.

This led to many forms of repression including attempts to ban it and its activities. ASIO was formed and developed with the primary aim of destroying its influence particularly in the working class and trade union movement.

In response to this challenge, the extreme right wing and the Catholic Church were organised to destroy the communist militant influence. The National Civic Council led by Santamaria, using among other things the parish priests and other forces, were mobilised to interfere in the democratic processes that existed within the trade union movement.

Hence the setting up of the Industrial Groups (the Groupers) which in turn led to debilitating internal struggle within the trade union movement and the labour movement generally.

While it may be argued that sectarian mistakes and attitude helped the forces of reaction, the main vehicles were the capitalist press, ASIO and the Industrial Groups that brought about defeats for the workers and the destruction of the virile militancy that had been developed by the Party.

### **Metalworker in the Redbelt**

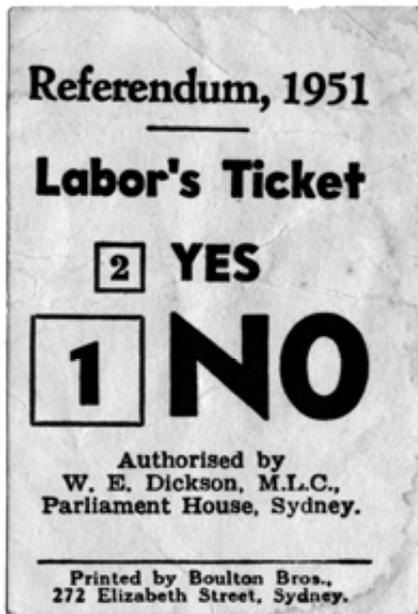
My first political action was at Uranquinty out of Wagga in the Vale of Winds. I was an electrical fitter at the RAAF flying school there. It was the end of 1945 and the Indonesians were resisting the attempts by the Dutch to recolonise. The Dutch Air Force was touting for recruits from the RAAF. We had a meeting at the base, there were also meetings at the air force stations at Amberly and down at Tocumwall. We decided that none of us would join the Dutch Air Force. The Labour government eventually followed our lead and no one was allowed to go by Air Force orders.

I was demobbed in 1946 in my Deadman suit in Bradfield Park and Joan and I got married the following year. I finally got a Tradesmans Rights Certificate as a fitter and went to work at Poole & Steele's shipyard in Balmain.

When the Menzies government introduced the legislation for court controlled ballots in 1950 it was condemned by the Communist Party, the ACTU and the ALP. The legislation gave great impetus to the Groupers.

I was working at the CSR Canite factory in Pymont at the time. I had been there during the Miners strike of the previous year. We were all stood down by CSR during that period and I had ended up cutting bakers wood at Wilberforce for the seven weeks of the lockout.

From CSR I went across the water to Balmain Power House and the fight around the Communist Party Dissolution Bill in 1951. I was in the AEU, on the union badge they had the slogan - organize, educate and control. There was a meeting called out the gate about the referendum on the dissolution and the



Communist Party had organized speakers. I wasn't in the Party at that stage but I was sympathetic. I didn't join until 1956. The meeting was chaired by Tiny Richards, the FEDFA Organiser, and speakers were Jesse Street, a feminist and activist and Harold Rich, a communist lawyer. Only six of us, the delegates, attended, the site had a strong influence from the Groupers. Activity was started, postering, organization, talking in pubs. The referendum was won by a narrow majority. The Communist Party stayed legal.

I left Balmain and went to the gas company where I worked with Ernie Thornton. We got the sack together. Everywhere he went he got the sack. They called him "week in lieu". Some thought he was Chinese. He had been in China as the Secretary of the World Trade Union Federation. Ernie had been the Federal Secretary of the Ironworkers Union but had lost a battle with Laurie Short for control of the Union. The Groupers used Judge Dumphy of the Arbitration Court to get him expelled from the union. Dumphy ruled he was not fit to be a member! He tried to rejoin the Ironworkers many times but when the delegate on the job took the money into the office in town the girls wouldn't accept it. The boss at the shop told Ernie that he was getting pressure

from the employers and had got to sack him for not being in the union. They told me the job had finished and I was sacked along with him; as a fellow traveler I suppose.

I've always been a peace activist. In the fifties the Party Branch at Hurstville solicited signatures for a petition to ban the bomb. Then there was large peace marches in Sydney. Modeled on the Aldermaston marches in Britain they went for two days. These radial marches started from Cronulla, Manly and Parramatta on the Saturday and converged on the Domain for a big rally on the Sunday afternoon. The party branch pasted up from Tom Ugly's bridge to Hurstville before the march. We did many telegraph poles.

I worked all around western Sydney, mainly as an installation and maintenance fitter. I worked in the shipyard at Mortlake and for a printer. Many other places too. I was the delegate at MacDonald Construction when they built the polythene plant for ICI. In 1954 I left the Kurnell oil refinery and went to the Shell oil company then to CIG. In 1955 I was at National Motor Springs as a maintenance fitter. 1956 was the Olympic games; Jane was born.

When at Coalcliff colliery working for AE Goodwin, their Chief came down and sacked the delegate to bust up the shop committee down there. I had been sick and arrived back at work on the day of the strike. They said I was exempt from the strike but I told them I had started back so I was in it. The strike went for seven weeks. Shona had just been born and I had no money to get Joan and Shona out of hospital. Joe Slingsby, a comrade did it for me. We were doing meetings at Bunnerong and other places to raise money for the strike fund. In the wash up we had more strike funds than our rate of pay would have been. We got great support from the Miners Federation and the Waterside Workers. The Watersiders never refuse to do a tarpaulin muster for other workers.

Punchbowl Brickworks was a non union shop but I managed to sell some Tribunes. I have always sold Tribunes. I was called Red Ray, as there was another fitter there they called Black Ray. Joe Dodds the Organiser would come down to see me. I tried to get him a job after he lost his position in a court controlled ballot but the employer did a security check and Joe didn't get in. He joined me up to the Hurstville Branch of the party.

Between 1961 and 1963 I worked at Procon, it was in the Monsanto Group Refinery at Silverwater. We had a Party Branch on the site and at one stage Joe Slingsby ran the red flag up the flagpole outside the boilermakers shop. We had a Party publication called the "The Good Oil" I was chair of the shop committee there. The site committee had representatives from all the unions and sections; Boilermakers, AEU, Ironworkers Electricians & Painters. We had lunch time meetings with good progressive speakers to address the workers - Rev. Allan Walker on peace. We used to sell 50 to 60 Tribune's there. Joe Slingsby had them on the bench and his mate was the bookmaker. They would come down to put money on with the SP bookmaker and buy a Tribune at the same time. Don't know whether they read them. I had joined Rex Oliver to the Communist Party. There was far from universal support for the Party Branch. Whenever Joe Slingsby the boiler maker took Rex and I to work in his Austin a right wing fitter called Loose Head would sing out "Here comes the Moscow Express". Going home in the Moscow Express one afternoon, Bluey Ryan jumped out and grabbed an escaped pig. We took him up to Jacques Hotel in Bankstown and raffled it out of the boot. The proceeds went to the

Party Branch.

Harry Jensen, who was the Lord mayor of Sydney at the time, had the electrical contract at Silverwater. "Headline Harry" we used to call him. The employers were out to get the shop committee and the foreman sacked the electrician's delegate who came back to work late on a Saturday. The job stopped and we were all outside the gate. At the meeting on the Monday with 800 troops outside the gate, the Site Committee met with Jensen down the shed. Jensen said he would suspend the delegate for four days. Victor Desailley the boilermakers delegate spoke up, "Who do you think you are Harry, Judge Dumphy? Suspending workers, we won't cop it." The shop committee want Delegate Fisher reinstated immediately and we will all wait outside the gate for your response." Jensen went down to see the powers that be and after a shot or two of whiskey came back with the news the delegate was reinstated.



In 1963 Barwick pushed up legislation under the Crimes Act. The five delegates from the Procon site committee went to Canberra to protest the Act. It was a big gathering, thousands had come. We had to report back to our Branches and out of that the AEU formed area committees. – I was chairman of the Crimes Act Committee for the St George area. At the inaugural meeting in Kogorah, Senator Doug McClelland addressed us on the implications of the Act. We decided that if the Crimes Act was invoked on any AEU member in the Area, there would be an immediate stoppage of all AEU workers in the area. The Crimes Act was never used but it is still on the statute books.

The Communist party metal fraction used to meet at the BWIU office. Jack McPhilips, member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and former assistant national secretary of the Ironworkers, said if we are going to win the court controlled ballots we need to organize hard.

I moved from Peakhurst to Liverpool in 1963 at the height of the fight against the court controlled ballots. We were doing the footwork. Lots of door knocking. We had to get the members names from the secretary, then we had to find out where they lived and try and deliver to them. Jack McPhilips through the Party Branch had me responsible for mailing out to 700 in the Liverpool area one weekend. We went out at lunch time to deliver and all day Saturday to try and contact the Branch members living in the area personally. All the leaflets had to be handwritten under the union rules so everyone had an equal opportunity. The wise fathers of the AEU had done this to stop rich factory owners getting material printed that favoured a particular group of candidates. We had everyone writing. We had to do 10 before we started work.

Support your loyal union candidate  
No court controlled ballots  
Clean Union ballots  
More democracy in the Union  
Campaign for three weeks annual leave  
35 hour week

The Groupers had a population advantage when it came to writing things out, they had all the kids. Shearer also managed to get away with breaking the union rules by distributing printed material.

In 1964 The AEU had over 50 branches around Sydney and there was 1,200 members in the Hurstville No 1 branch and 1,000 in Hurstville No 2 Branch.

There were area shop committees comprised of representatives of all the union delegates on the site. They would elect a convenor. Laurie Carmichael was the Victorian State Secretary of the AEU at this stage and he would come up to the Sydney shop stewards quarterly meetings to liaise around the work on the court controlled ballots. In Victoria, the Groupers had 30 full time organizers.

At this time there was a hot debate in the trade union movement as to the correct role of shop committees. This was triggered by stoppages in some Commonwealth establishments over a long standing log of claims. The debate was used by the employers and the Groupers as a general attack on shop committees. The "unauthorized" actions taken by the shop committees was usurping the authority of the official leadership and could rashly expose the union to the use of penal powers by the employers. It was even suggested they were an embarrassment to the unions.

The court controlled ballots were starting to bite. The Branch Secretary had to submit the membership books to the Industrial Registrar for the court controlled ballots. The Groupers were using them to increase their influence in the Union movement. Bob Santamaria was saying in his regular radio broadcast, with court-controlled ballots you can vote from the comfort of your homes, you don't have to go to branch meetings. There was a big struggle for control of the AEU.

In 1964 I was working at the Punchbowl Brick & Tile Works and I became President of the Hurstville No.1 Branch. Wally Buckley's election as a Divisional Organiser came up at that time. It was under a court controlled ballot. Two of the Groupers who were already national organisers, (Colin Shearer and J McDowell) had a meeting on their own and petitioned the Registrar for a court controlled ballot.

We needed money for stamps to send out campaign material and the Treasurer, Eddie Tourle moved an amount of five pounds from the Branch incidental fund to the AEU Rights Committee which we used to pay for the mailout. (The Groupers had a similar counter organization to the Rights Committee called the Engineers Committee) The Groupers found out about the use of the Branch funds for election purposes and decided if they could get hold of the books with evidence of this payment, they could get the Registrar to cancel out Wally Buckley in the election.



The delegates got the drum by telegram about two o'clock from the AEU state office "Important, be at the Branch meeting tonight". The meeting was, as usual, at the Railway Institute in Hurstville. When we got there, Joe Dodd the organizer told us Shearer and McDowell were coming to take the books. When the meeting started the Chairman ruled that Shearer and McDowell could look at the books but could not take them away. "Shearer, you can sit there and slobber (which he did) but you're not getting the books". Shearer had the books at this stage and went over and threw up the window. Eddie

the Treasurer had arrived late as usual to see Shearer with his books. He grabbed them off him as we closed the window and locked the doors. McDowell was a wrestler, big bastard with a cauliflower ear and I had been detailed to contain him. I had been wondering how to do it. I didn't need too. Once we locked the doors and windows all McDowell could do was sit there. Any chance of bolting out and picking up the books was gone. Eventually we threw them out of the meeting.

Wally Buckley won his election in the court controlled ballot however Joe Dodd and Arthur Searle the State Secretary lost their positions. From then on the AEU started to win court controlled ballots through organization. We worked closely with the more progressive forces in the Labour Party. Roy Bruggy was on the shop committee at Austral Bronze and was the Secretary of the AEU Rights Committee. He stood in a court controlled ballot for national organizer. The Groupers found another Bruggy out at Broken Hill and stood him as a candidate to confuse the ballot. The spoiling tactic didn't work and Bruggy got up.

In 1964 I worked at Pettifords a subsidiary of ACI. It was a wire factory in Padstow. It was a non union shop which over time we turned into an all union shop. We set up the Communist Party Wire Branch and recruited to the Party. Rex Oliver was there too but he left to become an organizer for the Union.

We had a plant in the office, a draftsman, Fox by name fox by nature. He was an AEU member and kept the delegates informed of what was being cooked up. During this time they tried to do a time and motion study, the Employers Federation were pushing it through all the factories in Sydney. Clarence the clocker was supposed to carry it out but maintenance refused to do it. We wouldn't clock our cards after every job.

There were growing demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Peace was union business. The shop committee won the right for people to knock off early around 3pm to go to the city to participate in the demonstrations. They lost money but they didn't lose their jobs. Stop Work to Stop the War! Similar to Procon we had meetings outside the gate about the Vietnam war and international peace. This was also when the French nuclear Tests were on in the Pacific. We would address the workers in the canteen at smoko about the radiation drifting over the Pacific and the potential effect on the North Coast of NSW.

Ken Thomas who founded TNT was showing films against the Vietnam war. We showed Felix Green's film, Inside Vietnam around the district on an old Russian projector we had borrowed from the Party school at Minto. It was broken down and I had to make a new wooden cog for it. At the showing in Lurnea they pulled a bomb scare which slowed us down but we carried on.

Laurie Aarons, Lloyd Caldwell and I went out to the airport to support Wilfred Burchett, a journalist who was the first Westerner to give an eyewitness account of the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima in Japan. He had covered the Korean War "from the other side". He was accused of being a traitor for his stories. The Australian government denied him a passport for many years. He traveled on North Vietnamese documents. Burchett came back on a light plane from Fiji and we met him in the press room. This is the first time these two metalworkers had been called journalists. It was hot and Burchett, a big man was white and sweating with anxiety. No other media showed any interest.

At Holsworthy Army barracks the local party branch and student supporters from Victoria sat down in the road. They were protesting the war and the detention of conscientious objectors like O'Donnell in the Holsworthy compound. The coppers moved in and arrested about fifty who they tried to hold at Liverpool police station. Don Syme, a local Branch member opened his house to use as a base to bail them out and feed them before the students went back to Victoria on the Monday.

In 1965 I went to CC Diecasting at Punchbowl. They cast Holden parts and did lawn mower bases. The whole place was working overtime Saturday and 2 nights a week. They had a Shop committee: AEU (1), sheet metal (1), ironworkers (1), section delegates e.g. 2 ironworkers, women production workers, the toolroom and the die repair shop. I was a maintenance fitter which gave me a roving commission around the factory. Very useful to sell Tribunes and have a chat. The shop committee had the whole place tied up.

I ended up as the chair of the shop committee after only a month when they got rid of Des Crisp the Convenor of the committee. We had advance warning of this because the electricians delegate was trying to have a nap in the air conditioning ducts next to the board room when they were discussing the plan to put him on the afternoon shift and down size him out of a job. They were stunned when the shop committee confronted them with their plans and had all the offices professionally swept by a security firm for non existent listening devices. We couldn't save Des Crisp on this occasion.

There had been a shop committee at CC Diecasting for many years built by communists such as Bill Britten, Peter Hawkins and Des Crisp. Shop committees were supported by the AEU as being close to the rank and file and often able to represent their local interests most effectively. Generally the local employer saw the sense in working with the shop committee as the unified voice of labour on the worksite and in the factory.

By this stage the shop committee was in the habit of meeting with management on Friday afternoons in work time over tea and bikkies and talking about the thickness of the shithouse paper. After rank & file criticism of this bludge, the shop committee reformed its practice and said they would only meet with the management if they had something important to tell them. No more Friday afternoon meetings.

On payday the shop committee would regularly collect for other workers who were on strike. With management consent we had the apprentices wash up early and man the collection boxes at the door. The collection boxes were kept in the paymasters office.

Once a year the delegates went to Canberra on the budget train. The costs of this trip were financed by the whole of the factory including the office staff. We would report back to everyone at a lunchtime meeting in the factory grounds the following day. Vic the Painter, a cockney socialist, used to paint all the banners for the trip. They tried to sack him but under the policy of the shop committee we immediately went into talks about the merits of the case. The management said he was no longer needed to paint the production lines as the Ironworkers could do it. The Ironworkers said they wouldn't do it. Vic was reinstated.

The big struggle in this period for the AEU was over the margins. As Paul Mortier put it in a pamphlet of the period,

"The purchasing power of the secondary wage called "margin" which is paid as reward for skill, hardship and other factors should be maintained by adjustments similar to those made to the basic wage. Women should receive equal wages to men."

We had many meetings over the margins at Diecasting. When the meetings went overtime, everyone would sit on their benches until the next quarter hour ticked over on the factory clocks. It drove the Manager mad.

The local Communist party bulletin was called the Punchbowl Beacon, we slipped articles about goings on in the factory and the margins campaign into the bulletin and it was distributed at the factory gates. Not by me but I contributed some good stories; about them giving themselves cars whilst holding out against an increase in the margin. Workers were very interested and the boss would tear his hair out about where the information was coming from.

The Grouper influence in the Ironworkers was always a bit of a problem on shop committees but not at CC Diecasting. The Ironworkers could have a meeting by themselves on the internal affairs of the union but on shop matters they were bound by the Constitution of the shop committee and had to work with the other union delegates. When the Ironworkers organizer "Bow Tie Gibb" (on account of his red neck attire) came down to address the members, the local delegate told him to go away, he wasn't wanted.

When the shop committee and local union organisation became too strong for the local bosses, the Metal Trades Employers wheeled in an industrial solicitor, Doug Wright to do the negotiations with the shop committee.

The Party had a house in Punchbowl. George and Zara Splayford were living there. He was a Party functionary. I went to a function there. There were four trade union officials from Indonesia there who were in the communist party. They talked of what was happening. This was before the coup in 1965. They all subsequently disappeared. Pat Clancy tried to take it up in the ACTU but sympathy for communists was in short supply. The trade union reaction to the coup was minimal.

Joan, my wife joined the Party in 1966. She had been active in the UAW and the Women's Movement for many years. It was the Liverpool Branch that met at Don Syme's place. We got active on local issues such as the Council Peace Committee and Liverpool, in common with a number of progressive councils, became a nuclear free zone. We also got part of the Old Powerhouse site made over as a peace park.

After the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Russians in 1968, the Communist Party in Australia split

again. I went to a meeting at the Sydney Town Hall over the Prague Spring and the Czech invasion. Laurie Aarons, the National Secretary who he had been in Russia the previous year spoke out against it. The Australian party took an independent line and condemned the invasion. Those communists who disagreed with this independent line went with the Socialist Party of Australia. There was some sectarian bitterness on both sides after the split but in the metal industry we generally managed to work together on industrial campaigns.

In 1969 Clarrie O'Shea wouldn't give up the books of the Bus & Tramways Union to the Industrial Registrar and they sent him to jail. For months job militants had been hassling me about taking direct action against the penal clauses. The Union and the Party had been cautious up until now, but this was it, massive protests. 1 million workers stopped around Australia. Non union shops stopped. I went to the meeting at Bankstown. There were about 3,000 there.



UGLY: A protester is removed from the SCG

July 1971 was my Mothers 80th birthday party. It was also the big demonstration against the Springboks at the Sydney Cricket Ground. I went into work to get some bolt cutters. I was due to be working that Saturday so I had to make excuses to the foreman before sidling out. I hid the bolt cutters down the leg of my trousers and into my socks to get into the game. There was all these rigger buggers chanting through the fence "Paint them black, send them back", ugly. After cutting the fence which was supposed to keep us from the ground I was thrown over the top barbed wire strands and kicked by the muster of coppers stationed around the ground inside the fence. A number of people had got on to the ground. As they threw me in the paddy wagon, Peter Elston the wharfie jumped out and took off across the ground with the keystone cops in pursuit. He led them a merry dance in and out of the orange smoke from the flares. Meredith Bergman was dragged across the ground by a copper on each leg. Her sister Verity was also collared.

They took us up to the cells in Darlinghurst. Fred Hollows, I didn't know him then, was in there writing on the walls 'Land rights for Aborigines'. He had a look at my eye socket which was bleeding. Also in the cells with us was Mick McNamara, secretary of the Builders Labourers, Ron Page Methodist Minister from Bankstown and Charlie Dumbrel secretary from the Water Board in Newcastle.

I never did get to Mothers birthday party.

In 1972 we went down to Canberra again, this time to support the Aboriginal tent Embassy. We went down on a Friday night. Five of us in the party car, a little Mazda station wagon. The petrol strike was on and we had gerry cans of petrol in the back. I was going crook because they were smoking, tobacco and other things. Always been safety conscious. I was off on compo at the time with a welding burn on my leg. It was cold, there was snow on the hills around Canberra. Thousands came to Canberra to support the demonstration. Chicka Dixon the wharfie led the march. Bobby Sykes said the week after we left and went back to Sydney, the police moved in "in their hundreds", and demolished it. They waited until there was only a few there to defend the Embassy.

I had finished at Diecasting when we went to the Workers Control conference in Newcastle. Same Party car and some of the same comrades. There were over 400 delegates there at the new trade union club. There was a big fight with the Trotskyists who wanted to take over the meeting. Typical they wouldn't get off the floor. Workers control wasn't really supported by the traditional trade unions. Some of the other comrades like Wally Buckley didn't show much interest. They thought it was adventurist, like the builders laborers were called later. I went to Conference knowing I had been sacked on the Friday. On the Monday I came back fired up and staged a one out work-in but I had no support. Sludgeguts Dugan called the police and said there was a demented fitter on the job. A sergeant and two constables escorted me off the premises.

By 1973 when I got a job on the waterfront I was now in the AMWSU. The AEU had amalgamated with blacksmiths, boilermakers, and sheetmetal workers into a single metals union in 1968-69 later to be

joined by the moulders and shipwrights. I was a maintenance fitter at Seatainers in Balmain and then moved to Botany Bay.

When Kerr sacked the Labour government in 1975 there were calls for a general strike. Whilst Whitlam was saying maintain the rage Hawke who was the ACTU President at the time was saying no industrial action, stay at work. The Party produced a daily Tribune during this period which I sold at a huge meeting in the Domain and at other meetings around the coup.

After I retired in 1986, I became a retired maritime union member as part of the big industry union amalgamations in 1993. When Corrigan and the Federal Government locked the waterfront out in 1998, I went down to join the picket at Botany Bay and down "the hungry mile" in The Rocks as a member of the MUA Retired Members Association. The support at the picket was all sorts of people outraged at what was going on. - MUA here to stay. Recently the Retired Maritime Members supported the picket line at the Hardies factory at Rosehill in the blue about asbestos compensation. I used to work with the stuff, packing valves at Balmain Power House and I am slightly dusted.

It is the May Day March today, I will catch up with many of the comrades who are still alive. This will be the start of the campaign against the Howard Government's proposed changes to the industrial legislation. It's on again.