

OPEN FOUNDATION
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

ANNE DUNNE
TUESDAY - 1.00 PM

Regional Research Project Paper:-

The rise and fall of communist control
of the Federated Ironworkers' Association
of Australia within the Newcastle iron
and steel industry 1917-1950.

Date:- 6th September, 1988.

The Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia (F.I.A.) was founded in 1908¹, originating out of the tradesmen's assistants organisations and unions. The F.I.A. first entered the Newcastle iron and steel industry when a branch was opened at the Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited (B.H.P.) Steelworks in 1917.² For the next decade the F.I.A. in Newcastle remained in a precarious position, largely due to the anti-union policy practised by the B.H.P.

During the interwar years B.H.P. and its subsidiary companies dominated every aspect of the industrial struggle within the Newcastle iron and steel industry. Working conditions were "...hot, arduous and hazardous."³ Management was able to counter union activities through an aggressive industrial relations policy. Union activists were dismissed and blacklisted whilst the threat of unemployment kept rank and file militancy under control. Solidarity amongst union members was almost non-existent and the F.I.A. only managed to survive due to the efforts of a few dedicated unionists. The F.I.A. accomplished few achievements in these early years but a solid group of members developed at Lysaghts.

When the Depression hit Australia in late 1929 the steel industry was one of the earliest and hardest hit, creating massive unemployment, poverty and misery for thousands of ironworkers. In the early 1930's the Communist Party of Australia (C.P.A.), which had been fairly insignificant during the 1920's, started to grow in membership numbers. "The penetration and capture of unions like the F.I.A. was the party's prime strategy..."⁴ One of the party's front organisations was the Militant Minority Movement.

1. Robert Murray and Kate White, The Ironworkers, Sydney, 1982, p.15.
2. W.A. Eather, 'The Trenches at Home: The Industrial Struggle in the Newcastle Iron & Steel Industry 1937-1947', unpub. Ph.D. thesis, University of Sydney, April, 1986, p.24.
3. Ibid. p.22.
4. Murray and White, Ironworkers, p.106.

It attracted huge numbers of ironworkers and helped to bring about a gradual radicalisation of the rank and file. Members of the Lysaghts group claimed that the Newcastle branch was inefficient and rebelled against its control in 1933.⁵ They were given permission by the F.I.A. Federal Council to set up their own branch which soon came under the control of the Militant Minority Movement.

After the Depression lifted in the Mid 1930's, the F.I.A. entered into a period of growth and development in conjunction with the rapid recovery of the steel industry. In 1936 Ernest Thornton, a C.P.A. member was elected F.I.A. general secretary and used the years of economic recovery to strengthen and unite the branches.⁶ Communist control of the union increased each year. Many of the new leaders were young family men who had come to communism out of the despair of the Depression. "They were also conscientious leaders, learning all they could about the industry and the problems associated with it. They became very skilled trade union leaders, frequently becoming better unionists than they were communists.."⁷ However, the Newcastle branch still lacked militant, aggressive leadership and many of the campaigns during the mid to late 1930's ended in failure. The continuing dispute between the Newcastle branch and the Lysaghts members led to Thornton's supervision of Newcastle affairs. In July 1939 Thornton broke into the Newcastle office, removed all records and changed the locks.⁸ This action left a lingering resentment among some of the members. Officials were suspended and arrangements were made for new elections in August which resulted in an overwhelming win for the Lysaghts nominations. Bill Hopkins headed the new communist team as branch president with Charlie Morgan as branch secretary and Charlie McCaffrey as full-time union organiser.⁹

5. Ibid. p. 78

6. Ibid. p. 90

7. A. Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia, California, 1969, p.89.

8. Eather, 'Trenches at Home', p.54.

9. Ibid. p. 55.

Australia's entry into World War II in 1939 led to a period of increased solidarity within the union movement. The new leadership of the F.I.A. in Newcastle made an all out effort to unionise the iron and steel industry. F.I.A. members pursued a series of aggressive industrial campaigns from late 1939 to 1941 with considerable success. Several sub-branches were formed within the industry. In line with C.P.A. policy the F.I.A. had initially opposed Australia's involvement in the war. Fearing communist sabotage of the war effort, the Federal Government declared the C.P.A. an illegal organisation in 1940.¹⁰ The same year saw B.H.P. dismiss many known communists from the Steelworks during a miners' stoppage.¹¹ Although the C.P.A. was forced to operate underground, it did not inhibit the F.I.A. drive to unionise workers. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union brought a change of attitude within the C.P.A. and the F.I.A. towards the war. By 1942 the F.I.A. had become an avid supporter of the war following the C.P.A.'s directive to resist any strike action that would hinder wartime production.¹²

The end of the war brought an end to the F.I.A.'s policy of wartime compromise. Wage increases and the introduction of a forty hour week became the immediate post war issues culminating in a wave of strikes throughout the steel industry in 1945 - 1946.¹³ For the next four years the F.I.A. found itself fighting against the employers, the Labor Party and a growing dissidence amongst its own rank and file. The Industrial Groups of the Australian Labor Party had been initially formed to attack the power of the communist union bosses. Anti-communists began to gradually infiltrate the Newcastle F.I.A. from 1945 onwards and won a number of minor positions in post war branch elections.¹⁴ The success of these candidates failed to alarm Thornton.

10. Ibid. p.65

11. Ibid. p.67

12. Murray and White, Ironworkers, p.116

13. Ibid. p.154.

14. Ibid. p.170

1949 proved to be a troubled year for the F.I.A. and saw a shift of power within the Newcastle leadership. On April 8, a twenty-four hour stoppage and meeting was called to discuss the gaoling of F.I.A. federal officer and communist Jack McPhillips. The meeting held at Newcastle Stadium erupted into violence and had to be adjourned. Branch officials claimed that Industrial Groupers and elements outside the union were responsible for the disruption. A further meeting of 3,000 of the 8,000 branch members was held at District Park on April 10, and rejected a motion to dissociate the union from those who had created mayhem at the stadium meeting.¹⁵ The communist led coal strike in July caused further dissention amongst the Newcastle membership. Meanwhile, Laurie Short, who had formed a Sydney based members' rights committee to end communist control of the union, had forged strong links with the Industrial Groupers in Newcastle.¹⁶ A meeting on August 20, opposed unqualified support for the coal strike and passed a no confidence motion in the national and branch executive officers. December branch elections resulted in the removal of the communist leaders and a clear win for the Industrial Groupers.¹⁷ Thornton had won the federal secretaryship over Short but a court enquiry led to the invalidation of the Federal Council's election. New elections gave a resounding victory to Short and his anti-communist team.¹⁸

Events bringing the 'cold war' to its peak had created insecurity and fear amongst union members. Many resented communist control and manipulation of the workforce. The appearance of European communist refugees in the rank and file together with the intensity of Catholic anti-communist opinion led to unrest and uneasiness amongst members. Regardless of the reasons behind the removal of communist control, the end result was the end of an era and a change of direction for the F.I.A. within the iron and steel industry.

15. Murray & White, Ironworkers, p.180
16. Ibid. p.184
17. Ibid. p. 197
18. Ibid. p.222

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Taped Interview

Interviewer - Dunne, Anne
Interviewee - Graham, Thomas
Date - 21st August, 1988

The subject of the accompanying taped interview is Mr. Thomas Graham aged eighty three who was born in Glasgow Scotland in 1904. Mr. Graham migrated to Australia in 1924 at the age of nineteen. He was a member of the Communist Party of Australia and active unionist for most of his working life.

Upon his arrival in Australia Mr. Graham lived and worked in Melbourne before moving to Newcastle in 1925 and gained employment in the blacksmith shop at the B.H.P. Steelworks. For a short period he worked with the railways in Sydney before returning to Newcastle at the onset of the Depression in 1929. During the Depression he married and only relief work was obtainable until 1933 when he found steady employment back at B.H.P.

Mr. Graham describes the harsh working environment and lack of safety measures in the industries during the 1930's. He had joined the Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia (F.I.A.) in 1925 but there was little unionisation due to B.H.P.'s aggressive industrial relations policy. In 1936 he was dismissed from Stewarts and Lloyds for trying to organise a union amongst the workers. From 1936-1938 he was employed as a hammer driver at Commonwealth Steel before moving to Varley's and then the State Dockyard in the early forties. He remained at the Dockyard until his retirement and became a full time union organiser for the F.I.A. during the period 1946-1950.

He joined the Communist Party in 1938 and witnessed the growth and development of the F.I.A. under communist leadership from 1936 to 1950. The party reached peak membership during the early forties and Mr. Graham gives his opinions on the party's support within the union and his thoughts on the decline of union support. He mentions some of the changes he has seen in the party during his fifty year membership.

An account is given of the period of Communist control of the Newcastle F.I.A. and the drive to gain one hundred percent membership in the industries. Mr. Graham gives his view on the rise of anti communist infiltration of the F.I.A. He talks about events which led to the takeover of the F.I.A. by the supporters of the A.L.P. Industrial Groups. In particular, he mentions the riot which erupted at the Newcastle Stadium meeting in April 1949. Mr. Graham talks about the changes in the F.I.A. after the Industrial Group supporters took control.

Mr. Graham remained active in union campaigns during his employment at the Dockyard and he talks about his strong involvement in the Watch Committee. He did not suffer any real descrimination for his communist affiliations.

Upon his retirement in 1969 he became involved in the pensioner movement.

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY
REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH PROJECT
TAPED INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
INTERVIEWER: ANNE DUNNE
INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS GRAHAM
DATE: 21ST AUGUST, 1988

Interviewer At the age of nineteen, can you tell me why you decided to migrate to Australia?

Interviewee My mother had a cousin who had been over here in Australia. He was over in Kalgoorlie, you know, in the diggings and he came home and of course he stopped at our place for a fortnight before he went back to Ireland, you know, where he came from originally, and the tales and the way he was speaking about it set up sort of a fire in my mind and I'd like to get away from the environment where I was living and that's when I pestered me mother to let me migrate to Australia. And there was another chap coming with me and he petered out but I still came.

Interviewer At what date did you arrive in Australia?

Interviewee Oh well the destination was Victoria, Melbourne. I arrived there the sixth of May, that was May Day in Melbourne that particular day and I met up with a little chap on the boat. I didn't know him but he was from Glasgow, the other end of Glasgow and we sort of palled up together and one of the conditions of coming out here was to go on a farm.

Interviewer Oh right, yes.

Interviewee We had to go on a farm. Well we separated. He went one way and I went another. I said we'd try and meet each other again if we didn't like it much and scoot through from the farm and come back to Melbourne and meet each other. Well I went up to a place called (Cooperook?) in Gippsland - mostly potato farm you know, tough - sent me away down about one hundred yard from the home in a little shed to sleep. So, I says to myself, "Jock you're not

going to stay here too long", so within three weeks I said to the bloke - he was an Englishman too - tough - I says, "I'm leaving", he says, "You can't leave". I says, "I'm leaving". He says, "I'll report you to the migration department". I says, "I'll report there myself and get another job. He says, "Well you're supposed to stop here for six month at least." I says, "Well, I'm away then." He says, "How are you going?" I says, "I'll walk to the station". He says, "You'll have a good walk". I says, "I've got a good pair of legs", you know. So I left and got my way back to Melbourne again and I called in then at a place, name of Craigs, they come from Springwood too and they come out here about two years before me. I didn't use them in the first instance but I used it then. I went and seen them in Footscray, that's one of the big suburbs and then I boarded with them for a wee while and then I got a job at Michael Hallesteins - it was a foundry. Stopped there for about three month and then I went to Swallows, the biscuit factory.

Interviewer Had you joined a union by this stage?

Interviewee Not then, no, there wasn't any actual union.

Interviewer There was no organisation?

Interviewee No organisation - and I went to Swallows and I was only there for about three weeks - mostly all women working there - and then I got a place at McPhersons nut and bolt factory. I stopped there for about two month - that wasn't far away from Footscray - it was only about two stops from the train, you know - and I had the address of two chaps that came out on the boat with me. They went up to Cessnock and another chap he come from (Mugalow?), he came to Adamstown. So, I had their addresses, so, I says, "Well I'm going up to Newcastle", and I stowed away on the old 'Canberra'.

Interviewer You stowed away!

Interviewee Stowed away on the 'Canberra', yes. It was only two days

aboard. So I stowed away and the next trip after that fire broke out and it was destroyed...and I got the train up then to Newcastle and when I walked out of Newcastle station I thought I was on another platform - there was steam trains running along Hunter Street - I thought I was on another platform and thought I'm not out of this station yet...and anyway I asked a few question and found out where I was going. I got up to Adamstown not far from here - just up the hill at Adamstown, and knocked at this chap's door and his sister come out, she was Mrs. Stephens, he was living with his sister. She was a Scotch woman, she had married an Australian soldier over there and come back here. So I stopped there and I was only there a week when I got a job at the B.H.P. in the blacksmiths shop there.

Interviewer And what year was this?

Interviewee That was nineteen - just beginning 1925.

Interviewer 1925?

Interviewee Yes, 1925, January 1925 and I was there for about twelve month and I was boarding at Tighes Hill with a chap there by the name of Colin Chapman. He became a singer and that and put on all those plays. Well, we roomed together and he was the youngest night officer in the railway at the time, he was only nineteen. He said, "Why don't you join the railway Tom," he said, "you'll do much better for yourself than B.H.P.". So, I joined the railway as a porter and that was in 1926 and I was there for maybe six or seven months and they sent me out to Adamstown station to ticket collecting out there... and I used to do the trains and all the pits was working out towards Belmont and Toronto...I used to sell the weekly tickets of a Monday morning to the miners...and I got into a bit of a fight with one of the guards on the train. We both got dismissed and we appealed and he got back. I was still off and I was nearly going to take another job back in the steelworks again when this

bloke says, "No, I think you'll win your appeal Jock." So, I had to go to Sydney to the appeals board and the chap that represent me he became a member of parliament here in Newcastle - Walter Skelton. He was secretary of the ARU. So, he appeared for me and we got me job back with loss of pay but it wasn't much anyway. Well, I was transferred to Sydney sheds. I got on the platform - following the platform in Sydney. Well I was there till near the end of 1929 when they laid us off. Then, they gave us pay for each year of service - then the pay was £2 16d a week - it wasn't £3. £2 something a week - and came back up to Newcastle.

Interviewer It was the start of the Depression then, wasn't it?

Interviewee The Depression was on, and I knew Maggie then, working at the refreshment rooms at the station...and I went to their place and got board their and got a bit of relief work - we got married in 1930.

Interviewer Had you joined the Communist Party by this stage or not?

Interviewee No, No, but I was a member of the Ironworkers Union when I came to Newcastle the first time in 1925 - that's when I went to the blacksmith's shop. This chap he says to me on the site he says, "Listen Jock, you come from Glasgow". I says, "Yes". He says, "How's the unions over there?" I says, "Oh, pretty good, I wouldn't say they were strong but you've got to be in a union". And he says, "Did you join the union?" I says, "Yes". I was a what do you call it - a junior a junior hammer. He says, " Well, whgat about joining the union here, but don't tell anyone", he says, "you'll get sacked". He says "There's nobody in the union much here", he says, "I'm the only one in the union in the shop here now".

Interviewer B.H.P. had a very anti-union agressive policy.

Interviewee

Oh yeah, you couldn't talk, there was nobody hardly in the union but I joined the Ironworkers then - Osborne was his name, Ozzie Osborne, He was a very good cyclist - a bike rider. So, Ozzie and I got on alright together and then I left there and went to the - as I told you - the railways and I joined the A.R.U. - that's Australian Railways Union - then laid off in 1929 - then I got relief work up to 1933. It was 1933 before we got permanent work, you know... and doing the dole jobs used to get a fortnight, sometimes a week, digging these drains, these big water drains. These were all dug by the relief workers of that period...and I got back into the B.H.P.'s blacksmith's shop again and I stopped there till 1936. There was still very little trade union members at all.

Interviewer

Well, '36 was when Thornton was elected secretary of the national council.

Interviewee

Yes, well we were starting to get strong as far as representation in the union but we still didn't have a lot of members...and I went to Stewart and Lloyds from there and three of us there were ironworkers. There were very few members of the union and we organised a stop work meeting to get the blokes to join the union. That was the end of us, we got the sack ...and they were looking for a hammer driver over at the Commonwealth Steelworks. A bloke said, "Well Jock, I think you'll get in there because there's not many around". So, a chap over there, an old chap, what was his name again - fine old fellow, he was an employment officer, you know. He says, "Where were you working?" I says, "Stewart and Lloyds", I says, "if you ring them up they'll tell you I got the sack. He says, "What for"? I says, "for trying to get blokes to join the union". He says, "They hold that against you"? I says, "Yes". "Well," he says "there's not many men in the union here but I'm a member myself in the background". He says, "You

drive a hammer"? I says, "Yes". He says, "Go down and see Mr. Hill, see if you can get a demonstration driving the hammer. Well," he says, "some kinds that walk in don't know what a hammer is". So, I was at the Commonwealth Steelworks then and I was there till 1938 and I got a job then at Varleys. That's where Bill Fry was at, that's the chap that Molly married.

Interviewer Just going back to when you were working in the industries in the 30's - what were the conditions like just after the Depression?

Interviewee Well, actually it was very hard, as far as safety, well, as a matter of fact, you were working on the job where you needed gloves - there was no gloves. You just had to get bits of rags and make your own hand rags after the type of work you was doing. The question of bathrooms was out of the question. There was no bathrooms. You had to bring your own dirt home with you. Then the agitation took place and it wasn't till 1939-1940 that it started to happen. The only place that had them before that was the mines. They got them earlier than what we did in industry. There was no conditions at all, no lockers, you just hanged your clother up anywhere you could.

Interviewer No protective clothing?

Interviewee No, very little protective clothing, apart from Lysaghts. Lysaghts was the first and best organised industry here in Newcastle because they brought with them, trade unionism from Britain. You see, and they had protective clothing in the mills in Britain. Well, they had clothes there for some jobs and they had gloves. The safety hats didn't come in till 1940 something before we got safety hats. But safety-first was brought about when they had the safety-first committee of Australia- I think it was Chifley's time, during the war and they started to get all these things in industry - locker rooms, bathrooms - all big industry had them before the war finished - it was a necessity.

Interviewer The Lysaghts group was always fairly strong, wasn't it?

Interviewee I'd say Lysaghts was the first all union industry in the district, maybe Australia.

Interviewer And a lot of them were of British background?

Interviewee A lot of them were. The (farriers?) they were the first ones out here and they lived in pommie town, what they called pommie town - Vine Street. Most were from Britain and a lot of them come from Wales....so...and I joined the Communist Party 1938.

Interviewer 1938?

Interviewee 1938...and I was a delegate at Varleys and the what do-you-call-it was building up + the State Dockyard - it was built up then. They got gear from Walshe Island transferred and rebuilt the dockyard. So, I went over there and seen Bill Robinson. I said, "I hear you're looking for a hammer driver". He says, "You might have trouble getting away", but", he says, "we'll see what we can do with the Manpower". So, I got into the State Dockyard and I was a delegate for about six months. Now, in 1941 we formed what they called the Watch Committee - that's representing each union at the Dockyard, which would meet regularly every fortnight on the job. So, we formed the Watch Committee there and had a mass meeting and all the unions agreed to elect delegates and, of course, with the war effort then, you see, there was no standing over us by the bosses concerned. It was hard to sack you - they had to have a good excuse, you know...and a few chaps of us were in the Communist Party. We had a branch there. We had about 23 members I think at the Dockyard at that time and we had quite a good influence then on the ironworkers in the union. We made it a 100% O.K. shop. We introduced the O.K. card. You had to have an O.K. card before you could start.

Interviewer So you had to be in the union?

Interviewee You had to be a union member. And Charlie McCaffrey, another Scotchman, he was an organiser for the Ironworkers - I wasn't an organiser then - he done a great job at the B.H.P. He got permission by the corporation...and cost plus was on, they were making big money B.H.P. and charging anything they liked to the government apparently at no expense...and we built up through Charlie, a terrific organisation at B.H.P. Every day of the week he went into some department and talked about unionism - joining the union and we got B.H.P. - we never got 100% at anytime but there was always one or two you missed.

Interviewer There was a very big drive in the early '40's....

Interviewee Mmm...and then in 1943 they were selling war bonds, you know...and another chap and I from the Dockyard, we were elected to sell war bonds representing the workers there...and there was another chap from Cardiff workshops and a clerical chap from the bank... and each of us used to go round to the various shops and factories and speak to them about buying war bonds ...and we had a member of the armed forces with us. I had a chap, he was a paratrooper, a big, young bloke from Tasmania and I says, "Do you ever do much talking"? ...and he says, "Oh no, I never talk". Anyway he was humming a wee song. I says, "You can sing". "Oh," he says, "a wee bit, you know". Anyway that song was just out - 'I'll Be Home For Christmas', and I got him to sing this to the ladies in the factories and it was a winner. It was mainly where the women worked in all these big factories. There were women everywhere, even working in industry...and we done very well. Then I came back to the Dockyard in 19- ...we were only there for two month at a time you know, we done two terms of it - it was very good because we got full pay plus expenses...and went back at the Dockyard and I worked there right through until 1946 when I went to be an

Ironworkers organiser. McCaffrey had been sent to South Australia to build up the union down there - he done a good job down there...and I was an organiser for the union then until just the end of 1950 when the Groupers took over - they won the election. They accused what do you call him, of a crook ballot, you know - Thornton and it was a judgement given against Thornton's group...because this was all propoganda to rush us out. There was big demonstration here at Burwood Park, the Statium and God knows what not.

Interviewer Well, that was at the height of the 'cold war' too, wasn't it?

Interviewee Oh yes, well the cold war was on then Anne, for sure, right after the armistice was signed, what do you call him - Churchill started the cold war against the Soviet Union - America - they were the ones who had signed the treaty on the question of unity of action and all this - it was on...and well, that was the Dockyard. I was still at the Dockyard up till then. I was an organiser and then we were put out. Charlie Morgan was the secretary - was a good secretary.

Interviewer He lost his position.

Interviewee He was working at Lysaghts and Frank Campbell he was from Lysaghts and Billy Bashford - where did Billy work - he was working at Commonwealth Steelworks. Anyway, Charlie Morgan he jumped the gun. He went down to Lysaghts to see if he could get his job back you know, just after the elections and because things had been cleaned up at the time and they'd had time to organise, they told him he couldn't get back - that there was no work for him. I went back to the Dockyard about a fortnight after and they were still looking for men in the blacksmith's shop, you know, good drivers and that...so, I got a job back in the blacksmith's shop as a driver and I was there until I left in 1969. I retired on my birthday, Christmas Eve, the day I was 65 I retired.

Interviewer How do you think the Groupers managed to take control of the Ironworkers Union?

Interviewee Well, as I said, they were planning prior to the end of the war. We knew the Industrial Groups were taking place but they still couldn't show their face until such time as the war had finished, you know. Well, it was from 1945 onwards we seen the first instance of organised groups inside the Ironworkers Union - mainly through the Catholic action, ..what do you call them... Catholic action. Santamaria was coming to the forefront then - the church was even informing at the church services to vote against communists - to get rid of communists - this was the new terror and they had to get rid of them...and so it is today at this present time...and all right then, I think it was in 1949 just after the big miners' strike in '49 where we'd played a prominent role too - the Ironworkers were supporting up there, bringing foodstuffs to them and such like - that's when we seen the whole thing develop...and the elections were coming up in 1950 and, of course, we were getting Groupers that were coming to meetings - stacking our meetings- all this type of thing. They were getting in to us then see after the war the Groups got a lot of Yugoslavs and Italians - workers who had never been connected with trade unions whatsoever, you see, and most of them, nearly 90% would be Catholics and this was the organisation that was set up to defeat the unions.

Interviewer Was that fairly strong in Newcastle?

Interviewee Which?

Interviewer The refugees from communist countries.

Interviewee Oh Yes. They are having a big reunion up at Greta, that's where the big camps was then they brought them out her. I think it was the best part of eighty odd thousand that came through Newcastle at Greta and they

used to had to work for two years at a labouring job, irrespective of what their profession or qualities were, that was part of their coming out here...and that's when the B.H.P., well, just after the war from 1947 there was hundreds of Yugoslavs and Italians. There was not many Greeks, they don't seem to like industry, they got ways and means of looking after themselves. There was a few Greeks but it was mainly Yugoslavs, Poles, you know Poland, and Italians - not a great deal from the Dutch countries - they seemed to have their own economy pretty well in hand, you see, but they were the main in employment from the people that come out here and without exception were mainly pro Catholic workers and that was the background you see, they'd suffered in their own country and they weren't going to suffer again out here in Australia under communist leadership...and well, they had the ballot, the exposure of what they said was Thornton's rigging ballot papers.

Interviewer And Laurie Short was...

Interviewee Laurie Short he became the secretary then,- he writes articles in the Herald every Wednesday.

Interviewer He had a fair bit of influence on the Newcastle group didn't he, setting up the dissidents?

Interviewee Yes, Laurie Short spent a lot of time here and he was a member of the party one time too you know.

Interviewer Yes, he was a member of the Young Communists.

Interviewee Yes, he was a member.

Interviewer He was dismissed from the party...

Interviewee Yes, it was some Nazi letters he was sending, he was dismissed, he got the sack.

Interviewer And during that time before the '49 elections when I think it was McPhillips...

Interviewee Jack McPhillips.

Interviewer He was gaoled for contempt of court...

Interviewee Well, you know, they wouldn't hand over the monies you know...there was miners representatives - considerable - there was Healy from the what do you call it - Waterside Workers...they were all gaoled at that particular time.

Interviewer And then there was the big meeting called at Newcastle at the...

Interviewee Burwood Park...well the one at Burwood Park and then the Stadium. The one at Burwood Park was fairly rowdy you know. There were quite a few fights there. Then the big one they held in the Stadium, well Onslow and I we were at school in Sydney at the time, you know, for the party and we missed it, we missed the Stadium. There was a lot of damage. Well, they had people who weren't in the union and that that were directed from the church - anyone was getting in apparently...and Morgan and Charlie and Bill Hopkins they were on the stage and McPhillips, I think, was on the stage too. Well, they were lucky to get out of it. There was that much damage - breaking all the stools and chairs - God knows - nearly pulled the Stadium down. From then on after when we were getting back to work, of course there was a fair bit of work then too, there was a lot of work at that time - I suppose it was 1964-65 before we seen another recession you know.

Interviewer So there wasn't very much antagonism getting back into work after the Groupers took control?

Interviewee Well, what do you call him, McCaffrey was still in South Australia, then he got a job with some factory down there. As a matter of fact, he only died a couple of months ago - Charlie he would have been 83 same as me and Billy Bashford he's dead, Charlie's dead, Bill Hopkin's dead, Frank Campbell's dead - they're nearly

all gone, the parts that took a leading part at that particular time. McPhillips is still alive but he broke away from the party, he became what do you call 'em organisation - Stalin supporter.

Interviewer Why did you join the party back in 1938?

Interviewee In 1938...well, actually I was in contact with militants prior to that you know. I'd worked with quite a good progressive team of lads at the Commonwealth Steel and from there little Dick Simmons, he was in the party at that time and George Cant, he was in the party at the time too...and then the question of all the agitation of facism and Hitler and that - it was quite prominent then and well there was talk of the question of another war coming up - all these things. I joined the party in a little book shop there at Hamilton. We used to go at the back of the bookshop and have our little meetings and we had little branches here and there was quite a few branches over the area in the coalfields, Cessnock and them places. And that was '65 ah '69 when I retired and I joined the pensioner movement in February 1970 but prior to that Anne, I should have told you in 1966 I got a trip to the Soviet Union. I was a party representative. There was twelve of us from different parts of Australia and I was representing the Newcastle area...that's when we went to the Soviet Union and of course, we got to all the main centres, seen everything that we wanted to see there...that's how I got a trip home.

Interviewer Have you seen a lot of changes in the party over fifty years?

Interviewee Oh, yes, for sure. I've seen some good men come in and some good men go out you know...and then, of course, the question of 1968, the invasion of Czechoslovakia seen the split of quite a number of our people in the party at that particular period and then the same happened in the invasion of Hungary too, you see, that was another split...and then the question of stalinism coming to

the forefront...there was a departure from here and in some of the communist parties around the world to disaffiliate from the International Communist Party and the Soviet Union. Then we had the what do you call it, here in Australia, then it was the Stalinist Party you know,,and we also had the rift with China and the Soviet Union and we formed the Chinese affiliated party...there was three groups, of course, we were still the original Communist Party - stood by that one all the time.

Interviewer What was the height of the party's support? During the war years, early '40's?

Interviewee Yes, well during the war you see, the party was strong and they played a very important part in winning conditions from employers at that particular period without strikes because the main thing was to keep industry going and the employers were getting cost plus, they were making millions, just millions.

Interviewer At the start of the war the Communist Party was very anti-war, they didn't want Australia in the war...

Interviewee Oh, well, we voted non conscription. We were anti-conscription and we didn't associate ourselves with the war - it was a fascist war.

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Interviewer But it was the invasion of Russia in 1941...

Interviewee Well then, 1941 I think it was when the Soviet Union was attacked by Germany, well, a change of position then took place. The war was a war of peace, we were fighting for peace and that was in 1941.

Interviewer How strong do you think support was among the rank and file for the communists?

Interviewee Oh, well, from a trade union level, good. We didn't come out just as the Communist Party on the job we were trade unionists from our own particular unions but our

impact for leadership was strong within the unions - the metal unions, the A.R.U., the miners were strong in leadership in the unions and the Ironworkers were strong right throughout Australia at that particular time. Well, then, we didn't have any membership over in Western Australia, they didn't come till after the Groupers came in.

Interviewer At the height of the cold war after the Groupers got control of the union in the fifties, what was the general feeling in the community towards the communists?

Interviewee Well actually, I tell you what caused a lot of dissention too. When we were in office, this would be about 1948 - we were all right at the time - they started what you call a political levy. You could either give it to the Labor Party, the Communist Party or into the fund for the union and this started a big dissention. Workers were protesting against the Communist Party and some against the Labor Party and that was put on and then we had to pull it back...and, of course, the question of the drive for compulsory unionism in the workshops, that was another one. Unfortunately, a lot of people still resisted joining unions so you had to get workshop organisation in the job so you could get at them...so that's when we had the situation at the Dockyard with the experience of Lysaghts, we made it a 100% union shop irrespective of what union, we had seventeen unions over there, and everyone had to be a financial member. Of course, the ironworkers there, if they wouldn't join the union they couldn't start, couldn't start without an O.K. card. If they were unfinancial when the quarter was up and couldn't pay your dues, you had to go home if you couldn't pay your dues - it was so strong the union...and as far as the fact that we had the Groupers in the union, Schofield and that, when they gained leadership, they wouldn't come to the Dockyard.

Interviewer Wouldn't they?

Interviewee No, nobody wanted them. The hatred grew up again when

they seen through the organisation and the lack of attention that was given to members, you know, and it was getting back to the old days - non unionists and all that and not pushing it through but as for the Dockyard went we could do without that, we could manage for ourselves we had formed the Watch Committee. Well, I suppose, well, I was back again in 1948, not 1948 it was 1951 when I got a job back. Well, that year I was elected president of the Watch Committee. I was on this committee before as a rank and file delegate and the last four years before I retired I was secretary of all the unions at the Dockyard.

Interviewer And you were still at that time - you were able to be an active...

Interviewee I was known as a communist on the job.

Interviewer Were you?

Interviewee Oh, yes. We had a very good branch. We printed a little monthly paper we called it 'The Slipway' and everybody was looking for it.

Interviewer And what did the Groupers think of this?

Interviewee Well the Groupers that was there, well, they had them over there but they had no chance of the organisation we had because we had blokes there that had experience, you know * Like what they done, Anne, when they took over power, admittedly well advised legally and that, they changed rules and endorsed through the registration so they could change the rules...and they made it that way that the rank and file had no voice. Because for example, here in Newcastle, you had to have twelve percent of the membership present at any general meeting that was called before it could be termed legalised. Well, at that time you'd have to have nearly 1,200 members to be at the meeting to get a vote, you know. They got in the management committee of the Ironworkers Union...they got delegates from various departments - shops. Say the management made a decision that was

* See over

not favourable to the leadership, they could work it themselves without taking it to the members, so that the rank and file had no say whatsoever... and yet, they always at election time "We support the rank and file", which they never did...and they've built it into a very strong wealthy union with membership, you see, the idea of financial membership came with them and they got the support of... see now they deduct the members fees out of their wages so you've got ready made money there coming in all the time. Well, they were all the things that took place then from that particular period.

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on what these blokes were doing. No we had full control over there at the Dockyard. At the mass meetings most of the unions would support the policy.

INTERVIEWER What about the B.H.P. Were the Groupers in there fairly strong...

INTERVIEWEE Oh yes. Well we had formed sub branches when Charlie was a delegate. We had seven sub branches, B.H.P., Lysaghts, Commonwealth Steelworks, State Dockyard, the Central Branch which took in all the small shops, the Lamp Works that was another sub branch...there were seven sub branches and each elected their own committee. Well when they took over, the Groupers, well they got these weaker shops and they elected their own little committee. Now there's only about one ...they've done away now...there's no organisation in shops at all now.

INTERVIEWER Isn't there?

INTERVIEWEE Only about two or three of them. I think Commonwealth Steel still elects a committee but outside Central there's nothing much at all.

INTERVIEWER What do you think - the Groupers once they were in power - how did that change the Ironworkers Union?

INTERVIEWEE Well, momentarily, it was played up by the press... Communist strength smashed by the Industrial Group, you know, the Ironworkers right wing...and it became pretty hard for some shops to organise and that's when we seen a lot of our people slip by the way side, you know, a lot of what we called 'red army recruits', when in the war the Soviets became involved with Germany we were getting recruits from the B.H.P. and different places and after the what do you call it was over, I guarantee that B.H.P. went defunct. There was no branch there at all, no branch there now, of course, that's a long while now.

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