

THE FEDERATED IRONWORKERS' ASSOCIATION

A review of the union activities, particularly the actions of the A.L.P. Industrial Groups and the incumbent Communist Organisers, with a particular emphasis on the Newcastle Branch.

In 1937 Ernie Thornton, a member of the Communist Party of Australia and a part time Organiser for the F.I.A. was elected to the position of National Secretary of the F.I.A. A position, which at that time, was essentially that of a Minute Secretary. It did have latent powers. Ernie Thornton developed the job by playing on the State parochialism of the State Secretaries and by effectively building up union membership by aggressive industrial campaigns, which improved both members conditions and pay. By 1937-38 he had a team elected, which was able to wrest control of the union from the A.L.P.

By 1939 the Communist Party of Australia had control of the union leadership in key economic areas. Ernie Thornton, General or National Secretary of the F.I.A., Jim Healy, General Secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation, Bill Orr, Federal Secretary of the Miners Federation, T. Wright, Federal Secretary of the Sheet Metal Workers and E.V. Elliott, Federal Secretary of the Seamens Union. Control of these unions also secured a large vote in the A.L.P. and the A.C.T.U. And there was evidence that this voting power was used to both gain further control of these organisations by policy formation and standing for office.

In Victoria, the incumbent Secretary, P.J. Kenelly, was narrowly defeated by a Communist sponsored candidate, D. McQueen, by 119 to 104, also by affiliation attempts with the C.P.A. was defeated by Federal Executive in 1937, 1938, and 1939 and again, the famous "Hands of Russia" resolution passed by the N.S.W. State Conference, 1940. All these actions led to a growing feeling amongst many members of the A.L.P. that the C.P.A. would have to be removed from their position of power in the Union movement.

These feelings were felt in Newcastle. In 1938 Ernie Thornton had a committee established federally "to investigate the Newcastle Branch". (1) And then in 1939 he challenged the credentials of the Newcastle and Lysaghts Sub-Branch National Council Delegates and it was on his motion that only two were allowed to stay, only as observers. (2)

(1) Robert Murray and Kate White "The Ironworkers" P.100 from F.I.A. Federal Council Minutes, May 1938

(2) Ibid P.100 from F.I.A. Federal Council Minutes, May 1938

Immediately after the Council Meeting, Thornton personally went to Newcastle and sacked all the Newcastle Officials and ordered fresh elections on the grounds that the Newcastle Officials were not responsive to Federal Officers. The Communists then gained control of the branch in a very small ballot return; Charlie Morgan, the C.P.A. candidate defeating, Ray Connelly, the A.L.P. incumbent by 350 to 220 votes. These events all created ill feeling locally, particularly with the very active Lysaghts Sub-Branch, which provided the focus of opposition to the Communists.

It should be noted that the situation at Lysaghts was different to other industries covered by the Union. When it was established, the Company brought many workers with them from Newport and Bristol in the U.K. These workers thus not only brought a strong sense of community with them (the Company built them housing "Pommie Town" at Mayfield East), but also a strong sense of union solidarity, which was re-inforced by the wage system prevalent, piece-work, where employees worked long hours without sickness benefits, annual leave, etc. in trying working conditions.

Meanwhile, Nationally moves had started to form Groups opposed to the Communists in the unions. These Groups had strong support from the Catholic Church. In Victoria, B.A. Santamaria started the Catholic Studies Movement in 1943. The 'movement' as it is generally known, received funding from the Catholic Church. B.A. Santamaria, "I went to the Archbishop with the practical plan of action the latter had requested. I told him for a start we should need 3000 pounds; he did not demur" (3) and "The Bishops voted 10,000 pounds per annum to enable the Movement to engage a skeleton staff in each state." (4)

This support was not confined to the Catholic Church, but received most of its support internally from the A.L.P. In N.S.W. the State Branch established the A.L.P. Industrial Groups in 1944-45 whose express purpose was to strengthen "the cause of the A.L.P. in factories and workshops (5) and to stop "overpresumptuous leftists cannot be allowed to use the trade unions as a means of imposing minority anti-Labour political control over our Governments". (6)

This feeling was again echoed in Newcastle by the welcome establishment of the District Organiser for the A.L.P. Industrial Groups, Frank Rooney, who was already Northern Organiser for the A.L.P. At the same time, in parallel, a group called the Ironworkers Committee for Democratic Unionism was formed.

(3) B.A. Santamaria "Against the Tide" P.74

(4) Ibid P.87

(5) W.J. McKell, cited in ALP Industrial Groups Handbook, ALP Sydney 1946 P.5

(6) J.A. Ferguson cited in 'ibid' P.15

Both these groups drew support from rank and file members, who were dissatisfied with a sense of events over the years of Communist control. Firstly, the unsuccessful strikes in 1938 and 1940-41, the reversal of policy of opposition to the war effort, the example of the heavy handed sacking of the Balmain Branch in 1942, reviving memories of the sacking of the Newcastle Branch in 1938 and most importantly, the unsuccessful steel strike of October-November, 1945, which led to the deregistration of the union.

By 1945 opposition to the Communist control of the F.I.A. had become widespread. It now began to organise Federally under the leadership of Laurie Short, with involvement of the A.L.P. Industrial Groups. This opposition promoted a determined reaction by the Communists to maintain control of the union. A reaction which saw Laurie Short expelled and re-instated from the union several times between 1946 and 1952 on trumped up charges.

The opposition became ever greater when Cecil Sharpley, a former Communist, began his revelations in 1948 of corrupt practices used by the Communists to maintain control of the union.

In Newcastle, several events had given impetus to the opposition, firstly, the already mentioned Steel Strike of 1945, then a continuing series of "push button" strikes (which had a greater effect on piece workers). Then on 8th April, 1946, the Federal and Branch Officials held a meeting at the Newcastle Stadium in order to gain support for the State Secretary, Jack McPhillips, who had been jailed for contempt of court. Both Morgan, the Newcastle Secretary, and Hopkins, the Newcastle President, were shouted down and more importantly, the State Secretary, McPhillips, was prevented from entering the meeting. This depth of feeling was further evidenced on 10th when a meeting of 3000 members at District Park voted against the following motion (which referred to the meeting on 8th) by a 2 to 1 majority. "Evidence had indicated that the disruption was planned by elements outside the Union and carried out by the so-called A.L.P. Industrial Groupers that this meeting expresses confidence in the leadership and action taken over McPhillips." (7)

Then in 1949 Newcastle members of the union lost 6 weeks or more work because of the Communist inspired National Coal Strike. Despite strong individual and family ties to miners, Branch members on 20th August opposed unqualified support of the strike and also passed a no confidence motion in Federal and Branch Officers.

(7) Newcastle Morning Herald 8th and 11th April, 1946

So, with a groundswell of opinion in their favour, the A.L.P. Industrial Groups challenged the Communist dominated incumbents in all positions in the 1949 elections. Federally Laurie Short was defeated by Ernie Thornton 9280 votes to 7602, this being challenged in the Arbitration Court, which found evidence of ballot rigging by the Communists and instated Laurie Short as the rightfully elected candidate.

However, in Newcastle the Industrial Group team comprising of mainly Lysaghts workers defeated all the incumbent Officials so ending Communist control of the Newcastle Branch.

In the re-ordered court ballots of 1951-52 the Communists were elected out of control of all positions in the Union.

In conclusion, it could be observed that the loss of control by the Communists in Newcastle, in particular was the result of local parochialism (ousting in 1938), challenges to the earning power of members through "push button" strikes, the arrogance of the Officials, the political stance adopted by the Officials and through the successful organisation and support of the officially sponsored A.L.P. Industrial Groups.

OPEN FOUNDATION

INTERVIEW WITH MR. HUGH McCARTHY, LONG TIME MEMBER FEDERATED
IRONWORKERS' ASSN.

Interviewer: When did you join the Union?

Hugh: I started work at John Lysaght Ltd. Works, Newcastle on July 8th, 1935 and joined the Union the same day. Lysaghts, of course, was one of the few strong union establishments in the 1930's.

Interviewer: What were the conditions like that you had to work under?

Hugh: Well, of course, in those days, that was before the introduction of weekly hiring, it was daily hire in those days. You did not enjoy paid annual leave. You did not have any sick leave, long service leave, compensation payments were very low, and of course, conditions like you have today were unheard of. Superannuation was not even thought of in those days.

Interviewer: Did you become active in the union movement from the day you started?

Hugh: No, I did not become active in the Trade Union Movement, even though as a 16 year old boy I found that we were involved in a number of small disputes over the next couple of years, which I felt were unnecessary, but we had a major dispute in 1938. I had been working at Lysaghts for 3 years. I was 19 years of age when that dispute began. A person was sacked for striking another man, which resulted in a stoppage of work, lasting 17 weeks. The stoppage, in my view, and most of the workers' view of the time was that it was something that should never have happened. At the end of the 17 week strike, we had to return to work without the member, who had been sacked and after that dispute I made up my mind that if given the opportunity, I would do everything possible to push these people out of control of the union, who were members of the Communist Party.

Interviewer: How many of your workmates felt the same way at the time? Many, or was it something that grew later on?

- Hugh: Well there was a lot of dissatisfaction, particularly in later years when we became involved in stoppages, which we considered were political; political inspired stoppages. So, as well as at Lysaghts, there was a general dissatisfaction with the leadership.
- Interviewer: Was this evident in other areas of the Union's activities around the town, or was something growing there too?
- Hugh: Well, I wasn't involved in other areas in those early years, but it was evident that there was a lot of dissatisfaction in some of the other industries. This came out at annual branch meetings, which in those years in the 40's were usually held at the City Hall, The Town Hall, Newcastle. Of course, branch meetings in those days were far different to branch meetings today, because people were interested, seemed to be more interested, in their welfare in those days. So you had a lot more of the membership attending meetings. At the annual meetings in those days you usually had at least 1000 members attending annual branch meetings as compared with recent years. You have been lucky to get 30 members attending, even your membership has grown much higher now than in those years.
- Interviewer: So, in your view, the members were very active in those days and had a dissatisfaction with the incumbent leadership.
- Hugh: Yes, but you found that there was a solid core of left wing supporters in those years, because even though you may get 1000 members at the annual branch meeting in those years, you always found that on the contentious issues the leadership had in those years a majority of votes. You would find they would have well over 600 of that 1000 supporting them on any contentious issue. But of course, a lot of the moderate people, the silent majority if you like, did not attend those meetings.
- Interviewer: When you say that there was a solid core for the Left, or the Communists, did you find that with the jailing for contempt of McPhillips, which I think was in 1942, did you find that the silent majority became active?

Hugh: Yes. Well I think that was later than 1942, I think it was 1946 or 1947. I can't remember the exact date. There was a strong objection to any support for the union leadership at that time. And I can recall a meeting of that time that was called at the old Newcastle Stadium. It was estimated that around 5000 members attended that meeting. Of course there were 100's outside that could not get into the Stadium and of course at that meeting the general membership erupted and would not allow the officials any leeway at all. As a matter of fact, many members who had, through frustration and possibly loss of wages through unnecessary stoppages over the years, tempers erupted. The result was that the ring where the officials were speaking from was erupted and invaded resulting in punches being thrown. The meeting broke up in chaos and of course the membership let the leadership know at that time they would not support them in a dispute in support of McPhillips.

Interviewer: In fact there was another meeting a few days later where even more members voted against them.

Hugh: Well you are looking at 40 years ago, a long time ago. There was another meeting but I don't remember a lot about it.

Interviewer: Were there records in the paper about it?

Hugh: Yes.

Interviewer: Hughie, a lot has been said and written about the Industrial Groups. What part do you believe that they played in the change of the leadership? Do you think that the strength of the Industrial Groups was the strength of the membership or was there much direction and help from the outside?

Hugh: I think that the Industrial Groups did play a big part in the overthrow of the leadership at that time. But what we cannot forget is that because of dissatisfaction with the union in Newcastle, I had joined a group of people who were meeting on a regular basis before the Industrial Groups became involved so I suppose you could say, in my view, that certainly the Industrial Groups did help to overthrow the Left Wing in the Federated Ironworkers' Association. But of course the dissatisfaction was already there amongst the membership and committees had already been formed. So,

following the formation of the Industrial Groups, we automatically became involved with Industrial Groups.

Interviewer: So there was a groundswell of opinion from the membership against the leadership at that time? Perhaps you could background some of the reasons why you mentioned some of the bad conditions the members worked under.

Hugh: Yes, well of course it wasn't until 1935 that Lysaghts first received paid annual leave following a decision of Justice Cantor. In 1935 the mill workers at Lysaghts were given 10 days paid annual leave. The rest of the workers were given 7 days and of course prior to that, the works were closed down for maintenance and repairs and the workers were given a fortnights holiday, but of course they weren't paid for that holiday. And it wasn't until 4 years later that workers at B.H.P. and subsidiaries received the same benefit through another judgment by Justice Cantor and so that was the first of a number of benefits that the workers felt they were entitled to. And in the 40's compensation payments were very very low. For example, I can recall I was badly injured in an accident at work in 1944. I was in hospital for 4 months and my rate of pay at the time, the compensation, was 3 pounds, 3 shillings a week, which I had to keep my wife and self. My rent for a one bedroom flat was 35 shillings a week, so thats something like 30 shillings a week to live on. I was on compensation for over 6 months, whereas my wages at the time averaged between 10 and 12 pounds a week. So I was certainly dissatisfied with the rate of compensation at the time. So we felt that the leadership was spending too much time on their own ideology and political issues rather than bread and butter issues. I think that this was certainly the way that I felt at the time. We felt that we should be entitled to a certain amount of sick pay; compensation payments should be increased, there should be some guarantee for old age, for our retirement. We felt that there should be some form of superannuation, sick leave and that type of thing.

So generally workers in those years were dissatisfied with their lot.

Interviewer: When the incumbent leadership was voted out of office, were many of these goals achieved in the immediate future?

Hugh: Well, in Newcastle of course they were voted out in 1949. In that year Laurie Schofield as Secretary, Norm Nolan, President, and Fred Jeans and Dave Watson were elected as Organisers. Our aim then was to achieve sick pay and to push for long service leave and push for a number of benefits that we felt we should be entitled to. That included compassionate leave and other things.

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Signed H. McCarthy

Date 19-9-88

Interviewer