

**‘Stop the War on Aborigines’: The Communist Party
of Australia and the Fight for Aboriginal Rights
1920-1934**

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Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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Abstract

This thesis provides a detailed historical reconstruction of the thought and practice of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) regarding Aboriginal rights from 1920-1934. Based primarily upon archives of the CPA press and internal CPA records, it charts a development from a perspective that failed to challenge the racism of the Australian mainstream, and even embraced some of these racist ideas, towards one of solidarity with Aboriginal resistance to colonisation.

Running through this study is a critical engagement with early Marxist thought about Indigenous peoples and settler-colonialism. The classical Marxist tradition insisted on the importance of anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles for the revolutionary working-class movement. However, influential texts in this tradition also contained racist ideas about supposedly “primitive” Indigenous people in Australia and this contributed to the delayed emergence of a pro-Aboriginal communist perspective.

As the CPA expanded to become a mass party during the Depression, the experiences of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in NSW (forced underground in 1929) and continuing armed Aboriginal resistance in the Northern Territory, inspired theoretical innovation by Australian communists. In 1931, a CPA manifesto for Aboriginal rights drew on Marxist theory to profoundly articulate the ways that Australian capitalism was predicated on continuing Indigenous genocide, along with the importance of the Aboriginal struggle for the liberation of the entire working class. These new insights provided the basis for the first campaigns for Aboriginal rights by working-class organisations in Australian history. This campaigning stopped a police-planned massacre of Yolngu people in Arnhem Land 1933, challenged the imprisonment of Aboriginal warriors in Darwin in 1934 and laid the basis for a tradition of trade union solidarity that would play a crucial role in many campaigns for Aboriginal rights across Australia in the following decades.

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List of Abbreviations

AAPA	Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association
AAL	Australian Aborigines League
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACTU	Australian Congress of Trade Unions
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ALP (NSW)	Australian Labor Party, New South Wales branch (1931-1936)
APB	New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board
APNR	Association for the Protection of Native Races
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
ASP	Australian Socialist Party
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
CAC	Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship
CAW	Council Against War
CC	Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia
CCC	Central Control Commission of the Communist Party of Australia
CDL	Citizens Defence League
CMS	Church Missionary Society of Australia
Comintern	Communist International
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
DAV	Democratic Association of Victoria
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
ICWPA	International Class War Prisoners Association
ILD	International Labor Defence
IRA	International Red Aid
ITUCNW	International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers
IWMA	International Workingmen's Association
IWW	International Workers of the World
LAI	League Against Imperialism
MECW	Marx and Engels Collected Works
ML SLNSW	Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

MMS	Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia
NAIU	North Australian Industrial Union
NAWU	North Australian Workers' Union
NLU	National Labor Union of the United States
PPTUS	Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat
RL	Red Leader
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
SPD	German Social Democratic Party
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
UWM	Unemployed Workers' Movement
VAG	Victorian Aboriginal Group
VCAW	Victorian Council Against War
WDC	Workers' Defence Corps
WIR	Workers' International Relief
WW	<i>Workers' Weekly</i>
WWF	Waterside Workers' Federation
YCL	Young Communist League

Introduction

On August 1, 1933, Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda, a Yolngu leader from the Dhudi Djapu clan, fatally speared a Northern Territory police officer. Dhakiyarr's act of militant resistance to colonisation set off events culminating in a national campaign led by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), that mobilised thousands of workers behind a call to stop the "war of extermination" being waged against Aboriginal people. This thesis examines the historical engagement of the CPA with questions of Aboriginal oppression and resistance, from the founding of the party in 1920 through to the end of the first major wave of CPA campaigning for Aboriginal rights in November 1934. From a position of ignorance and even racism in its early years, the party developed a sophisticated analysis of Aboriginal oppression, drawing on Marxist anti-colonial theory, that by 1934 had played a major role in transforming the terrain of national Aboriginal politics. To date, historians have not accounted for this important activism by the CPA and the radical workers they led.

The police officer Dhakiyarr speared, Constable Albert McColl, was on Dhakiyarr's land on Woodah Island, adjacent to Blue Mud Bay in East Arnhem Land. He was part of a police patrol sent to nearby Caledon Bay, to investigate the killing of a Japanese trepang fisherman by Yolngu¹ people the previous year.² At the time he was killed, McColl had four Yolngu women chained by his side, including Djaparri Wirrpanda, Dhakiyarr's wife,³ in an attempt to force Yolngu on the island to co-operate with the investigation.⁴ Defending Dhakiyarr's actions more than 80 years later, Dhakiyarr's son, Wuyal Wirrpanda, explained that police "were still fighting a war with Black people" and a brutal massacre on the land of Dhakiyarr's mother, had meant that "all his aunts and uncles had been killed and thrown in

¹ Throughout this thesis, I refer to Aboriginal people from the North-East Arnhem Land region as "Yolngu", which is used consistently by local Aboriginal people as a self-referential term, that translates as "human being". The term is also commonly used by researchers to describe people from this area. Mickey Dewar, *The Black War in Arnhem Land* (Darwin: North Australia Research Unit, 1995), xii.

² Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Island Killings 1932-1933* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 22-29.

³ Egan, *Justice*, 33.

⁴ E.H. Morey, "Letter to A.V. Stretton (Superintendent of NT Police)", 21 August 1933, Department of the Interior, NAA 47/1434.

the river”.⁵

In August 1933, at the most senior levels of government in Australia, sending police out to massacre Aboriginal people was still considered to be an acceptable policy response to events like the spearing of McColl.⁶ A government inquiry had exonerated police responsible for killing scores of Aboriginal people at Coniston in Central Australia in 1928.⁷ Now, both the Northern Territory Administration in Darwin and the Department of the Interior they reported to in Canberra, began to prepare a police-led “punitive expedition” that would ride into Arnhem Land and “teach the natives a lesson”.⁸

A large protest campaign across Australia stopped the impending massacre.⁹ Instead of dispatching an armed police party, the government collaborated with missionaries to negotiate the surrender of Dhakiyarr and other Yolngu responsible for recent killings.¹⁰ The brutal treatment of these prisoners, and the farcical nature of court proceedings which condemned them to death, launched another wave of protest which led to the High Court of Australia quashing Dhakiyarr’s conviction and ordering his release in November 1934.¹¹ Brutal injustice of course continued. Dhakiyarr himself disappeared after he was released from prison and was most likely murdered by police.¹² However, what is commonly analysed as the period of “frontier warfare” – overt military conflict between Aboriginal people and armed forces of colonisation that began on this continent in 1788 – was now over.¹³

The CPA played a decisive role in organising this protest campaign. It was communists in Darwin who first announced the formation of a committee to campaign against the massacre and first appealed to national networks for support.¹⁴ Communists argued that collective

⁵ Tom Murray, dir., *Dhakiyarr vs the King* (2004: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), streaming video, 57 mins, Kanopy.

⁶ Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1998), 204.

⁷ Charles Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice Volume 1* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970), 288.

⁸ “Government Prepares For Punitive Expedition Against Blacks – ‘Lesson Must Be Given’”, *The Herald*, September 2, 1933, 1.

⁹ “Fed. Govt. Climbs Down On Punitive Expedition”, *Labor Daily*, September 30, 1933, 7.

¹⁰ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 209-12.

¹¹ Egan, *Justice*, 153-155, 188.

¹² Egan, *Justice*, 192.

¹³ Charles Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice Volume 1*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 1970), 287.

¹⁴ Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections*, (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 9.

working-class action was the key social power capable of forcing progressive change, with the capacity for strike action that could hit the economy and drive broader radicalisation. The CPA's focus in this campaign was, therefore, on mobilising working-class organisations. They did so on an anti-imperialist basis.¹⁵ In September of 1933, in response to Communist Party agitation, unions and organisations from across the political spectrum of the labour movement took their first public, campaigning position on the question of frontier violence – forcefully protesting the planned raid.¹⁶

This entry of working-class organisations into the field of public debate about Aboriginal policy was a completely new development. Historically, trade unions had only ever considered the role of Aboriginal people as workers. Pastoral workers' unions in particular, some of which excluded Aboriginal workers from membership, negotiated wage rates and working conditions, often far inferior to those of white unionists.¹⁷ Through the campaigning in 1933-34, however, Aboriginal people resisting the police were characterised in the CPA press as comrades in a struggle against a cruel conservative federal government.¹⁸ Resolutions from mass meetings of workers in south-east Australia declared that Aboriginal attacks on police entering their territories were entirely justified, and demanded rights to self-determination for Aboriginal people living on their lands.¹⁹ This thesis charts the development of the CPA's thought and practice on questions of Aboriginal rights, demonstrating how this position of working-class solidarity with Aboriginal struggle first emerged and how it was put into practice.

Anti-colonial Marxism and the CPA

The calls by the CPA during the Dhakiyarr campaign for solidarity with Aboriginal struggle drew on a rich global tradition of Marxist anti-colonial thought and practice. Two significant

¹⁵ "WAR! Against Aborigines", *Workers Weekly*, September 8, 1.

¹⁶ Copies of many of the resolutions passed by working-class organisations are held in an Interior Ministry file in the National Archives of Australia. Interior Ministry File, "Caledon Bay Expedition – Protests", 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁷ Andrew Markus, "Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement", in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus, eds., *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 138-149.

¹⁸ "Stop this Murder", *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11.

¹⁹ Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union of Australia (Victorian Branch), "Letter to Hon. J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior", September 6, 1933, Caledon Bay Expedition – Protests, Interior Ministry File, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; "Meeting's Protest – Mr. Brennan on Rights of Blacks", *The Argus*, September 14, 1933, 10.

aspects of the relationship between the CPA and this Marxist tradition are explored in detail throughout this thesis. Firstly, the ways that the CPA creatively applied theoretical tools developed for other contexts across the world where workers from “oppressor nations” like Australia had acted in solidarity with Black and colonised peoples.²⁰ Secondly, how through this process the CPA overcame the largely uncritical attitude to the dispossession of minority Indigenous populations in the Anglosphere settler-colonies that had characterised Marxism hitherto.

From the 1850s, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels began to theorise the relationship between freedom struggles in the colonies and the revolutionary working-class movement.²¹ They argued that the industrial proletariat, then concentrated in western Europe, was the primary political subject capable of bringing the productive forces created by capitalism under social control, making possible a global socialist society free from want and exploitation. The agency of colonised people, however, increasingly became viewed as a key constitutive force in the global revolutionary process. In the 1850s and 1860s, Marx developed powerful insights into the importance of anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles. He argued that freedom movements in the colonies could shake the power of capitalist empires such as Britain and France.²² Generalising from the revolts of enslaved people in the USA through the Civil War of 1861 to 1865, Marx recognised the crucial role that racism played in tying the allegiance of white workers to their rulers: “labour in the white skin can never emancipate itself while in the black it is branded”.²³ Marx also agitated amongst British workers for support for the Irish independence struggle, arguing that “a nation that enslaves another forges its own chains”.²⁴

This militant internationalist tradition profoundly informed the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the formation of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1919. In the Comintern,

²⁰ The Communist International drew a distinction between “oppressor” and “oppressed” nations, placing special obligations on member parties from the former to struggle against racism and imperialism. V.I. Lenin, “Terms of Admission to the Communist International”, Second Congress of the Communist International (1920), Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x01.htm>.

²¹ Thierry Drapeau, “The Roots of Karl Marx’s Anti-colonialism”, *Jacobin*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/01/karl-marx-anti-colonialism-ernest-jones>.

²² Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (United States of America: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 28-41, 115-153.

²³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, 1867, MECW 35, 305.

²⁴ Karl Marx, “Confidential Communication,” March 1870, MECW 21, 120.

communist parties quickly forming across Europe began to organise with revolutionaries from the colonial world, all inspired by the Russian example. Membership of the Comintern was conditional on affiliated parties supporting the rights of colonised people to self-determination, actively supporting armed insurgency and fighting the ideologies of racial superiority that justified imperialism.²⁵ Through these struggles, the Comintern developed and generalised Marx's original insights, applying them to a myriad of circumstances across the world.²⁶

CPA members were encouraged to see themselves as part of a global movement, united through the Comintern, working to destroy imperialism.²⁷ For most of the 1920s, however, the CPA had not recognised that the resistance of Aboriginal people in Australia was part of this global struggle for freedom. The CPA was initially silent on continuing frontier massacres and ignored an extraordinary campaign against the NSW Aborigines Protection Board (APB), led by the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) in the 1920s.²⁸ Hegemonic ideology in Australia, consistently pushed through the press and codified in racist legislation, framed Aboriginal people as inferior and doomed to disappear²⁹ and there was some echo of these ideas in the CPA press.³⁰

At this time in history, no one from the socialist movement internationally had systematically applied a Marxist analysis of colonialism to the situation facing minority Indigenous populations in Anglosphere settler-colonies like Australia.³¹ Marx never recognised continuing Indigenous resistance in North America or Australia, writing only about struggles over land between settler farmers and bigger capitalist interests.³² Engels' discussion of

²⁵ Lenin, "Terms of Admission to the Communist International".

²⁶ John Riddell, Vijay Prashad, Nazeef Mollah (eds.) *Liberate the Colonies! Communism and Colonial Freedom 1917-1924*, (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2019).

²⁷ "Manifesto of the Communist Party on the Occasion of the Fifth Anniversary", WW, June 20, 1924, 4; "Our Party Program: Imperialism", WW, September 7, 1923, 1

²⁸ Worimi historian John Maynard has produced extensive work on the AAPA. The richest study is John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism*. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

²⁹ For the most comprehensive study of these ideas and their relation to government policy, see Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australia and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939*, (Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

³⁰ "Odds and Ends from Everywhere", *The Communist*, July 14, 1922, 2.

³¹ Oleksa Drachewych, "Settler Colonialism and the Communist International", *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism, Second Edition*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-91206-6_140-1 4-5.

³² For example, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and others, "Circular Against Krieg", 1846; Marx, "The North American Civil War", October 25, 1861; Marx, "To Engels in Manchester", November 25,

Indigenous peoples in Australia and North America in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* contained explicitly racist ideas. Following bourgeois ethnologists, he argued “savage” peoples were mentally inferior and doomed to disappear.³³ German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Karl Kautsky, the world’s premier Marxist theorist prior to WWI, drew a distinction between “exploitation colonies” that socialists should oppose, and “work colonies” or “settlement colonies” such as the USA, Australia, Chile and Canada, that were praised as beacons of democracy and progress.³⁴ Within the Comintern in the 1920s, there was some important theorisation of the relationship between Indigenous struggles and socialist revolution in the settler-colonies of Algeria³⁵ and South Africa³⁶ where the Indigenous population was an overwhelming majority of the working class, and similarly in some places in South America.³⁷ However, in Canada, the United States and New Zealand, communist parties largely remained silent on the question of Indigenous rights through the 1920s and early 1930s.³⁸

In Australia, however, things began to shift in the late 1920s, as communists drew on Marxist theory to respond to sharp questions about racism posed for radical workers in struggle. In the tropical town of Darwin, where Aboriginal and Asian workers formed a much larger proportion of the working class than in southern capital cities, inter-racial relationships forged through an experience of joint hardship informed the first flickers of solidarity with Aboriginal people in the CPA press. A CPA branch was formed in Darwin in 1928 to argue for a strategy of multi-racial unionism to meet the growing challenges of unemployment and homelessness in a time of economic crisis. Contemporaneous with these developments was a

1869, all in Nelly Rumyantseva, ed., *Marx and Engels on the United States*, (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1979). There is detailed discussion of the political economy of land distribution in Australia and the USA in Marx, *Capital*, Chapter 33. Other disparate commentary on Australian conditions across the writings of Marx and Engels is collated in Henry Mayer, *Marx, Engels, and Australia* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1964).

³³ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1978), 51-52.

³⁴ Kautsky, *Socialism and Colonial Policy*, 1909, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1907/colonial/4-work.htm>.

³⁵ For example, Leon Trotsky, “Report on France: The Colonial Question”, in John Riddell (ed.), *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 1000-1001

³⁶ Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism”, 7-8.

³⁷ Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism”, 4-5.

³⁸ Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism”, 4-6; Oleksa Drachewych, “Race, the Comintern, and Communist Parties in British Dominions, 1920-1943”, in Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (eds.), *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Questions*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 260-261.

step forward in Marxist anti-imperialist theory as it related to Australia. In late 1927, Indian Comintern leader Manabendra Nath (M.N.) Roy stridently challenged the idea, held widely both in the CPA and the Comintern leadership, that Australia was a colony oppressed by Britain. Roy successfully argued to the Comintern executive that Australian capitalism had developed into an independent locus of imperialist power, still allied to British imperialism, but holding its own distinct interests.³⁹ This shift highlighted, in a theoretical sense, the potential significance of Indigenous struggle against distinctly Australian forms of colonial rule, both in Australia and in New Guinea and surrounding islands.

Depression conditions from 1929 created unprecedented hardship for workers everywhere, and this saw massive expansion in the ranks of the CPA. At the same time, there was also an intensification of racist controls over Aboriginal life across Australia.⁴⁰ Just like in Darwin,⁴¹ interaction in unemployed workers' camps precipitated joint experiences of hardship and in some cases joint struggles by white communists and Aboriginal people in locations as varied as Sydney, country NSW and regional north Queensland.⁴²

New insights into Aboriginal conditions gained through these experiences provided the basis for articulation of a comprehensive manifesto calling for Aboriginal liberation, the "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines: Draft Program for a Struggle Against Slavery", published in September 1931.⁴³ This was a novel application of anti-colonial Marxism to Aboriginal circumstances and a profound theoretical breakthrough, laying foundations for the development of deeper relationships of solidarity between workers' struggle and Aboriginal communities in Australia over the coming decades. Historian Andrew Markus argues that the CPA's 1931 program "constituted the most radical demands being made by, or on behalf of, Aborigines till the 1960s".⁴⁴ While the program has been widely cited in existing historiography, the first comprehensive analysis of its development and political character sits at the centre of this thesis. Chapters Three and Four explain the conditions that informed

³⁹ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 10, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, NSW 495-3-39.

⁴⁰ Rowley, *Destruction*, 281-282.

⁴¹ Joe McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu: My Fight for Aboriginal Rights*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991), 21-22.

⁴² R.W., "Aborigines and the Dole – Dubbo Unemployed", WW, July 1, 1932, 4; "Unity Against Dole Regulations", RL, May 31, 1933, 8.

⁴³ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery", WW September 24, 1931, 2.

⁴⁴ Markus, "Talka Longa Mouth", 148.

the development of the 1931 program and Chapters Six, Seven and Eight analyse the transition from a novel theory of potential solidarity, to the first nationwide pro-Aboriginal campaigns led by the CPA.

The 1931 program was drafted by CPA Political Bureau member and former General Secretary, Herbert Moxon. Moxon's writing described a continuing process of "mass extermination" across the Australian continent through frontier homicide, starvation and forced child removal.⁴⁵ Influenced by Marx's analysis of colonial violence in *Capital Volume I*, Moxon identified the roots of this process in the imperatives of Australian capitalism. He argued that having stolen an entire continent through imperialist expansion, the Australian ruling class was trying to permanently erase the presence of the Aboriginal peoples and cultures that provided a constant reminder of this injustice.⁴⁶

Moxon called for the revolutionary working-class movement to "struggle with the aborigines against Australian imperialism".⁴⁷ A list of 14 demands included the abolition of all draconian "Protection" authorities, an end to the removal of children, freedom for all Aboriginal prisoners and repeal of all racist laws and regulations to deliver full economic, political and social rights. There were also specific demands for resources for Aboriginal people to run their own schools, develop their cultures, control administration in their communities, for the return of "watered and fertile country" to Aboriginal people, and the creation of "one or more independent aboriginal states or republics", including through "the handing back to the aborigines of all Central, North and North-Western Australia".⁴⁸ This final demand for independent Aboriginal states was not raised by Aboriginal people themselves in this period,⁴⁹ or seriously prosecuted by the CPA. Demands against discrimination and for self-determination, however, first articulated in a labour movement context in Moxon's program, remain foundational for Aboriginal solidarity campaigning today.

The first serious manifestation of the solidarity proposed in Moxon's program was the campaign against the police massacre planned in Arnhem Land in September 1933, followed

⁴⁵ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁴⁶ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁴⁷ "The Native Races and Imperialism", WW, September 18, 1931, 2.

⁴⁸ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁴⁹ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 82-83.

by mobilisations demanding freedom for Aboriginal prisoners held in Darwin in 1934.⁵⁰ This emergence in Australia of a position of revolutionary solidarity with Aboriginal struggle had a decisive impact on the trajectory of both the relationship between Aboriginal people and the workers' movement, and on Australian government policy. As Henry Reynolds argued, the 14-month period between September 1933 and the acquittal of Dhakiyarr by the High Court of Australia in November 1934 was "decisive in the history of Aboriginal-European relations".⁵¹

Methodology and contribution to historiography

Histories of developments in this period, however, all written within the field of Aboriginal history, have uniformly failed to recognise the crucial initiative of communists and the impact of anti-colonial Marxism. Large-scale collective action by radical workers, openly calling for defiance of the police and the courts, drove a number of key policy developments. Australian historians have given too much credit to the leadership of middle and upper-class intellectuals or clergymen in these campaigns.⁵² Close examination of both the development of this Marxist position, and the dynamics of this campaigning, forms part of an argument in this thesis about the crucial role that working-class solidarity can play in advancing the struggle for Aboriginal rights.

Oleksa Drachewych, a scholar based in Canada who specialises in Comintern history, has recently described it as both "curious" and "problematic" that the rich and unique history of the CPA's relationship to Aboriginal struggle in the interwar period has not yet been the subject of a specific study.⁵³ The most detailed analysis of the development of the CPA's position on Aboriginal rights is contained in Drachewych's 2019 book, *The Communist International, Anti-imperialism and Racial Equality in the British Dominions*,⁵⁴ based on

⁵⁰ Kylie Tennant, "Aborigines Persecuted", *Australian Labor Defender*, July 1934, 6.

⁵¹ Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1998), 215.

⁵² Brief accounts of the campaign are provided by Rowley, *Destruction*, 290-291; Andrew McMillan, *An Intruder's Guide to East Arnhem Land* (Nightcliff: Niblock Publishing, 2007), 114-117; Egan, *Justice*, 41-43; Dewar, *Black War*, 61-62; Most substantially, Reynolds provides a six-page account that gives some acknowledgement of the labour movement, but not the CPA: Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 205-210.

⁵³ Oleksa Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia on Questions of Imperialism, Nationality and Race, 1919-1943" (PhD diss., McMaster University, 2017), 26.

⁵⁴ Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions*, (Routledge: New York, 2019).

PhD research completed contemporaneously with my own, that includes a close study of many of the same archives.⁵⁵ In Australian historiography, this topic has been considered both by scholars working in the field of Aboriginal history,⁵⁶ and Australian labour history,⁵⁷ though analyses have rarely stretched beyond a few pages. Historian Deborah Wilson and socialist writer Terry Townsend have written the most substantial accounts, with seven and eleven pages respectively on the period 1920-1934, both in books with a stronger focus on relations between Aboriginal struggle and the left after WWII.⁵⁸ Both cover some important CPA writings and campaign initiatives explored in greater depth in this thesis. Both, however, are too uncritical, arguing incorrectly that the CPA demonstrated “uncompromising”⁵⁹ support for Aboriginal struggle from its foundation.⁶⁰ Townsend provided some useful critique of the impact of Stalinism on the CPA’s position. He also

⁵⁵ Drachewych, “The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia”.

⁵⁶ Heather Goodall makes numerous short references to the role of the Communist Party throughout her writing on NSW Aboriginal politics in the 1930s, for example Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 269-310. Short references are also littered throughout Jack Horner, *Bill Ferguson: Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom*, (Mayborough: Australian Print Group, 1994). Tim Rowse has recently published some analyses of the CPA’s position in the early 1930s in Tim Rowse, *Indigenous Australians and Others Since 1901* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2017). Brief mentions noting the importance of early solidarity for the Aboriginal struggle are made by a number of historians, for example, Gordon Briscoe, “The Origins of Aboriginal Political Consciousness and the Aboriginal Embassy, 1907-1972”, in Gary Foley, Andrew Schaap and Edwina Howell, *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 42; Henry Reynolds, “Action and anxiety: the long history of settler protest about the nature of Australian colonization”, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 4 No. 4 (2014), 337; Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 40, 49-52.

⁵⁷ PhD theses by Julia Martinez and Jude Elton provide the most detail, confined primarily to developments in Darwin, Jude Elton: “Comrades or Competition? Union Relations with Aboriginal Workers in the South Australian and Northern Territory Pastoral Industries, 1878-1957” (PhD diss., University of South Australia, 2007), 254-304; Julia Martinez, “Plural Australia: Aboriginal and Asian Labour in Tropical White Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2000), 94-125. Andrew Markus has written the most useful account of any Australian historian of the approach of the CPA as a whole: Andrew Markus, “Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement”, in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus ed., *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia* (Neutral Bay: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 146-151. Drew Cottle covers similar ground to Markus, in Drew Cottle, “The Colour Line and the Third Period: A Comparative Analysis of American and Australian Communism and the Question of Race, 1928-1934”, *American Communist History*, 10 No. 2 (2011), 126-131. Other accounts that provided some starting points for further research in this thesis include Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 178-179; Bob Boughton, “The Communist Party of Australia’s Involvement in the Struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s Rights”, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History Conference, Proceedings, Wollongong NSW, 1999, 37-39.

⁵⁸ Deborah Wilson, *Different White People: Radical Activism for Aboriginal Rights 1946-1972* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2015), 18-24; Terry Townsend, *The Aboriginal Struggle & the Left* (Sydney: Resistance Books, 2009), 7-18.

⁵⁹ Townsend, *The Aboriginal Struggle & the Left*, 7.

⁶⁰ Wilson, *Different White People*, 18.

provides an important account of the role of a Sydney-based Aboriginal family, the Eatocks, in the UWM in Sydney, drawing on insights from a family history written by Joan Eatock.⁶¹

The lack of detailed research on the CPA's pro-Aboriginal activism in this period has led not just to a lack of appreciation of the quality and scale of CPA-led campaigning, but to some fundamentally mistaken assumptions. A number of Australian historians who discuss the emergence of a CPA pro-Aboriginal position from the late 1920s credit the Comintern for pushing the Australian party to take up the cause of Aboriginal rights.⁶² My research has found no evidence for any Comintern correspondence on Aboriginal issues. Drachewych conversely, and in accord with this thesis, argues the CPA's pro-Aboriginal position was "homegrown".⁶³ Drachewych's focus is on the CPA's relationship with the Comintern, however, and there is no analysis of the way the position of solidarity emerged through contact with Aboriginal workers, and in response to Aboriginal political initiative – key influences explored in my study.

The core source materials informing this study are the newspapers, magazines, other agitational material such as leaflets, and internal party records produced by the CPA. The existence of these materials was largely identified through consultation with a comprehensive bibliography of Communist Party history published by Beverly Symons, Andrew Wells and Stuart Macintyre in 1994 and their supplementary volume published in 2002.⁶⁴ Scholars writing within the field of Aboriginal History have only ever examined a fraction of this very extensive material.⁶⁵ Of particular importance is the archive of CPA-controlled newspapers

⁶¹ Townsend, *Aboriginal Struggle and the Left*, 13, 15-18; Joan Eatock, *Delusions of Grandeur, a Family's Story of Love and Struggle* (Alice Springs: Jakurrpa Books, 2003).

⁶² Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 278; Markus, "Talka Longa Mouth", 148; Frank Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour: The Left in Australia, 1919-1939* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981), 88; Hannah Middleton, *But Now We Want Our Land Back: A History of the Aboriginal People*, (Sydney: New Age Publishers, 1977), 130-131.

⁶³ Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia", 223.

⁶⁴ Beverly Symons, Andrew Wells and Stuart Macintyre, *Communism in Australia: a resource bibliography* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1994); Beverly Symons and Stuart Macintyre, *Communism in Australia: a supplementary resource bibliography, c. 1994-2001* (Sydney: Sydney Branch, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 2002).

⁶⁵ Heather Goodall has given the most serious consideration to the relationship between the Aboriginal movement and the trade union movement in NSW in this period, providing an important starting point for a number of areas of inquiry pursued in this thesis. Goodall's research on CPA press archives was limited to the *Workers' Weekly* and some sources from the Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union. Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 395.

and journals that reveal both a scale of campaigning and a depth of analysis not hitherto appreciated.⁶⁶

There are limitations that come with relying so heavily on the CPA press to understand the nature of the party's thought and activity. In the period of intensive pro-Aboriginal campaigning in the early 1930s, the CPA had more than 3000 members and an authoritarian political culture that ensured dissenting opinions were rarely discussed in party meetings, let alone in published party organs controlled by the leadership.⁶⁷ The party press often provided evidence of contact with Aboriginal communities, but seldom offered information that would inform historians about the quality of these relationships.⁶⁸ A self-published, four volume autobiography by Charles Priest,⁶⁹ a CPA activist who led campaigning in Darwin from 1933, greatly enriched my analysis of the human relationships behind some CPA press headlines and rallies. This account also revealed important detail about the central role that Priest himself played in campaign developments in 1933-34, a role completely missed in existing history. Further research into a number of archives listed by Symons, Wells and Macintyre, particularly the personal papers of CPA members who were active in this period, may provide further information about the nature of relationships, or turn up evidence containing similarly transformative insights to those in Priest's autobiography.⁷⁰

In the central CPA press organs consulted, reports and analysis focused overwhelmingly on issues of Aboriginal oppression in north Australia and, at times, campaigning efforts in the south-east where party membership was strongest. There were references to stories from other parts of Australia scattered throughout, however, that suggest a focused study of local

⁶⁶ *The Proletarian Review* (1920), *The Australian Communist* (1920-1921), *The Communist: Official Organ of the Communist Party of Australia* (1921-1923), *Communist: A Journal for the Theory and Practice of Marxism* (1925-1926), *Workers' Weekly* (1923-1939), *Red Leader* (1931-1935), *Australian Labor Defender* (1933-1936), *War! What For?* (1934-1936), *World Survey* (1932-1934), *The Pan-Pacific Worker: Official Organ of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat* (1928-1932), *Working Woman* (1930-1936), *Maritime Worker* (1931-1934), *Labor Review* (1932-1934), *Proletariat* (1932-1936), *Northern Voice* (1933), *The Proletarian* (1934), *Communist Review* (1934-1939), *Workers' Voice* (1933-1939).

⁶⁷ Beris Penrose, "Hebert Moxon, a Victim of the 'Bolshevisation' of the Communist Party", *Labour History*, no. 70 (May 1996), 100-102.

⁶⁸ "Aborigines – U.W.M. Will Fight for Justice", *WW*, November 6, 1931, 4; R.W., "Aborigines and the Dole – Dubbo Unemployed", *WW*, July 1, 1932, 4.

⁶⁹ Charles Priest, *Nothing to Lose*, (Benella: Self-published, 1986); Charles Priest, *Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986), Charles Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986); Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986).

⁷⁰ Symons, Wells and Macintyre, *Communism in Australia: A Research Bibliography*, 1-41.

records of both the CPA and other working-class organisations, in places including North Queensland, Adelaide and Perth, may well uncover more untold stories of solidarity in this period.

Oral history interviews conducted by Heather Goodall in 1981 with Kylie Tennant and Jack Booth, both CPA members in the 1930s, were generously provided for my own consideration and contained important insights drawn upon in this thesis.⁷¹ Other film and radio documentaries, made when there was still living memory of events in the early 1930s, have also been cited in places.⁷²

Existing work utilising oral history to explore the relationship between Aboriginal struggle and the workers' movement, such as recent books by Kevin Cook, Goodall⁷³ and Anne Scrimgeour,⁷⁴ relied on interviews exploring lived experiences of these movements and many years of work building relationships with relevant people and communities. Unfortunately, there is no one alive today who participated in the struggles documented in this thesis. The documentary film *Dhakiyarr vs the King*, produced in 2004, demonstrates that memories of some of the events analysed in my thesis live on in some Aboriginal communities, even when direct participants have died.⁷⁵ Oral history research would provide more important Aboriginal community perspectives on major historical events discussed here, though this was beyond the scope of my study. The large volume of unexamined CPA archival material took priority over dedication of the time and resources needed to do meaningful oral history. I look forward, however, to presenting this material to friends and colleagues either from, or

⁷¹ Heather Goodall, "Interview with Jack Booth", May 21, 1981. Interview Transcript supplied by Heather Goodall; Heather Goodall, "Interview with Kylie Tennant", February 9, 1981. Interview Transcript supplied by Heather Goodall.

⁷² Alec Morgan, dir., *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1982: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), streaming video, 53 min. Kanopy; The Borroloola Community, Alessandro Cavadini, Carolyn Strachan, dirs., *Two Laws: An Aboriginal Struggle for Land and Law* (1981; Chicago: Facets DVD, 2007), DVD, 2 hours 10 mins; Tom Murray (Producer). "Tuckier (Dhakiyarr) v the King and Territory", 7 July 2013, ABC Radio National, Radio Documentary, archived audio, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/tuckier-vs.-the-king-and-territory/4760592>; Cathy Prior (producer), "Happy Valley Revisited", *Hindsight: ABC Radio National*, June 17, 2007 (first broadcast March 27, 2005), <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/happy-valley-revisited/3233138>.

⁷³ Kevin Cook and Heather Goodall, *Making Change Happen: Black and White Activists talk to Kevin Cook about Aboriginal, Union and Liberation Politics* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013).

⁷⁴ Anne Scrimgeour, *On Red Earth Walking: The Pilbara Aboriginal Strike, Western Australia 1946-49* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2020).

⁷⁵ Tom Murray, dir., *Dhakiyarr vs the King* (2004: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), streaming video, 57 mins, Kanopy.

with connections in communities discussed in this thesis, and exploring research into this period further.

During the life of this project, some relevant newspapers and periodicals were digitised and became available to search by key word, on the National Library site *Trove*,⁷⁶ including the major CPA paper, the *Workers' Weekly*, which came online in March of 2016.⁷⁷ My methodology involved reading all CPA publications in full and in hard copy, including the *Workers' Weekly*, to ensure the articles on Aboriginal issues were understood in context. However, the ability to word-search other newspapers from this time, including Labor Party-controlled⁷⁸ and smaller regional newspapers, allowed me to piece together other details around events and campaigns reported on by the CPA, or to check the accuracy of CPA reports, without needing to study entire newspaper archives.⁷⁹ Official archival sources, particularly from the Commonwealth Investigation Branch within the Attorney-General's Department, who oversaw political intelligence operations, provided crucial insights.⁸⁰ Such records included files with a large volume of documents circulated internally by the CPA and affiliated campaign groups like the International Labor Defence.⁸¹ Files from the Interior Ministry, responsible for Aboriginal affairs in Northern Australia through the campaigns of 1933-34, were also drawn on heavily for the later chapters. Two major deposits of protest

⁷⁶ "Digitised Newspapers and More", *Trove*, National Library of Australia, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>.

⁷⁷ Evan Smith, "Another Reason to Fund Trove: Communist Party of Australia material now digitised", *New Historical Express*, March 5, 2016, <https://hatfulofhistory.wordpress.com/2016/03/05/another-reason-to-fundtrove-communist-party-of-australia-material-now-digitised/>.

⁷⁸ *Labor Call* (1921-1939), *Labor Daily* (1922-1938)

⁷⁹ For example, the *Western Herald* (1931) reported on Herbert Moxon's visit to the town and the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (1932-33) printed proceedings from local meetings of the Unemployed Workers' Movement that showed a consistent commitment to Aboriginal rights. The *Northern Standard* (1921-1935), owned by the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU), is an invaluable source that has already been heavily drawn on to document the CPA's growth in Darwin from 1928.

⁸⁰ For example, files on Herbert Moxon and Darwin based CPA leader John Waldie. "Moxon, Herbert", Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department Minute Paper, May 1926, in ASIO File, "Moxon, Herbert John". NAA: A6119, 388; Commonwealth Investigation Branch File. "John Waldie 1932-1934". NAA: A6126, 110. Both files were digitised by the NAA on my request and are now available on their online archive.

⁸¹ For example, a number of "circulars" from the ILD leadership to various branches are available in Commonwealth Investigation Branch file, National Archives of Australia, "Communist party of Australia. Central Committee Reports", NAA: A8911, 41.

resolutions sent to John Perkins, Minister for the Interior during these campaigns, were particularly important.⁸²

A large deposit of CPA material held in Russia from the Comintern era was studied by Australia socialist historian Barbara Curthoys in 1990, who copied material and deposited it at the Mitchell Library in Sydney.⁸³ Curthoys' collection includes records of minutes from CPA conferences and leadership body meetings that, while already closely studied, contained information on the development of a pro-Aboriginal position not yet cited by other historians.⁸⁴ Similarly, minutes in this deposit from meetings between Australian communists and Comintern leaders in Russia in the 1920s have yielded fresh insights during my research, adding to existing analyses by a number of historians.⁸⁵ For example, this thesis provides the first analysis by any historian of an important contribution by Nikolai Bukharin, General Secretary of the Comintern, to the debate about the nature of the White Australia policy and Australian imperialism in 1927.⁸⁶

Examining the neglected question of the CPA's position on Aboriginal rights provides new texture to well-worn debates in Australian labour history about the impact of the CPA on the Australian left, particularly on the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and trade unions. One development that looms large in Australian labour history in this period is the Comintern's

⁸² Caledon Bay Expedition – Protests, Department of the Interior File, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; Sentence imposed on Fitzmaurice River Aboriginals for murder of two white men - Koch and Arinsky. Protest re, Department of the Interior File, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

⁸³ Barbara Curthoys, "The Comintern, the CPA, and the Impact of Harry Wicks", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 1, vol. 39 (April 1993), 1; David Lovell and Kevin Windle (eds), *Our Unswerving Loyalty* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), 18-19.

⁸⁴ For example, verbatim minutes from a CPA Central Committee meeting that moved to expel Herbert Moxon in early 1932, were studied by Beris Penrose. Penrose did not comment, however, on a number of illuminating references to Moxon's 1931 Aboriginal rights program. Beris Penrose, "Hebert Moxon, a Victim of the 'Bolshevisation' of the Communist Party", *Labour History*, no. 70 (May 1996); Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, August 29, 1931, Sydney, in Comintern Records, Mitchell Library, NSW, FM4-10419; "Closed Session of the Central Committee Plenum", January 2, 1932, in Misc. Security Files Inherited by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Communist Party – NSW – Discipline, NAA: A6335, 31. I also provide an original analysis of meetings between CPA and Comintern leaders in Moscow already discussed by others such as

⁸⁵ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 90-92; Oleksa Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia on Questions of Imperialism, Nationality and Race, 1919-1943" (PhD diss., McMaster University, 2017), 229-230.

⁸⁶ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 14, 1927, Comintern Records, Mitchell Library, NSW 495-3-40, FM4-10415B. Bukharin's comments were recorded in German and translated for analysis at my request by Australian socialist historian Kate Davidson.

“Third Period” policy, first proclaimed in 1928, which led to characterisation of the reformist workers’ parties such as the ALP as “social fascist”.⁸⁷ My study builds on insights from socialist historians who have argued that from 1928, Comintern policy was determined primarily by the needs of the Stalinist bureaucracy that consolidated power in Russia, rather than by the needs of the global revolutionary struggle.⁸⁸ The twists and turns of Comintern policy emanating from Moscow produced contradictory outcomes on the ground in Australia. On the one hand, the breakdown of relationships between CPA and ALP activists led communists to more confidently denounce Australian racism. On the other, it was not until a softening of anti-Labor rhetoric by the CPA in 1933, that pro-Aboriginal campaign initiatives with support across the trade union movement became possible. While numerous historians have argued that the CPA emerged as a serious force within the trade union movement in Australia from late in 1934,⁸⁹ this thesis is the first to identify the party’s leadership role in pro-Aboriginal struggles as an important factor in this new success.

While advancing the development of Australian labour history and Aboriginal history, this study also contributes to an emerging body of scholarship examining the impact of anti-colonial Marxism on struggles across the world prior to WWII. A new volume of essays co-edited by Drachewych, *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Questions*, is one manifestation of this trend.⁹⁰ Another is the publication of two separate edited collections by Indian Marxist historian Vijay Prashad, one containing essays on the Comintern’s League Against Imperialism and the early development of Communism in a number of colonised countries,⁹¹ and other containing anti-colonial documents written by Comintern leaders.⁹² As Drachewych argues, “the efforts of

⁸⁷ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 178-188; Robin Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955*, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1975), 29-30.

⁸⁸ Tom O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism* (Sydney: Stained Wattle Press, 1985), 35-38; Beris Penrose, “Herbert Moxon, a Victim of the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the Communist Party”, *Labour History*, no. 70 (May, 1996), 94.

⁸⁹ Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists*, 70-78; O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 38-41.

⁹⁰ Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (eds.), *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Questions*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019).

⁹¹ Vijay Prashad, ed., *Communist Histories* (Delhi: LeftWord, 2016).

⁹² John Riddell, Vijay Prashad, Nazeef Mollah (eds.) *Liberate the Colonies! Communism and Colonial Freedom 1917-1924*, (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2019).

international communism to fight racial inequality or support colonial liberation are no longer topics on the periphery”.⁹³

The last decade has also seen renewed academic interest in the foundational anti-colonial thought of Marx and Engels that decisively informed the Comintern’s perspective.⁹⁴ Italian historian and political economist Lucia Pradella situates this turn to foundational communist thought in the “crisis of neo-liberal doctrine” that followed the Global Financial Crisis in 2008.⁹⁵ The renewed interest in Marxism has also been fuelled by movements in response to “neo-colonial wars” and attacks on the gains of twentieth century anti-colonial movements,⁹⁶ along with mass anti-racist campaigns like “Black Lives Matter” in the United States.⁹⁷ Across North America, this period has seen a resurgence of Indigenous resistance, with mass campaigns such as Idle No More from 2012⁹⁸ and the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline from 2016,⁹⁹ informing a renewed engagement with Marxism by Indigenous scholars. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz,¹⁰⁰ Dene scholar and activist, Glen Coulthard,¹⁰¹ and Kul Wicasa historian and socialist organiser, Nick Estes,¹⁰² while focused on North American history, have all drawn on Marxism to theorise Indigenous oppression and resistance in terms relevant for the Anglo settler-colonial societies of the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.¹⁰³ These developments in Indigenous scholarship in North

⁹³ Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay, “Introduction”, in Drachewych and McKay (eds.), *Left Transnationalism*, 32.

⁹⁴ The most significant studies are Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*; Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (London: Saqi, 2013). Kindle Edition; Lucilla Pradella, *Globalization and the Critique of Political Economy: New Insights from Marx’s Writings* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

⁹⁵ Pradella, *Globalization*, 2.

⁹⁶ Pradella, *Globalization*, 2-3.

⁹⁷ For example, socialist historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has returned to Marx’s writings to emphasise the enduring importance of Marx’s revolutionary theory for the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, (Haymarket Books: Chicago, 2016), 205-209.

⁹⁸ Glen Coulthard, “Idle No More in Historical Context”, in The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, eds., *The Winter We Danced*. (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2014), 32-36.

⁹⁹ Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, eds., *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

¹⁰¹ Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014).

¹⁰² Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, (London: Verso, 2019).

¹⁰³ Insights about the particularly of Anglo settler-colonialism have often been developed in conversation with scholars based in Australia. Particularly influential has been the thought of Geonpul scholar, Aileen Morton-Robinson. See for example, Nick Estes, “Anti-Indian Common Sense: Border Town Violence and Resistance in Mni Luzahen”, in Heather Dorries, Robert Henry, David Hugill,

America have taken discussion beyond quite an acrimonious debate that began in the 1980s, when key Indigenous leaders and scholars strongly rejected the idea that Marxism could inform their struggles.¹⁰⁴ Some of this hostility came in response to real anti-Indigenous racism expressed by crude, deterministic Marxists, along with the oppression and environmental destruction practised by Stalinist regimes in the twentieth century.¹⁰⁵ This led to what Coulthard called a “premature rejection” of Marx’s “important critique of capitalist exploitation and his extensive writings on the entangled relationship between capitalism and colonialism”.¹⁰⁶ Estes, Coulthard and Dunbar-Ortiz all locate the specifics of settler-colonial oppression within the global system of imperialism,¹⁰⁷ ultimately structured by the logic of capital accumulation. Coulthard’s militant intellectual position, “for Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die”,¹⁰⁸ also works to indicate the key alliances open to Indigenous people struggling for liberation, namely with anti-imperialist struggles, the resistance of other oppressed peoples and the key transformative agency of the global working class.¹⁰⁹

While he does not engage with Marxism, Worimi historian John Maynard has written extensively on the AAPA’s philosophy and activities in NSW in the 1920s in ways that decisively situate the Aboriginal struggle within global anti-colonial and anti-racist movements, particularly Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association

Tyler McCreary and Julie Tomiak (eds.), *Settler City Limits: Indigenous Resurgence and Colonial Violence in the Urban Prairie West*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019), 50; Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, “Introduction”, in Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (eds.), *Theorising Native Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 50.

¹⁰⁴ Ward Churchill, ed., *Marxism and Native Americans* (Boston: South End Press, 1983) provides a good introduction to this debate.

¹⁰⁵ David Bedford and Daniel Irving, *The Tragedy of Progress: Marxism, Modernity and the Aboriginal Question* (Black Point: Fernwood, 2003), 66-76.

¹⁰⁶ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz emphasises the continuity between “Indian Wars” and US Army operations overseas in Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples’ History*, 118-121, 162-167, 192-195, 219-222; Nick Estes discusses his initial radicalisation participating the movements against the Iraq War and the importance of global anti-imperialist solidarity in “‘The History of Indigenous People is of Anti-Capitalist Resistance’: An Interview with Nick Estes”, *Regeneration Magazine*, September 6, 2019, <https://regenerationmag.org/our-history-is-the-future-interview-with-nick-estes/>.

¹⁰⁸ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 173.

¹⁰⁹ In a critical review of Coulthard, Dunbar-Ortiz argues for closer attention to application of Lenin’s theses on the right of oppressed nations to self-determination to the Indigenous situation in North America to explore, “the dialectic of the workers or masses of citizens in the colonial state and their potential for revolution and the Indigenous peoples and other nationalities that are colonised by that state”. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “The Relationship between Marxism and Indigenous Struggles and the Implications of the Theoretical Framework for International Indigenous Struggles”, *Historical Materialism*, 23 No. 3 (2016), 82.

(UNIA) that inspired and directly collaborated with Aboriginal people in NSW.¹¹⁰ Leading AAPA members were industrial workers and the waterfront in Sydney in particular became a key site of contact with global struggles.¹¹¹ This thesis argues that the initiative of the AAPA provided Moxon with a living example of a struggle for self-determination that allowed him to theorise potential relationships of solidarity with the working-class movement within a Marxist anti-colonial framework.

Protest and history

The impetus for this research project has come from my own engagement, as both a socialist activist and an academic researcher, in struggles for Aboriginal liberation. In the foreword to the 1988 re-issuing of their path-breaking *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland* (first published in 1975), Raymond Evans and Kay Saunders reflected on their early 1970s' research in terms that speak to my own experience:

Our concerns as historians were formed as much by our social experiences and political commitments as by the documents we researched. At a distance, it is easier now to see this integration of our seemingly compartmentalized lives. It was not only those days spent diligently working at the Queensland State Archives or the Fryer Memorial Library which shaped our intellectual perceptions. There were also other, angrier days spent protesting... as well as those measureless times of debate on human liberation.¹¹²

In 2007, working as a research assistant and casual tutor, I became involved in a protest campaign against the Northern Territory Intervention into Aboriginal communities. The continuing relationship between an aggressive Australian imperialism and Aboriginal oppression was palpable at this time. In June 2007, I was demonstrating in Rockhampton against joint military training exercises involving US and Australian forces when a friend sent me a text message: "John Howard is sending troops into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory". These troops accompanied new government administrators into

¹¹⁰ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 18-35.

¹¹¹ John Maynard, "'The men only worked when necessary, we called no man master, and we had no King'", *Queensland Journal of Labour History*, 26 (March 2018), 38, 42-44.

¹¹² Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993), xiii.

communities as the Commonwealth government suspended the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975) to impose explicitly racist “Protection” era style controls over Aboriginal life.¹¹³ Over the years that followed I was also intensely involved in campaigns against the continuing forced removal of Aboriginal children by Child Protection agencies, mass incarceration and deaths in custody and struggles for land justice.

A major component of my activism, as a non-Indigenous socialist involved in Aboriginal rights campaigns, has involved building support for these struggles in the trade union movement. Through all of these years, I have also been on the editorial committee of *Solidarity*, a socialist publication produced by an organisation of the same name.¹¹⁴ While *Solidarity* is a very different organisation from the CPA, and operating in a very different time, these experiences have given me insights into the relationship between social struggles and socialist publications that have been useful throughout the course of this research.

Since 2008 I have been privileged to work as part of an Aboriginal-controlled research unit, Jumbunna, at the University of Technology Sydney, alongside world-leading Indigenous scholars such as Larissa Behrendt and Jason De Santolo, whose work is grounded in a commitment to self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty.¹¹⁵ Academic research has been important for the development of my thinking about the relationship between Aboriginal oppression and the operations of Australian capitalism.¹¹⁶ However, more influential has been the conversations and debates with countless participants in these campaigns for change, from Australia and across the world, including my colleagues at Jumbunna. While analysis of the relationship between Marxism and Indigenous struggle that features in some recent North American scholarship has not yet been seriously addressed in the Australian academy, such discussions are very much alive in campaigns for Aboriginal rights.

¹¹³ My analysis of the impact of the Intervention and an account of early campaign activity is in Padraic Gibson, “Return to the Ration Days: Northern Territory Intervention – Grass-roots Experience and Resistance”, *Nginya: Talk the Law*, 3 (2012), 58-107.

¹¹⁴ *Solidarity* (2008-2020), www.solidarity.net.au

¹¹⁵ See for example, Larissa Behrendt, “Indigenous Storytelling: Decolonizing Institutions and Assertive Self-Determination – Implications for Legal Practice”, in Jo-ann Archibald Q’um Q’um Xiiem, Jenny Lee-Morgan and Jason De Santolo (eds), *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, (London: Zed Books, 2019), 175-186.

¹¹⁶ See for example Padraic Gibson, “Imperialism, ANZAC nationalism and the Aboriginal experience of warfare”, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal*, 6 No. 3 (2014), 63-82; Padraic Gibson, “Inte(rve)ntion to Destroy”, *Arena*, 118 (2012), 9-12.

I first learnt about the CPA's 1931 program at a socialist conference more than a decade ago¹¹⁷ and was always struck by the way in which the analysis still resonated in the present day, particularly in the wake of the NT Intervention. My interest in studying this period in Aboriginal history was further heightened by reading John Maynard's ground-breaking work on the AAPA, which demonstrated the central role of Aboriginal trade unionists in founding and leading the organisation.¹¹⁸ I was eager to explore potential connections between the AAPA and the radical workers' movement. In the early stages of this project it became clear, however, that there was no evidence of active support for the AAPA from non-Aboriginal trade unionists. This failure of solidarity was in fact criticised by Moxon in his 1931 writings.¹¹⁹ A strong focus of this thesis is, therefore, on the various shortcomings of communist thought and practice, with careful attention to the factors that worked to improve the quality of the CPA's analysis. While Marxist anti-colonial theory can play a crucial role in charting strategies for Indigenous liberation, drawing these charts requires insights grounded in real experiences of oppression and struggle.

Organisation of the thesis

Chapter One provides a detailed analysis of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' writings on race and colonialism. I introduce Marx's theory of the relationship between anti-colonial revolt and proletarian revolution and show how his calls for workers to fight against anti-Black racism and colonial domination had an impact on CPA activists who took the party's first pro-Aboriginal initiatives. In a novel reading of Marx's *Capital* and his writings on the American Civil War, I also demonstrate that the early socialist movement largely accepted dominant ideas that rendered Indigenous people in Anglosphere settler-colonies invisible, or destined to disappear. Engels' classic work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* contained explicit anti-Aboriginal racism and I explore the relationship between Engels' writings on Aboriginal people and the more dynamic and sympathetic account found in Marx's unpublished notebooks from the final years of his life. While the focus of this chapter sets it apart from the thesis as a whole in many ways, this research has been crucial

¹¹⁷ "Race and Class: The Communist Party and the fight for Aboriginal rights", conference session at Turning up the Heat: Ideas for a World in Crisis Conference, Saturday September 13, 2008, Sydney University Village, Newtown.

¹¹⁸ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 39, 133.

¹¹⁹ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

for understanding the thought and practice of the CPA and contributes to a better understanding of anti-colonial Marxism. **Chapter Two** explores the tension between the CPA's ostensible commitment to the revolutionary anti-colonial politics of the Comintern and the reproduction in the party press, sporadically through much of the 1920s, of racist ideas about Aboriginal then hegemonic in Australian society. I explore the failure of the CPA to support the AAPA, despite a key membership base of both organisations amongst industrial workers in Sydney, and also examine the impact of Engels' racist anthropology on early CPA intellectuals who wrote about Aboriginal people. This chapter introduces debates about the relationship between Australian capitalism and the global imperialist system taking place within the CPA and the Comintern in this period, and the disorientation caused by a belief that Australian settler-society was oppressed by Great Britain.

Chapter Three argues that there were two crucial dynamics driving a major shift in the CPA's perspective which led to the first active party efforts in support of Aboriginal rights from 1928. Firstly, in dialogue with Comintern leaders, the CPA began to recognise that Australia was an imperialist power in its own right, creating an obligation on Australian communists to support colonised people oppressed by the Australian bourgeoisie. While this insight first crystallised in relation to armed Indigenous resistance against Australian forces in New Guinea and Malaita in the Solomon Islands, it was soon applied to Aboriginal people. Secondly, a general CPA position that all workers should be allowed to join unions, regardless of race or nationality, was applied in relation to Aboriginal people for the first time in 1928 in Darwin, a position that precipitated the creation of a new CPA branch in the tropical town.

Chapter Four provides a detailed analysis of the depth and sophistication of the 1931 CPA program for Aboriginal rights, written by Moxon. This program and associated writings were based on many of the insights gained through the early experience of pro-Aboriginal campaigning in Darwin, and also from new connections with Aboriginal people forged on the east coast through the hardships of the Depression. While there is no evidence of direct connection with AAPA activists, and despite the organisation having been effectively smashed two years previously, I argue that the influence of the AAPA's struggle in the 1920s on the CPA program was profound. **Chapter Five** discusses the failure of Moxon's writings to, initially, lead to a substantial change in CPA practice in relation to Aboriginal people. Moxon was expelled from the party in 1932 and the CPA leadership ignored continuing

initiatives by rank-and-file members of the unemployed movement to fight for Aboriginal rights. I argue that a commitment to the Comintern “Third Period” policy contributed to both Moxon’s expulsion and this failure. The chapter also argues that Black American communists, through their leadership of a successful global campaign to free the “Scottsboro Boys” – nine Black youths sentenced to death in Alabama – had an important impact on the practice of the CPA, laying groundwork for the pro-Aboriginal campaigning that started in August 1933.

Chapters Six, Seven and Eight document the role of communists and the broader working-class movement in the major campaigns for freedom for Aboriginal people in North Australia that took place from August 1933 to November 1934. I look at the key role of communists in Darwin, who had connections with Aboriginal workers in the town and Aboriginal people still living on their lands, in agitating for national mobilisation. The relationship between “imperial humanitarian”¹²⁰ organisations lobbying for change, and the revolutionary anti-imperialism of communists and other radical workers, is analysed here. I give close attention to successful CPA efforts to bring left-wing Labor party activists into campaign activity. Throughout this activity, unfortunately, the CPA missed opportunities to link the struggles against Aboriginal oppression in North Australia with those continuing efforts by unemployed activists and others in the labour movement to respond to intensifying Aboriginal oppression in the south-east. However, looking in succession at the campaign to stop the threatened massacre in Arnhem Land in August-September 1933, then to free “Fitzmaurice River natives” from May to July 1934, and finally the successful campaign to free Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda from prison in Darwin from August to November 1934, these chapters argue that working-class action was crucial in shifting government policy and helped to cement Aboriginal rights as a feature of left-wing working-class politics.

Anti-colonial Marxism contends that the liberation of Indigenous peoples, who have suffered genocide and colonial domination as capitalism expanded across their lands, is intimately bound up with the liberation of workers right across the world exploited by the capitalist class. There is nothing automatic, however, about non-Aboriginal working-class militants and Aboriginal community activists recognising the potential connection between their struggles.

¹²⁰ This term was coined by Alison Holland to refer to liberal humanitarians committed to paternalistic responsibility for “subject races”, Alison Holland, *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade for Aboriginal Rights*, (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2015), Kindle edition, 244.

Indeed, as will be explained throughout my study, the ruling classes have worked hard throughout history to keep oppressed people divided. This thesis will demonstrate, however, that profound connections and expressions of solidarity are very possible, and provide a powerful lever for change. This thesis has been written to deepen these connections and contribute to this joint struggle for human liberation.

Chapter One

Race, empire and settler-colonialism in the writings of Marx and Engels

In the pages of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) press, no historical figure was held in greater esteem than Karl Marx: “the greatest revolutionist, genius, teacher and leader of the world proletariat in its struggle for the overthrow of capitalism”.¹ The CPA regularly promoted the major published works of Marx and his “great co-worker” Frederick Engels.² Their works were also quoted or extracted to help illustrate the communist position on topics varying from family life under capitalism to the global financial system.³

Over the course of forty years of joint work as revolutionaries, from 1843 until Marx’s death in 1883, Marx and Engels had developed powerful insights into the way that the emergence and continuing operations of global capitalism relied on racist ideology and brutal forms of colonial domination.⁴ This theory crystalised the most radical insights borne of massive anti-racist and anti-imperialist campaigns by the workers’ movement in Europe and the United States, in which Marx and Engels played a leading role, particularly struggles against British rule in Ireland,⁵ and for the liberation of enslaved peoples in the US South.⁶ These ideas had a profound impact on the foundational principles of the Communist International (Comintern) that formed in the wake of the Russian Revolution in 1917. The CPA’s own anti-racism and anti-colonial thought and practice was consistently grounded in Marx’s insights. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, this included the path-breaking pro-Aboriginal campaign initiatives of Charles Priest and Herbert Moxon in the early 1930s (campaigns discussed in detail in Chapters Four – Eight).

Despite their emergence as fierce critics of empire, early writings from Marx and Engels displayed an attitude that the expansion of European domination across the world was both inevitable and

¹ “Commemorate the Death of Marx by Studying Marxism,” WW, March 10, 1933, 2.

² J.S. Garden, “United Front,” WW, May 1, 1925, 1; “Books at Andrade’s,” *The Proletarian*, October 7, 1921; “Latest Literature,” WW, June 13, 1924, 4; “What to Read,” WW, April 1, 1927, 3; “Communist Bookstall,” WW, August 26, 1932, 2.

³ “Karl Marx on the Family,” WW, December 9, 1932, 2; L.S., “Credits and Crisis,” WW, March 3, 1933, 2.

⁴ Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (United States of America: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx and Engels on Ireland* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971).

⁶ Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (Verso: London, 2011).

historically progressive. From the mid-1850s they clearly broke with these ideas in relation to many regions of the colonised world. The published work of both revolutionaries, however, retained an uncritical attitude to the process of settler-colonial expansion across North America by the USA and across Australia by the British. This attitude reflected a real weakness in the radical workers' movement they were leading. A feature of socialist politics in the USA through these decades was participation in campaigns demanding the federal government release "public lands" in the west, land owned by Indigenous peoples, as small holdings for settler workers.⁷ This entangled the workers' movement, including Marx and Engels, in the ideology of *terra nullius*.⁸ Their writings cast Indigenous lands as "virgin soils",⁹ "as good as uninhabited",¹⁰ vacant lands awaiting settlement. Engels' major work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, first published in 1884 just after Marx's death, contained explicit anti-Aboriginal racism, arguing "savage" peoples were mentally inferior and destined to disappear.¹¹

This contradiction within the writings of Marx and Engels, between opposition to colonialism in general and support for settler-colonialism in particular, also animated the development of the CPA's thought through the period under study in this thesis. As Chapter Two will argue, an attitude that Australia was *terra nullius* and that Aboriginal people were inferior was present in the CPA press for much of the 1920s. From the late 1920s, however, the CPA developed a practice of solidarity with Aboriginal people through the application of principles first developed by Marx for other colonial contexts.

Marx and Engels' ideas about race, empire, settler-colonialism and Indigenous peoples developed over three distinct periods in their revolutionary careers, each of which included the production of major works that leading CPA cadre were expected to study, namely *The Communist Manifesto* published in 1848,¹² *Capital Volume 1* in 1867¹³ and Engels' *Origin* in 1884. This chapter is structured by different sections examining each work in its political context. Exploring the

⁷ Karl Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer: Pioneer of American Socialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 78-84.

⁸ The importance of *terra nullius* as a pattern of thought relied upon by colonists to justify their political order in North America and Australia is comprehensively explored by Carole Pateman, "The settler contract," in Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills, *Contract and Domination*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 35-78.

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, 1867, MECW 35, 751.

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "from Review: January-February 1850," in Nelly Rumyantseva, ed., *Marx and Engels on the United States*, (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1979), 55.

¹¹ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1978), 51-52.

¹² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 1848, MECW 6, 477-519.

¹³ Marx, *Capital*.

development of Marx and Engels' thought in detail provides an important introduction to key theoretical principles that inform this thesis, particularly the basis on which workers in imperialist countries such as Australia can build relationships of solidarity with colonised peoples. Each section also includes some initial evidence and discussion about the availability and influence of these works on the CPA and its activity in the 1920s and 30s. More substantial proof of the impact of Marx and Engels' thought on the Australian party, however, is provided in ensuing chapters, where the CPA's Marxist anti-colonial thought and practice is assessed in detail.

Internationalism, imperialism and the *Communist Manifesto*

No other text enjoyed the same consistent promotion in the CPA press as the *Communist Manifesto*, "the first and greatest statement of the position of Communism"¹⁴ that "laid down the fundamental principles of the working-class movement".¹⁵ There were bans enforced on the importation of Marxist literature by Australian Customs through the 1920s, including on the *Manifesto*. Historian Stuart Macintyre argued that this led to "a distinct dearth" in the availability of Marxist texts,¹⁶ though the *Manifesto* was printed locally for continued distribution.¹⁷ It was used as the premier textbook in CPA study classes for new members.¹⁸

The stirring internationalism of the *Manifesto* helped to inspire the early anti-racist and anti-imperialist agitation of the CPA. The *Manifesto*'s rallying cry "workers of the world unite!" was quoted through the 1920s as a challenge to the racism, nationalism and militarism of Australia's ruling class and also the racial exclusion practised by trade unions.¹⁹ In 1930, this slogan concluded one of the first CPA articles calling for active efforts to lift racist membership bans and recruit Aboriginal people into the North Australian Workers' Union (discussed in Chapter Three).²⁰

When Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto* in late 1847 as a program for the Communist League in Germany, however, they had not yet developed a sophisticated analysis of either racism or

¹⁴ "Communism," WW, April 21, 1926, 4;

¹⁵ "Great Opportunity," WW, February 24, 1933, 4; Charles Priest, "What is the Communist Party?" *The Proletarian*, June 27, 1934, 2.

¹⁶ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 71.

¹⁷ Roger Douglas, "Saving Australia from Sedition: Customs, The Attorney-General's Department and the Administration of Peacetime Political Censorship," *Federal Law Review* 30, no. 1 (2002): 153-154

¹⁸ "Party Training," WW, February 25, 1927, 2; "Melbourne School of Science," WW, June 30, 1933, 2.

¹⁹ "Communism Means World Comradeship," WW, September 12, 1924, 3; A Workers Correspondent, "Don't Let National Sectarianism Disorganise Workers," WW, September 28, 1928, 3; Essess, "The Chinese Revolution," WW, September 28, 1928, 4; "Anti-Imperialist War Campaign," WW, August 9, 1929. "Wholesale Slaughter," *Northern Voice*, March 29, 1933, 2.

²⁰ "Aboriginals – Ruthlessly Exploited," WW, May 16, 1930, 5.

imperialism. Indeed, their writings from this period accepted that European imperialist expansion across the world was inevitable and ultimately progressive.²¹ In 1848, Engels also welcomed a French army victory in Algeria as a “fortunate fact for the progress of civilisation”, arguing the “modern bourgeois” was “preferable to... the barbarian state of society”.²² This was a period in which Marx and Engels were both involved in radical democratic struggles on the European continent against absolutist and feudal forms of political rule, in which the bourgeoisie were viewed as playing a potential, if temporary, revolutionary role.²³

In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels praised the incredible dynamism of capitalism, discussed as a harbinger of progress in both the European and non-European worlds.²⁴ In the European context, however, they presented this progress as a deeply contradictory phenomenon, juxtaposed to the degradation and alienation experienced by the proletariat.²⁵ No such qualifications occurred in the brief passages that discuss the colonised world. As Marxist historian and sociologist Kevin Anderson argued, Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto* “seem to view Western colonial incursions into Asia... as on the whole a progressive and beneficial undermining of Oriental ‘barbarism’”.²⁶

Critiques of Marxism that became dominant in the academy and influential in social movements from the early 1980s often focused in on these characteristics of early Marxist writing.²⁷ Palestinian scholar Edward Said, for example, dismissed Marx as an “Orientalist” thinker. He cited Marx’s early writings which included passages that homogenised the “barbaric” non-European world and demonstrated a belief in the “historical necessity” of imperialist expansion for advancing the development of culture and productive forces.²⁸ Such an attitude certainly informed the pro-imperialist approach of many self-identified Marxists²⁹ who led the Second International that united the European workers movement from 1889 until 1914, when the organisation collapsed after key constituent parties supported their governments entering WWI (discussed further in Chapter

²¹ Anderson, *Marx*, 10-17.

²² Frederick Engels, “Extraordinary Revelations. — Abd-El-Kader. — Guizot’s Foreign Policy,” January 22, 1848, MECW 6, 471.

²³ Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Haymarket: Chicago, 2012), 166.

²⁴ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” 485-489.

²⁵ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” 490-492.

²⁶ Kevin Anderson, “Not Just Capital and Class: Marx on Non-Western Societies, Nationalism and Ethnicity.” *Socialism and Democracy* 24, no. 10 (December 2010): 8.

²⁷ Anderson, “Not Just Capital and Class,” 8-9; Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (London: Saqi, 2013), location 1268-1768. Kindle Edition.

²⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books: London, 1987), 153-154.

²⁹ Richard B. Day and Daniel Gado, *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I* (Brill: Leiden, 2012), 4-5, 11-3.

Two).³⁰ Passages from the *Manifesto*, and other selective quotations from Marx were turned into what Marx biographer Marcello Musto has called: “a schematic doctrine, an elementary evolutionist interpretation soaked in economic determinism... a naïve belief in the automatic forward march of history”.³¹

In relation to Anglosphere settler colonies such as the United States and Australia, as will be discussed below, none of the published works of Marx or Engels ever moved beyond the idea that Indigenous peoples were doomed to extinction in the face of a superior European civilisation. But in general terms, their analysis of race and empire developed in profound ways from the 1850s through to Marx’s death in 1883. This development came in response to resistance movements of colonised people around the world.³² Marx always insisted that his writings should not be turned into a dogma and that historical materialism was a method for understanding the world through engaging with revolutionary struggle, with a need for constant theoretical innovation informed by this struggle.³³

In the wake of the revolutionary movement of 1848 and the bloody suppression of militant workers across Europe, Marx was forced to flee the continent and take up residence in London.³⁴ Marx and Engels always maintained a belief that the massive, continuing development of productive capacity generated by the growth of industrial capitalism in Western Europe provided a crucial basis for the possibility of an interconnected, global socialist society.³⁵ However, following the “treachery” of the liberal bourgeoisie,³⁶ who sided with absolutist forces to crush workers’ uprisings in 1848, they abandoned the idea that the bourgeoisie in Europe would lead militant democratic struggle.³⁷ This coincided with the beginning of a shift in Marx’s perspective away from any conception that the expansion of bourgeois domination across the world was progressive or inevitable.

In London, amongst a Chartist movement with some figures hostile to the British Empire, Marx’s

³⁰ Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1985), 15.

³¹ Marcello Musto, *Marx for Today* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 1.

³² Anderson, *Marx*, 2-3.

³³ Alex Callinicos, *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* (London: Bookmarks, 2012), 77-80.

³⁴ Anderson, *Marx*, 1.

³⁵ This point was still being hammered home in their final published work in 1882, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*,” MECW 24, 425-426.

³⁶ Marx and Engels, “Address of the Central Authority to the League: March 1850, MECW 10, 279

³⁷ Emanuele Saccarelli, “The Permanent Revolution in and around the *Manifesto*,” in Terrell Carver and James Farr, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to ‘The Communist Manifesto’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 109-111.

political sympathies shifted decisively towards anti-colonial struggles.³⁸ In the early 1850s Marx first wrote in support of Indian resistance to the British³⁹ and in 1857 he wrote in more profoundly anti-colonial terms response to the mutiny in the Indian army known as the “Sepoy uprising”.⁴⁰ Marx and Engels were both thrilled to recognise a new social force confronting the power of Britain. In the midst of the uprising, Marx wrote to Engels that, “India is now our best ally”.⁴¹ They both displayed a similar sympathy for rebellions in China and Algeria, while consistently condemning the violence and destruction of imperialist armies.⁴²

The First International and *Capital*

Marx and Engels’ thought on colonialism and racism took a leap forward with the founding of the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA or First International) in London in 1864.⁴³ The IWMA united militant workers’ organisations from across Europe and North America, welcomed members “without regard to color, creed, or nationality” and placed a clear emphasis on international solidarity.⁴⁴

A crucial precursor to the formation of the IWMA was a massive campaign, co-ordinated by English labour movement leaders opposed to the enslavement of Black people, to stop the mobilisation of British naval power on the side of the southern Confederacy in the US Civil War.⁴⁵ In contrast to the sole concern with the resistance of European workers to capitalism that characterised the *Manifesto*, Marx described the rebellions against slavery that precipitated the Civil War as “the most momentous thing happening in the world today”.⁴⁶ The Civil War began in 1861 and was finally ended in 1865 by what WEB Du Bois described as a “general strike of slaves”, masses of Black people absconding from plantations and moving as a tide behind and amongst the lines of the Union army.⁴⁷ This revolt against slavery deeply radicalised other social struggles.⁴⁸ At

³⁸ Thierry Drapeau, “The Roots of Karl Marx’s Anti-colonialism,” *Jacobin*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/01/karl-marx-anti-colonialism-ernest-jones>.

³⁹ Lucia Pradella, *Globilisation and the Critique of Political Economy: New insights from Marx’s writings* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 122.

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Marx*, 41.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels in Manchester. [London,] 26 November 1869,” MECW 43, 389.

⁴² Anderson, *Marx*, 32-33, 254.

⁴³ Marcello Musto, *Workers Unite! The International 150 years later* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 7-8.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, “Provisional Rules of the Association,” 1864. MEWC 20, 14-16.

⁴⁵ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom* (Twayne Publishers: New York, 1964), 83; Karl Marx, “English Public Opinion,” MECW 19, 137-142.

⁴⁶ Anderson, “Not Just Capital and Class”.

⁴⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 55-83.

⁴⁸ David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (London: Verso, 2014), 106.

the conclusion of the Civil War, mass campaigning for an eight-hour day swept across the United States. These developments demonstrated clearly to Marx the explosive potential of anti-racist struggles for advancing working-class consciousness and organisation. In 1864, Marx drafted a letter on behalf of the IWMA congratulating Abraham Lincoln on his re-election as President of the USA. Here Marx outlined the importance of the anti-slavery struggle to the labour movement: “while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, [workingmen] boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned labourer to sell himself and choose his master, they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor”.⁴⁹

Through the period of the US Civil War, Marx played a central role as a revolutionary leader of the IWMA and was working hard on *Capital Volume I*, his masterwork of political economy (first printed in 1867). Marx’s insight into the way that the anti-racist revolt through the Civil War strengthened the trans-Atlantic class struggle was outlined in the preface to the first edition of *Capital* and profoundly influenced Chapter Ten, on “The Working Day”:

In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.⁵⁰

Capital was overwhelmingly concerned with the underlying dynamics of capital accumulation through the exploitation of wage-labour, illustrated through analysis of the operations of industrial capitalism in England. However, Marx “examined British capitalism as a world-polarising and ever-expanding system” and there are powerful passages throughout *Capital* which demonstrate the sophistication that now informed his political commitment to anti-colonial struggle.⁵¹ This is particularly the case in the final section, comprising Chapters 26 to 33. This section, titled “Primitive Accumulation”, provides a vivid history of the destruction of communal forms of production and land ownership that were a necessary feature of establishing capitalist social relations, both in Europe and across the world.⁵² The first five chapters⁵³ of this section detail how peasants were expelled from the land and how the rising capitalist class gained control over the state in Britain, using this power to brutally enforce a new regime of wage labour.⁵⁴ From Chapter

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, “To Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America,” 1864, MECW 20, 19-22.

⁵⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 303-307.

⁵¹ Pradella, “Imperialism,” 119.

⁵² Marx, *Capital*, 704-764.

⁵³ Marx, *Capital*, 704-737.

⁵⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 723-730.

31, Marx concentrated on imperialism as a central component of primitive accumulation.⁵⁵ He described merciless dispossession and domination at the hands of European forces and the crucial role of colonised lands and labour in the global system of capital accumulation: “Capital comes [into the world] dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt”.⁵⁶

Capital was promoted and sold by the CPA throughout the 1920s and 30s⁵⁷ and was regularly quoted and extracted in the party press,⁵⁸ including some passages condemning anti-Black racism and the violence of colonisation.⁵⁹ Given the dense nature of the text and the high degree of intellectual commitment required to work through it, the book would have been read by a smaller number of members than the *Manifesto*. There were not the same advertisements in the *Workers’ Weekly* for study groups on *Capital*. However, *Capital* certainly had an impact in shaping the thought and action of key party leaders discussed in this thesis. This influence is evident in the writing of Priest, who led the CPA’s campaigning on Aboriginal rights in 1933-34. As editor of the CPA’s Darwin broadsheet, Priest urged his comrades to read Marx.⁶⁰ He stood as the CPA’s candidate for the Northern Territory in the 1934 federal election. In a lengthy candidate’s statement, Priest explained that the roots of the CPA’s revolutionary internationalism stretched back to Karl Marx’s efforts establishing the First International and his “masterly analysis of the capitalist system, CAPITAL... a manual of action for the working class”.⁶¹ Priest condemned the “slavery” suffered by Aboriginal workers and his election campaign led with the slogan “full citizenship rights for colored workers”.⁶²

Marx’s *Capital* also had an impact on Herbert Moxon’s program for Aboriginal liberation published in September 1931. Four sections from Part Eight of *Capital* (the section discussing primitive accumulation cited above) were printed in the *Workers’ Weekly* in the three months prior to

⁵⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 738-737.

⁵⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 748.

⁵⁷ For example, “Latest Literature,” WW, June 13, 4; “Books for Militants,” WW, September 9, 1927; “Anvil Bookshop,” WW, June 29, 1934.

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, “Extracts on Science,” *The Communist*, May 1925, 8; “Marx on the Vital Points of His ‘Capital’,” WW, November 27, 1925; T. Ensfield, “In Reply,” WW, December 4, 1931, 3; “Marx, Lenin and the Banks,” WW, February 24, 1933, 2.

⁵⁹ Guido Barrachi, “Imperialism,” *The Communist*, January 1925, 3; “Barbarous! The Beginnings of Capitalism,” WW, June 26, 1931, 2; “The Programme of our League,” *World Survey*, November 1, 1933, 19.

⁶⁰ “Scissors and Paste,” *Northern Voice*, October 25, 1933, 4; “Our Policy,” *The Proletarian*, June 27, 1934, 1.

⁶¹ The title of “CAPITAL” was the only word fully capitalised in the entire statement, denoting special emphasis. “Policy Speech,” *The Proletarian*, September 12, 1934, 3.

⁶² “Federal Elections,” *The Proletarian*, August 8, 1934, 4.

Moxon's articles.⁶³ This included extracts from the two chapters in *Capital* where Marx used the term "aboriginal", such as this passage from Chapter 31 on June 26:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.⁶⁴

In August 1931 an extract was printed from Chapter 27 where Marx gave a graphic account of how Celts in the Scottish Highlands, also described as "aborigines",⁶⁵ were "systematically hunted and rooted out" of lands that "from time immemorial had belonged to the clan".⁶⁶ This was done to make way for large scale sheep farming at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Parallels with the process of Aboriginal dispossession in Australia are striking.⁶⁷ If not Moxon himself, someone in the party leadership was obviously studying Marx's writings on primitive accumulation at this time and this informed the first serious attempts being made to theorise Aboriginal oppression. August 1931 also saw a CPA Political Bureau meeting where Moxon first reported on his research into the "question of the Aborigines" to the party leadership, and was commissioned to write his subsequent articles.⁶⁸ Moxon's writings adopted a similar style of both analysis and prose to Marx in Part Eight of *Capital*.⁶⁹ He wrote long, multi-clause and occasionally ironic sentences recounting the brutal, continuing destruction of Aboriginal society.⁷⁰ This "extermination drive"⁷¹ was framed by Moxon as foundational for Australian capitalism in ways consistent with the account in *Capital* of what Marx called "momenta of primitive accumulation" through violent dispossession that accompanied capitalist expansion across the globe.⁷²

⁶³ Karl Marx, "Barbarous! The Beginnings of Capitalism," WW, June 26, 1931, 2; Karl Marx, "Expropriation of the Expropriators," July 10, 1931, 2; Karl Marx, "Birth of Capitalism," WW, July 17, 1931, 2; Karl Marx, "How Duchess of Sunderland became a Capitalist," WW, August 7, 1931, 2.

⁶⁴ "Barbarous! The Beginnings of Capitalism".

⁶⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 720.

⁶⁶ Marx, "How Duchess of Sunderland became a Capitalist".

⁶⁷ Aboriginal people were very often violently dispossessed to make way for sheep in the nineteenth century. Callum Clayton-Dixon, *Surviving New England: A history of Aboriginal resistance & resilience through the first forty years of the colonial apocalypse* (Armidale: Anaiwan Language Revival Program, 2019), 44-55.

⁶⁸ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, August 29, 1931, Sydney, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419.

⁶⁹ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines"; H.J.M. "Slave Labor – Imagined and Real," WW, September 11, 1931, 4; H.J.M. "Massacre! Rape! Slavery!," RL, September 11, 1931.

⁷⁰ This style is most evidence in Moxon's draft program for Aboriginal liberation "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines," which is quoted extensively in Chapter Four of this thesis.

⁷¹ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁷² Marx, *Capital*, 739.

Just as Marx's work informed the first generation of CPA activists confronting Aboriginal oppression, his dynamic writing linking dispossession to the global regime of capital accumulation has been a touchstone in the revitalisation of Marxist analysis of Indigenous oppression and settler colonialism over the last decade, noted in the Introduction to this thesis.⁷³ The enduring power of Marx's analysis for radical thinkers flows from the fact that his work was produced through both reflection on and active participation in struggle against the system.⁷⁴ In this tradition, Moxon's 1931 writings were inspired by growing CPA contact with Aboriginal people through the Unemployed Workers' Movement that he led (discussed in Chapter Four). In these writings, Moxon both drew on Marx's insights and overcame one of the real limitations of the analysis of primitive accumulation outlined in *Capital*, namely the reproduction of the ideology of *terra nullius* when discussing struggles over land in North America and Australia.

Despite Marx's keen appreciation of the horrific violence inflicted on colonised people in a wide variety of circumstances across the globe, his discussion of primitive accumulation in the Australian and US contexts focused on the struggle over land taking place between settlers with small holdings and big capitalists and land owners. In quite a detailed discussion of land politics in Australia and North America in Chapter 33, Marx ignored the presence and continuing resistance of Indigenous people on both continents, discussing these lands as "virgin soil" and "public lands", seemingly empty and awaiting settlement.⁷⁵ Marx's argument in Chapter 33 will be explored in further detail later in this chapter. First, however, it is important to account for the political weakness on the question of Indigenous rights in Anglosphere settler-colonies reflected in Marx and Engels writings throughout their career, which was ultimately a function of the weaknesses of the radical workers' movement on this question.

Settler-colonialism and the US workers' movement

Marx and Engels never extended their analysis about the injustice of colonial oppression and the importance of anti-racism for the working-class movement to Indigenous struggles in the USA or Australia. This silence was most glaring in relation to the USA. From the mid-1840s when Marx

⁷³ See for example, the special edition of *Historical Materialism* journal, focused on socialist perspectives on settler colonialism *Historical Materialism*, 24, No. 3 (2016). This edition is a symposium on Glen Coulthard's work, which argues that Indigenous dispossession in Canada is a perpetual process of primitive accumulation. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014), 6-15.

⁷⁴ Articles about Marx in the CPA press consistently made this point, often with extracts from Marx. For example, "Theory and the Masses," WW, June 13, 1924, 3.

⁷⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 751-761.

and Engels started writing about the USA, through to the 1880s when Marx died, the entire western half of North America changed in formal status from “Indian Country”, to being incorporated in various ways as states of the Union.⁷⁶ Over this time, they produced extensive analysis about US politics,⁷⁷ including conflicts over the distribution of land. The IWMA had a significant membership in the USA and shifted its headquarters to New York in 1872.⁷⁸ But from the available archive of their works,⁷⁹ it seems neither author ever published any acknowledgement of the genocidal violence being perpetrated through the expansion of the United States across America.

Indigenous resistance to US expansion was fierce throughout this period.⁸⁰ However, unlike the situation with anti-colonial revolts in Asia and North Africa praised by Marx and Engels, Indigenous people in North America were a small minority of the population. Marx recognised the significance of the large-scale Black revolt through the Civil War, but the primary audience for his radical mass politics was the European settler population. The settler-colonial conditions of the USA shaped the class dynamics of this population. In Europe, the central figure of communist strategy was the proletariat, with “nothing to lose but their chains”.⁸¹ In the USA, however, despite the existence of a growing industrial working class, the figure of the independent small farmer loomed large in radical politics.

Many early socialists in the USA were preoccupied with schemes based around establishing egalitarian communities on the expanding American frontier.⁸² Marx and Engels rejected this as a “utopian” socialist strategy.⁸³ However, from at least 1846, they argued that land reform in the USA, specifically the opening up of “public lands” for settlement by independent farmers (rather than large commercial interests), was an important question that communists should relate to. In particular, they argued that the “American National Reforms’ Movement”, a mass campaign demanding the release of 160 acre lots across the continent, was “historically justified”.⁸⁴ The need to “make common cause” with the National Reformers was noted in *The Principles of Communism*,

⁷⁶ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 119-157.

⁷⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx and Engels on the United States* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1979).

⁷⁸ David Fernbach, *Karl Marx: The First International and After* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 50.

⁷⁹ MECW Volumes 1-50.

⁸⁰ Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, (London: Verso, 2019), location 1426-2086. Kindle Edition.

⁸¹ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” 519.

⁸² Frederick Engels, “Description of Recently Founded Communist Colonies Still in Existence,” 1845, MECW 4, 214-228.

⁸³ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” 514-517.

⁸⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Circular Against Kriege,” 1846, MECW 6, 41-42.

prepared by Engels in 1847⁸⁵ and in the *Manifesto*.⁸⁶ In the political debates around this strategy, there was no acknowledgement that overwhelmingly this “public land” was in fact occupied by Indigenous nations, whose sovereignty had been recognised in treaties with the US Government.⁸⁷

Amongst their early, explicitly pro-imperialist writings were two articles by Engels in 1848-49 “rejoicing” in the conquest of California by the US Army.⁸⁸ Engels praised the “energetic Yankees,” waging war against Mexico, “wholly and solely in the interests of civilisation”.⁸⁹ The new Yankee government in California actively organised a genocide of Indigenous people, aided by federal troops and resources.⁹⁰ The extent of this violence may not have been understood by Marx or Engels, but they co-authored an article in 1850 celebrating the rapid colonisation that followed the annexation of California, described as “fertile country hitherto as good as uninhabited”.⁹¹ This argument demonstrates an acceptance of the imperialist mode of thought that cast Indigenous lands as *terra nullius*. As Irene Watson, a Tanganekald and Meintangk scholar has written, “[t]he coloniser perceived this Nunga [Aboriginal] place as available to be filled with their ‘beginnings’ of history”.⁹²

Political scientist Carole Pateman argued *terra nullius* was “at the heart of the creation of new forms of political organisation” being established on stolen Indigenous land in North America and Australia,⁹³ explaining the concept “has a range of meanings: the territory is empty, vacant, deserted, uninhabited... it belongs to no one, it is waste, uncultivated, virgin, desert, wilderness”.⁹⁴ While they never again explicitly advocated violent annexation by the United States after 1848, as will be seen, Marx and Engels continued to conceptualise the lands being colonised in Australia and North America in ways congruent with Pateman’s definition of *terra nullius* in the decades to come. This stands in contrast to the way both revolutionaries came to reject much of the imperialist ideology used to justify European conquest in other contexts.⁹⁵

This attitude to US expansion flowed directly from Marx and Engels’ active dialogue with the

⁸⁵ Frederick Engels, 1847, “Principles of Communism,” MECW 6, 356.

⁸⁶ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” 518.

⁸⁷ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples’ History*, 140-141.

⁸⁸ Frederick Engels, “The Movements of 1847,” January 23, 1848, MECW 6, 527.

⁸⁹ Frederick Engels, “Democratic Pan Slavism,” February 1849, MECW 6, 365-366.

⁹⁰ Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 14.

⁹¹ Marx and Engels, “from Review,” 55.

⁹² Irene Watson, “Buried Alive,” *Law and Critique* 13 (2002), 254.

⁹³ Carole Pateman, “The Settler Contract,” 38.

⁹⁴ Pateman, “The Settler Contract,” 36.

⁹⁵ Anderson, “Not just Capital and Class,” 9-21.

workers' movement in the USA. In the 1850s, German communists close to Marx, such as Joseph Weydemeyer, were involved in the foundation of the Republican party with its slogan "free labour, free soil, free men".⁹⁶ The Republicans were formed as part of a struggle between dominant factions in the US ruling class that eventually broke out as the Civil War, over the form that settler-colonial expansion would take across the western half of the continent. It was becoming clear there could be no compromise between the "free labour" system of the northern states and the slave system of the south, both of which had strong expansionist tendencies.⁹⁷ There was a strong labour movement milieu around the Republicans too and "free soil" agitation was one of the main concerns of workers organisations in the lead up to the Civil War. The promise of grants of stolen Indigenous lands was crucial for the consolidation of Lincoln's popular support base and helped deliver him victory in the 1860 election,⁹⁸ a campaign actively supported by German communists.⁹⁹ Instead of division into small holdings, Weydemeyer argued that land in the Territories should be held as state property and worked collectively by workers' associations.¹⁰⁰ While far more radical than mainstream Republicans, there was still no reckoning with the question of continuing Indigenous occupation and sovereignty.

Throughout the Civil War from 1861 to 65, settler violence and US military attacks on Indigenous people in the trans-Mississippi West continued, including through atrocities ordered by Lincoln.¹⁰¹ As Lincoln took on the program of full emancipation from slavery, he also moved to deliver the Homestead Act, passed in 1862, which distributed land "comprising nearly three hundred million acres taken from the Indigenous collective estates and privatized for the market."¹⁰² US labour movement leaders largely remained silent on an intensifying genocide on the western frontier and the exclusion of Indigenous people from the citizenship rights being opened up to formerly enslaved people.¹⁰³

Terra nullius ideology coloured Marx's celebration of the Union victory in the Civil War and the radicalising trans-Atlantic impact of these developments. In a *Tribune* article written in the opening phase of the war, Marx had argued that European workers "consider the soil of the United States as the free soil of the landless millions of Europe, as their land of promise, now to be defended sword

⁹⁶ Blackburn, *Unfinished Revolution*, 24-25.

⁹⁷ Against the Grain, 2017. "Interview with David Roediger: The General Strike of Slaves," *Against the Grain*, KPFA podcast, November 25, 2017, <https://kpfa.org/episode/against-the-grain-october-25-2017/>.

⁹⁸ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples' History*, 134.

⁹⁹ Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer*, 108-113.

¹⁰⁰ Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer*, 83.

¹⁰¹ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples' History*, 136-140.

¹⁰² Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples' History*, 141.

¹⁰³ Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*, 106-107

in hand, from the sordid grasp of the slaveholder”.¹⁰⁴ Marx’s letter to Lincoln on behalf of the IWMA in 1864, cited above, argued similarly that the European workers’ movement believed that the “virgin soil of immense tracts” in the US Territories should be available for settlement by workers.¹⁰⁵

Terra Nullius in Capital

Marx’s writings on conflict over land in North America and Australia in *Capital* were decisively informed by the political concerns discussed above. In Chapter 31 of *Capital*, Marx described the systematic slaughter of Indigenous people that accompanied the expansion of British colonies on the east coast of North America in the eighteenth century as part of the global process of primitive accumulation.¹⁰⁶ This is the only acknowledgement in any of the published work of Marx and Engels of the violent dispossession experienced by Indigenous people in North America. Significantly, this sole reference concerned the pre-revolutionary period when the North American colonies were still part of the British Empire. Despite their strident opposition to empire, Marx and Engels remained enthusiastic about the democratic, republican quality of the USA and this seems to have stifled a critique of US settler-colonial expansion as a similarly violent imperialist process.

The final chapter of *Capital*, “Chapter 33: The Modern Theory of Colonisation” provides a lengthy meditation on property relations and political conflict in settler-colonies, exploring the implications of these conflicts for the system as a whole. Opening with “we treat here of real Colonies, virgin soils, colonised by free immigrants,”¹⁰⁷ the analysis is focused on developments in Australia and the United States from the 1820s to 1860s:

We have seen that the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production. The essence of a free colony, on the contrary, consists in this — that the bulk of the soil is still public property, and every settler on it therefore can turn part of it into his private property and individual means of production, without hindering the later settlers in the same operation.¹⁰⁸

In this chapter, the process of “primitive accumulation” in both the Australian and US contexts did

¹⁰⁴ Karl Marx, “The London Times on the Orleans Princes in America,” November 7, 1861, MECW 19, 29.

¹⁰⁵ Marx, “To Abraham Lincoln,” 19.

¹⁰⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 741.

¹⁰⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 751.

¹⁰⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 755.

not include genocidal attacks on Indigenous collective ways of life and expropriation of their lands, as Marx recognised in many other contexts. Instead, “primitive accumulation” is described exclusively as efforts by British imperialism in the context of Australia, and big capitalist interests in the context of the United States, to stop the process of land occupation by individual settlers engaged in petty production, in order to force their entry into the labour market as proletarians.¹⁰⁹ Marx argued that in both Australia and the US, attempts by workers to settle on land to escape wage labour was an “anti-capitalistic” response to the process of primitive accumulation. While silent on anti-Indigenous violence, he condemned the “English Government” for “squandering the land”, through the “shameless lavishing of uncultivated colonial land on aristocrats and capitalists”. Marx similarly condemned “the squandering of a huge part of the public land on speculative companies” following the Civil War in the USA.¹¹⁰

Despite Marx’s continuing sympathy with small farmers trying to hold onto land, however, he argued these efforts would ultimately prove fruitless. The capitalist state was being used by the ruling class both in Australia and the USA to carry out “primitive accumulation” and enforce a regime of wage labour. Workers had nowhere to hide, even in the settler colonies where land seemed abundant. This was a revolutionary argument about the need to overthrow the system through a proletarian revolution.¹¹¹ But in accepting *terra nullius*, Marx misread the terrain of social struggle in settler-colonies, missing Indigenous resistance to imperialism.¹¹²

The CPA did not overcome *terra nullius* ideology for much of the 1920s. In a detailed analysis of the party’s early position in Chapters Two and Three, I argue that it was primarily the dominance of racism in Australian society, including in the labour movement, that explains the stubborn hold of these ideas on Australian communists. With other challenges in political life, however, when CPA members sought guidance from Marx’s work they often found powerful counter-hegemonic ideas that helped to challenge the system. As argued above, when the CPA was moving into struggle with Aboriginal people in the early 1930s, a dynamic engagement with Marx’s writings about other colonial contexts helped to produce a major theoretical breakthrough about the nature of Aboriginal oppression. However, Marx’s specific writing on Australian conditions offered no challenge to the

¹⁰⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 758-760.

¹¹⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 758-760.

¹¹¹ William Clare Roberts, "What Was Primitive Accumulation? Reconstructing the Origin of a Critical Concept." *European Journal of Political Theory* OnLine First, October 11, 2017, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1474885117735961>.

¹¹² A survey of this resistance, from British invasion to the 1920s, is provided in Henry Reynolds, *Forgotten War* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013).

dominant conception of Australian history as playing out on an ostensibly empty continent.¹¹³

Self-determination

Perhaps the most significant development in Marx's thought around the relationship between anti-colonial struggle and proletarian revolution came in response to struggles for Irish independence, which exploded just after he published *Capital* in 1867.¹¹⁴ Irish people at this time were subject to vicious racism, rooted in the ongoing colonial domination of their country by Britain. Unlike uprisings in distant colonial possessions in Africa or Asia, however, guerrilla attacks were launched by Irish Fenians in London. Irish migrant workers made up a significant portion of the working class in many industrial centres within England and they took to the streets in massive numbers.¹¹⁵ In this context, Marx drafted and fought successfully for the IWMA to carry resolutions celebrating the Irish independence struggle.¹¹⁶

Marx argued that any blow against British rule in Ireland would weaken the British ruling class, and their capacity to repress proletarian struggles at home.¹¹⁷ Similar to his writings on slavery, Marx also focused on the psychological impact of colonial racism on the English working class, in a situation where many of the people they were working alongside in the factories were Irish:

Compared with the Irish worker, the English worker feels himself a member of the 'ruling nation', and so for this reason he makes himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland and thus strengthens their domination over himself.¹¹⁸

Marx wrote that the English worker "cherishes the religious, social and national prejudices against Irish workers", ideas which were "artificially sustained and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the

¹¹³ Marx's passages on Australia in *Capital* were read and discussed by some CPA members in the 1920s. For example, Guido Barrachi, leading CPA intellectual and editor of the party's theoretical journals, *The Proletarian* and *The Communist*, cited Chapter 33 of *Capital* in an analysis about the delayed development of an industrial proletariat in Australia compared with European countries, due to the availability of land for settlement. This same article also quoted *Capital* to illustrate the brutality of British imperialism. Guido Barrachi, "Notes of the Month," *The Communist*, January 1925, 2-3.

¹¹⁴ Anderson, *Marx*, 115.

¹¹⁵ Anderson, *Marx*, 134.

¹¹⁶ Fallon Donal and Ronan Burtenshaw, "Ireland's Other Proclamation," *Jacobin*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/irelands-other-proclamation>.

¹¹⁷ Karl Marx, "Confidential Communication," March 1870, MECW 21, 119-121.

¹¹⁸ Karl Marx, "Letter to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt in New York. [London,] 9 April 1870," MECW 43, 474.

comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling class”.¹¹⁹ Elsewhere, he argued that the English bourgeoisie, “knows that this split is the true secret of maintaining its power”.¹²⁰ In these circumstances, calls for Irish and English workers to unite on the basis of their class interests, as per the *Manifesto* twenty years previous, would not be enough to bring workers together for struggle against the system. English workers needed to take active efforts to demonstrate their commitment to fight against colonial oppression. Marx argued this struggle could at once break English workers from the false sense of superiority that kept them “in tether” to their own rulers¹²¹ and also show Irish workers that their real enemies were the English ruling class, not English people in general.¹²²

Key components of Marx’s argument for English working class support for Irish self-determination were present in communist agitation for Aboriginal rights in the early 1930s. In Darwin in 1933, for example, Priest issued a call for workers to refuse to enlist in a civilian party reportedly being recruited to join the “punitive expedition” into Arnhem Land against Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda’s people (discussed in the Introduction and Chapter Eight). In this article, Priest condemned the “psychology of self-assumed superiority to aboriginals” that characterised workers who supported the expedition, a mentality “moulded from childhood to identify their interests with the ruling class”.¹²³ For Priest, the antidote to this racism was building solidarity with Aboriginal people, such as Dhakiyarr, willing to defend their territory and their culture from the same police being used to suppress the workers’ movement.

As will be seen throughout this thesis, it was not by reading Marx directly on this question, but rather through the writings of leading Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin and others in the Comintern that CPA members were exposed to these key Marxist principles. When developing his theses about the importance of workers in imperialist countries supporting the rights of all oppressed peoples to self-determination, Lenin had explicitly generalised from Marx’s writings on Ireland.¹²⁴ The authority of Lenin’s anti-imperialism was bolstered in the CPA press by insisting he had “revived and elaborated” the perspective of Marx.¹²⁵ Some of Marx’s letters cited above, that had been drawn on by Lenin, were first published in English in London in 1934, in a collection

¹¹⁹ Marx, “Letter to Sigfrid Meyer,” 475.

¹²⁰ Marx, “Confidential Communication,” 120.

¹²¹ Karl Marx, “Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann in Hanover. [London,] 29 November 1869,” MECW 43, 389.

¹²² Vladimir Lenin, “The Utopian Karl Marx and the Practical Rosa Luxemburg,” in *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, 1914. Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/ch08.htm>.

¹²³ “A study in psychology,” *Northern Voice*, August 30, 1933, 2.

¹²⁴ Lenin, “The Utopian Karl Marx and the Practical Rosa Luxemburg”; Aijaz Ahmad, *Marx and Engels on the National and Colonial Questions* (LeftWord Books: Delhi, 2001), 16.

¹²⁵ L.S. “Communism and National Revolutionary Struggles,” WW, September 30, 1932, 2.

quickly obtained and promoted by the CPA : “The people which oppresses another people forges its own chains”.¹²⁶

Marx never published anything applying this analysis about the importance of solidarity with anti-colonial struggle to Indigenous resistance in the USA. However, in rough notes for a lecture on “the Irish question” in December 1867, Marx compared English strategy in Ireland in the sixteenth century, “clearing the island of natives and stocking it with loyal Englishmen,” to “the war of conquest conducted... against Red Indians”.¹²⁷ Would Marx have said anything in this lecture about the continuing “war of conquest” then intensifying across the Western plains in North America?

In Marx’s political writings on the USA at this time, he was definitely developing his theory of proletarian anti-imperialism. In this note for his lecture, however, Marx was most likely referring to Indigenous dispossession in British colonies on the east coast of America prior to the American revolution, in same way he did in *Capital*. Marx’s correspondence with the US workers movement was focused on warnings about the dangers of the USA moving on from the Civil War to become involved in “wars of the old world type” against Britain or other European powers: “a second war... not hallowed by a sublime purpose [the struggle against slavery]... would forge chains for the free labourer instead of tearing asunder those of the slave”.¹²⁸ This was powerful analysis, but it ignored the fact that the US Army had never stopped fighting Indigenous peoples. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has argued, the US Army had emerged from the Civil War “a far more advanced killing machine”, that immediately intensified “genocidal wars against the resistant Indian nations of the West”.¹²⁹

Marx had argued that the standing army created by Britain to occupy and suppress Ireland also gave them a ready-made weapon to suppress the working-class movement at home.¹³⁰ A similar phenomenon played out in the United States in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. During an insurgent railway strike wave in 1877, US Army regiments were redeployed from fighting against Sioux people to break up workers’ demonstrations in Chicago.¹³¹ This was the first of numerous mobilisations of the US Army against mass strikes, including the suppression of the

¹²⁶ Karl Marx, *Letters to Dr. Kugelmann* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1934); “Letters of Marx to Kugelmann,” WW, October 12, 1934, 4; “Books Review: Dr Kugelmann Letters Rich in Marxist Theory,” WW, August 16, 1935, 2.

¹²⁷ Karl Marx, “Outline of a report on the Irish question delivered to the German Workers’ Educational Society in London on December 16, 1867,” MECW 21, 194.

¹²⁸ Karl Marx, “Address to the National Labour Union of the United States,” 1869, MECW 21, 54.

¹²⁹ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples’ History*, 144.

¹³⁰ Marx, “Confidential Communication,” 120.

¹³¹ Steve Talbot, *Roots of Oppression: The American Indian Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 108.

nationwide “Pullman strike” of railway workers by Army divisions that had recently massacred Lakota men, women and children at Wounded Knee in 1890.¹³² Marx had warned US mobilisation for war against England would “forge chains for the free labourer”, but the war for the American west accomplished this same task.

Anti-Aboriginal racism in *Origin of the Family*

We have seen how Marx and Engels’ support for workers’ movements demanding land in the settler-colonies entangled their thinking with *terra nullius* ideology. In the works printed in Marx’s lifetime, this largely manifested as silence on Indigenous genocide and resistance. However, in 1884, the year after Marx’s death, Engels published *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. This book contained detailed discussion of Indigenous peoples in both North America and Australia, based on Engels’ studies of contemporary ethnological material.

The book remains famous today for Engels’ path-breaking analysis of the rise of women’s oppression over the course of human history.¹³³ Engels argued that there was nothing inevitable about the oppression of women and used studies of colonised peoples around the world to demonstrate that women could enjoy far more power and autonomy than under capitalism. He argued that the systematic oppression of women emerged with the initial division of society into classes and the emergence of the patriarchal family and private property. The liberation of women therefore required the smashing of class society.¹³⁴

When defending this central argument about women’s oppression, Marxist authors today acknowledge that Engels’ ethnographic material was antiquated and often inaccurate.¹³⁵ Coming to terms with the anti-Indigenous thought that dominated the early socialist movement, however, also requires an analysis of the fundamental racism embedded in Engels’ discussion of Indigenous people. Engels made no mention of the violent destruction of Indigenous societies in the settler-

¹³² Priscilla Murolo, “Wars of Civilisation: The US Army Contemplates Wounded Knee, the Pullman Strike and the Philippine Insurrection,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, 80, no 1 (Fall 2011): 77-102; Barton Hacker, “The US Army as a National Police Force: Policing of Labor Disputes, 1877-1898,” *Military Affairs*, 33 no 1 (April 1, 1969): 255-264.

¹³³ Sally Campbell, “Engels Revisited,” *Socialist Review*, 378, March 2013, <http://socialistreview.org.uk/378/engels-revisited>.

¹³⁴ Campbell, “Engels Revisited”.

¹³⁵ Sharon Smith, *Women and Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 32; Eleanore Burke Leacock, “Introduction to Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State by Frederick Engels,” October 1971, <https://www.marxistschool.org/classdocs/LeacockIntro.pdf>.

colonies and there is only one mention of colonial violence in any context.¹³⁶ The peoples he analysed were going through genocidal trauma, trying to make new ways of life under colonial rule. Engels writes, however, as though their contemporary cultures were relics of cultural forms that once existed in Europe, but had been superseded thousands of years previously.

Aboriginal people in Australia and Indigenous peoples in North America were classified as typical examples of “savages”¹³⁷ (hunter-gatherers) and “barbarians”¹³⁸ (proto-agricultural peoples) respectively. Much of Iroquois culture, for example, was described as “identical” to the practices of ancient European peoples¹³⁹ and for Aboriginal people the comparison was with prehistoric groups who had just discovered fire and begun to cook food.¹⁴⁰ Pateman argued that the ideology of *terra nullius* was expressed in European political thought not only through the complete analytical erasure of the presence of Indigenous peoples on their own land. It also extended to derogatory forms of recognition that refused to acknowledge a legitimate claim to sovereignty and framed dispossession as inevitable.¹⁴¹ This attitude is palpable in *Origin*, where both “savage” and “barbarian” peoples were considered to be historically doomed,¹⁴² with nothing to contribute to the contemporary world.¹⁴³

Engels argued that “Australians” were representative of the “middle stage of savagery”, the most “backward” peoples surviving in the contemporary world, forced to resort to cannibalism due to uncertain food supply.¹⁴⁴ This backwardness was even presented as involving *biological* inferiority. Aboriginal people were said to practice a “low and primitive” form of “group marriage”, which lacked a conscious understanding of the dangers of incest.¹⁴⁵ A subconscious “urge towards the prevention of inbreeding” was argued to have slowly driven the development of rules prohibiting sex between some family members in Australia.¹⁴⁶ However, Aboriginal people had not yet undergone the transition completed elsewhere in the world to the next stage of family development,

¹³⁶ A reference to Zulus and Nubians in Africa, who despite their impressive victories in battles against British imperialism are described as “doomed” due to the backwardness of their social organisation. Engels, *Origin*, 114.

¹³⁷ Engels, *Origin*, 24.

¹³⁸ Engels, *Origin*, 26-29.

¹³⁹ Engels, *Origin*, 98, 167.

¹⁴⁰ Engels, *Origin*, 24.

¹⁴¹ Pateman, “The Settler Contract,” 38-39.

¹⁴² Engels, *Origin*, 114, 52.

¹⁴³ Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson makes similar critique of the work of American ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan, who Engels quoted uncritically about Indigenous societies. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 97.

¹⁴⁴ Engels, *Origin*, 25.

¹⁴⁵ Engels, *Origin*, 52.

¹⁴⁶ Engels, *Origin*, 50.

the “pairing family” characteristic of barbarism, where “marriage is prohibited between *all* relatives” (emphasis in original).¹⁴⁷ This family form was argued to be the crucial determining factor in allowing development of the mental powers needed for a full progression through stages of barbarian society. Engels described a process of “natural selection” working to “create a more vigorous stock physically and mentally,” including with bigger brains, as savages “excluded blood relatives from the bond of marriage” in the transition to barbarism.¹⁴⁸ Central to Marxism is an understanding that contradictions within the system of production drive the development of social institutions. But in *Origin*, it is only once societies have advanced biologically, beyond the level supposedly represented by Aboriginal people, that production becomes the dynamic element driving social development.¹⁴⁹

Origin was extremely influential in the communist movement, part of the Marxist ‘canon’. It consistently appeared on lists of recommended readings in the CPA press throughout the 1920s and 30s.¹⁵⁰ As will be seen in Chapter Two, in the mid-1920s, the CPA’s theoretical journal *The Communist* carried lengthy analysis, directly inspired by *Origin*, treating Aboriginal people as anthropological curiosities with an inferior intellect.¹⁵¹ This was at precisely the time when Aboriginal working-class activists in Sydney were campaigning against their own oppression,¹⁵² a struggle completely ignored by the CPA.

A large part of the authority attached to *Origin* in the socialist movement flowed from the fact that the book had roots in notes Engels found in Karl Marx’s study after Marx died.¹⁵³ Marx had been intensively studying ethnology from the late 1870s.¹⁵⁴ The structure, and much of the content of

¹⁴⁷ Engels, *Origin*, 53.

¹⁴⁸ Engels, *Origin*, 52-53. Engels’ also asserted the inferiority of Aboriginal intelligence in an unpublished note written during preparation of his *Dialectics of Nature* between 1873 and 1886. He commented that European children were capable of comprehending mathematical axioms that would be impossible for an “Australian negro,” Frederick Engels, “Dialectics of Nature: Notes and Fragments,” MECW 25, 545.

¹⁴⁹ Engels, *Origin*, 52-53, 60-61. Marxist anthropologist Eleanor Leacock does not identify the racism inherent in this approach, but she does note that it is inconsistent with the historical materialist analysis of human development provided in other works of Engels. Eleanore Burke Leacock, “Introduction to Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State by Frederick Engels,” October 1971, 16-17, <https://www.marxistschool.org/classdocs/LeacockIntro.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ “Books to Read: The Origin of the Family,” WW, January 9, 1925, 2; “What to Read,” WW, April 1, 1927, 3; “Books, Books, Books,” WW, September 7, 1934, 3.

¹⁵¹ For example, George Winter, “Individual Pairing and Group Marriage,” *The Communist* (February 1925), 4-5; George Winter, “General Conclusions from Australian Development,” *The Communist* (May 1925), 13.

¹⁵² John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism*. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

¹⁵³ Engels, *Origin*, 3; “From Lenin’s ‘Teachings of Karl Marx’: Communism Abolishes Classes and the State,” WW, April 22, 1932, 3.

¹⁵⁴ Lawrence Krader, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp, 1974).

Origin is based on Marx's extensive extracts from American ethnographer Lewis Henry Morgan's book *Ancient Society*.¹⁵⁵ Engels celebrated Morgan's work, even claiming him for the Marxist tradition: "he discovered afresh in America the materialist conception of history discovered by Marx 40 years ago".¹⁵⁶ He largely reprinted Morgan's material and conclusions about "savage" societies and the transition to "barbarism" and adopted the same rigidly deterministic approach to human development.¹⁵⁷ What is original in Engels' book is a more detailed analysis of the transition from "barbarism to civilisation", where Engels' own history and some of Marx's analysis from *Capital* and other works is synthesised with Morgan's work.¹⁵⁸

In the preface to *Origin*, Engels said the work was "in a sense, the execution of a bequest". He was clear he could "only offer a meagre substitute for what my departed friend could no longer accomplish".¹⁵⁹ However, there had been no discussion between Marx and Engels about producing a work such as *Origin*.¹⁶⁰ Marx's extracts from Morgan were far more extensive and contained much less critical commentary than the extracts from other ethnologists, a clear sign of respect for Morgan's research.¹⁶¹ But the fact that Marx extracted Morgan's work, cannot, as some have argued, be taken as evidence he necessarily agreed with Morgan's conclusions.¹⁶² Far from characterising Morgan's approach as "historical materialism", Marx emphasised in other notes that Morgan's work was carried out on behalf of the US government and was "not at all to be suspected of revolutionary tendencies".¹⁶³

¹⁵⁵ Engels, *Origin*, 4; Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarianism to Civilisation* (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1974). First published 1877.

¹⁵⁶ Engels, *Origin*, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Engels, *Origin*, 24-25; 41-63. Engels also cited the work of Australian ethnographers Fison and Howitt to make an argument that "marriage by capture", involving the sexual "use" of the captured woman by all men who joined the prospective husband on the raid, was the "rule" in many Aboriginal societies. This was argued to be a universal stage of "savage" development. It is hard to see how this argument, essentially for the prevalence of institutionalised group rape, fits into Engels' general point about the high status of women in "savage" societies. Interestingly, Fison and Howitt's book actually explicitly challenges the idea that "marriage by capture" was the "rule". Lorimer Fison and A.W. Howitt, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, (Sydney: George Robertson, 1880), 138-144.

¹⁵⁸ The synthesis of Marx's work with Morgan is most pronounced in Chapter 9, Engels, *Origin*, 190-216. A good example of Engels' novel history is in Chapter 7, 156-174.

¹⁵⁹ Engels, *Origin*, 3-4.

¹⁶⁰ In a letter to Karl Kautsky in 1884, Engels said that Marx "mentioned it once, but my head was full of other things, and he never mentioned it again". Frederick Engels, "Letter to Kautsky," Marxist Internet Archive, 16 February 1884, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84_02_16.htm.

¹⁶¹ Krader, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 11.

¹⁶² Sharon Smith, "Engels and the Origin of Women's Oppression," *International Socialist Review*, 2 (Fall 1997), http://www.isreview.org/issues/02/engles_family.shtml.

¹⁶³ Karl Marx, "Drafts of a reply to Zasulich: The 'First' Draft, February/March 1881" in Theodore Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 107.

Many scholars who have independently evaluated Marx's unpublished notes from this time argue that there was a broader purpose to Marx's studies not appreciated by Engels, and that Marx's analysis of ethnology was quite distinct from that presented in *Origin*.¹⁶⁴ The remainder of this chapter will explore these differences. There is clear evidence that Marx's anti-colonial critique became deeper and more nuanced through his ethnological studies in a way that puts him at odds with a number of Engels' racist generalisations.

The “archaic” commune, Indigenous peoples and socialist revolution

Contemporaneous with Marx's studies of the ethnology was his active intervention in the debates amongst revolutionary socialists in Russia on the question of the fate of the Russian peasant commune.¹⁶⁵ The commune was a form of collective land ownership and agricultural production which some self-identified Russian Marxists were arguing would first need to be annihilated by capitalist development, before the preconditions for socialism could exist in Russia.¹⁶⁶ Marx himself, in contrast, argued that if a Russian revolution could link up with a proletarian revolution in Western Europe, the “archaic” peasant commune could act as a “point of departure” for communist development.¹⁶⁷ In this scenario, a global revolution could harness the awesome productive powers created by capitalism to the “vitality” of the commune. Rather than disappear, the commune could provide inspiration to the revolutionary process, become a “fulcrum for social regeneration”¹⁶⁸ and provide “an element of superiority” over socialist development in Western Europe, where all communal social forms had already been destroyed.¹⁶⁹

There has been scholarly debate about the extent to which Marx believed that resistance in defence of communal social forms in the colonised world could play a similar role in a global socialist

¹⁶⁴ Anderson, *Marx*, 242-243; Lawrence Krader, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp, 1974), 77-81. Manuel Yang has written a detailed analysis of the differences between Marx's dynamic analysis of historical change and the deterministic approach of Morgan, in Manuel Yang, “Karl Marx, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Nineteenth-Century European Stadialism,” *borderlands ejournal* 11, no. 2 (2012): 1-31.

¹⁶⁵ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), 180.

¹⁶⁶ Vera Zasulich, “A Letter to Marx. [Geneva,] 16 February, 1881,” in Theodore Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 98-99.

¹⁶⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*,” 1882, MECW 24, 425-426; Marx, “Drafts of a reply to Zasulich: The ‘First’ Draft,” 107.

¹⁶⁸ Karl Marx, “The reply to Zasulich. [London,] 8 March 1881,” in Theodore Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 123-124.

¹⁶⁹ Marx, “Drafts of a reply to Zasulich: The ‘First’ Draft,” 117.

revolution.¹⁷⁰ Certainly, his extensive study of Algerian collective property relations in this period¹⁷¹ was coupled with a strong identification with the principles of “absolute equality” he observed amongst Algerians during a trip for health reasons in 1882, and his belief this was informing their anti-colonial struggle.¹⁷² He noted the French parliament was enforcing private landownership on native people in Algeria, in part, because communal property was “a form which supports communist tendencies in the minds” and was “dangerous for both the colony and the homeland”.¹⁷³ While he wrote nothing clear about Indigenous people either in North America or Australia, Marx’s notebooks from 1880 to 1882¹⁷⁴ do indicate that he was breaking from the idea both continents were *terra nullius*, and beginning to appreciate the “vitality” of these societies too.

Marx had a far more developed critique of bourgeois ethnology, including of the work of Morgan, than Engels.¹⁷⁵ While Marx argued that “clues” to the social development of different societies could be deduced through historical comparison, he insisted that “different historic surroundings” could lead to “totally different results”, and explicitly rejected any “general historico-political theory” of social evolution.¹⁷⁶ Marx recognised that the development of ethnology itself was part of a process of bourgeois imperialist domination¹⁷⁷ and Marx’s political sympathy with colonised people was palpable in his notes.¹⁷⁸ On numerous occasions, he argued that ethnologists worked hand in glove with colonialists, by justifying the active destruction of Indigenous social forms as a fulfilment of impersonal “laws” of economic and historical development.¹⁷⁹ While Marx never named Morgan in this regard, Morgan’s ethnological publishing was also coupled with political advocacy for state intervention to break up Indigenous collective land holdings into individual lots and force a nuclear family structure, justified by reference to historical laws of development.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁰ See for example Christopher Araujo, “On the Misappropriation of Marx’s Late Writings on Russia: A Critique of Marx at the Margins,” *Science and Society*, 82 no. 1 (January 2018); 67-93.

¹⁷¹ Anderson, *Marx*, 218-221.

¹⁷² Karl Marx, “Letter to Laura Lafargue in London. [Argenteuil,] 9 August 1881,” MECW 46, 118.

¹⁷³ Marcello Musto, *The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, California), 21.

¹⁷⁴ Transcribed in Krader, *Ethnological Notebooks*.

¹⁷⁵ Krader, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 53-56.

¹⁷⁶ Karl Marx, “A Letter to Editor of the *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*. 1877,” in Theodore Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 134-137.

¹⁷⁷ Theodore Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983): 107.

¹⁷⁸ Anderson, “Not Just Capital and Class,” 12-14.

¹⁷⁹ Shanin, *Late Marx*, 107; Anderson, *Marx*, 219-220; Karl Marx, “Drafts of a reply to Zasulich: The ‘Third’ Draft, February/March 1881,” in Theodore Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 117-22.

¹⁸⁰ Daniel Noah Moses, *The Promise of Progress: The Life and Work of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 113-114; Yang, “Karl Marx, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Nineteenth-Century European Stadialism,” 14-15, 23-24.

The margins of Marx's notebooks are, intriguingly, full of insults directed at colonists, particularly the British, described variously as "dogs", "blockheads" and "asses".¹⁸¹ He frequently challenged their pretensions of superiority. For example, Marx extracted a passage from British ethnologist John Lubbock arguing for the spiritual superiority of the "higher races", where Lubbock cited another author's account of a friend in Australia who was trying in vain to convince an Aboriginal man about the existence of a soul that could leave the body and ascend to heaven. Marx the materialist mocked Lubbock as "fool" and the friend as an "ass", in contrast to the "intelligent black" who "would not keep his countenance".¹⁸²

Socialist anthropologist Lawrence Krader, who first edited and published Marx's notebooks on ethnology, argues that Marx's notes demonstrate an "uncompromising rejection of race, racism and biologism" such as that found in Morgan and Engels' ideas about the transition from savagery to barbarism.¹⁸³ Marx copied down extracts from other works that were at odds with Morgan's account of Aboriginal society, including a description of specific forms of Aboriginal land tenure.¹⁸⁴ When extracting Lubbock, Marx made a note himself drawing a comparison between a description of regulations around ritualised spearing in Aboriginal law with the Shakespearean "Shylock Affair".¹⁸⁵ In a recent book on the final years of Karl Marx's life, Musto argues Marx explored ethnologies of Aboriginal people to "acquire the necessary critical knowledge to use against those who argued that there were neither laws nor culture in Aboriginal society".¹⁸⁶

There was a real innovation in Morgan's methodology which compelled his research partners, such as missionaries and colonial administrators, to closely collaborate with local Indigenous people and fill out a detailed "schedule" documenting kinship structures.¹⁸⁷ It was the fine details of this data that seems to have been most interesting to Marx. His extracts from Morgan contain more than 2000 words of precisely copied tables and narrative, documenting the intricate social system of the Kamilaroi people in north-west NSW, including the Kamilaroi words for kinship and section groupings and important animal totems.¹⁸⁸ Rather than coming from a survey of "savage" life, this

¹⁸¹ Anderson, "Not Just Capital and Class," 14; Karl Marx, "Excerpts from John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilisation*," in Lawrence Krader, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp, 1974), 286. Notes taken 1880-82.

¹⁸² Marx, "Excerpts from John Lubbock," 349.

¹⁸³ Krader, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 48, 84.

¹⁸⁴ Marx, "Excerpts from John Lubbock," 349.

¹⁸⁵ Marx, "Excerpts from John Lubbock," 351.

¹⁸⁶ Musto, *The Last Years of Karl Marx*, 23.

¹⁸⁷ Patrick McConvell and Helen Gardner, *Southern Anthropology - A History of Fison and Howitt's Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8-21.

¹⁸⁸ Karl Marx, "Excerpts from Lewis Henry Morgan *Ancient Society*," in Lawrence Krader, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp, 1974), 139-144.

information was compiled by William Ridley, a missionary who worked alongside Kamilaroi stock-workers in the town of Moree and on surrounding stations.¹⁸⁹ Ridley supported the Kamilaroi against continuing efforts to drive them from their rivers. Ironically, given Morgan and Engels' interpretation, Ridley's research was actually an attempt to demonstrate Kamilaroi sophistication against common assumptions of mental inferiority.¹⁹⁰

In the case of Indigenous peoples of the Americas too, Morgan's data provided Marx with glimpses of communal life governed by a complex web of relationships and responsibilities to other people and the natural world.¹⁹¹ Marx was simultaneously deepening his investigations into ecology, developing his theory of the "metabolic rift" between humans and nature brought about by capitalism.¹⁹² Musto has argued for greater recognition of the connections between this ecological and ethnological research.¹⁹³ Both were part of a process of thinking through communist possibilities for overcoming alienation from both fellow human beings and from the natural world.

None of the thought experiments taking place in Marx's late notebooks were ever shared with the world. Throughout modern Australian history, however, there is evidence of the organic process beginning to be identified by Marx, where Indigenous struggles driven by commitment to collective social relations and relationships to land on the periphery of the system have provided inspiration for workers being exploited at its core.¹⁹⁴ Later chapters in this thesis will demonstrate how exposure to these struggles helped to jolt the CPA out of the racist perspective that cast Aboriginal people as inferior and ultimately "doomed". In Chapter Six, for example, we will see how Priest, who initiated the first major CPA campaign for Aboriginal rights in 1933, developed his commitment to the struggle while living amongst Tiwi people on Melville Island and being deeply impressed by their collective ethos.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ McConvell and Gardner, *Southern Anthropology*, 106; William Ridley, "Kamilaroi Tribe of Australians and Their Dialect," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain*, 4 (1856): 285-293.

¹⁹⁰ McConvell and Gardner, *Southern Anthropology*, 107-108; William Ridley, "Aborigines: Petition to the Legislative Council of NSW," *Empire*, September 22, 1854, 6.

¹⁹¹ Franklin Rosemont, "Karl Marx and the Iroquois," *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion* (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1989), 201-213.

¹⁹² Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capitalism, Nature and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 219.

¹⁹³ Marcello Musto, "The Rosa Luxemburg Lecture," *International Conference on Karl Marx*, Asian Development Research Institute, November 20, 2018, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgvaDdMNumc&t=2062s>.

¹⁹⁴ The best documented is the struggle of the Gurindji. Frank Hardy, *The Unlucky Australians* (Camperwell East: One Day Hill, 2006).

¹⁹⁵ Charles Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections: Improving my Education* (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 37-38.

Conclusion

The impact of the writings and political activism of Marx and Engels reverberated strongly in Australia through the 1920s and 30s. In their daily struggles against police and employers, CPA cadre drew strength from the idea they were carrying forward a revolutionary tradition born from the early stirrings of the proletarian movement in Europe that Marx and Engels led. The vision of global liberation from the shackles of capitalism through united working-class action, set out in the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, inspired early challenges by CPA members to the racist, nationalist ideology dominant in Australia generally and rife in the labour movement. Marx's writings in *Capital* helped to refine this internationalism, setting out the relationship between the brutality inflicted on colonised people across the world and the "wage slavery" suffered by factory workers. Reading *Capital* itself, or quotes and extracts published by the CPA, helped educate Australian worker-activists about the crucial role of anti-Black racism in tying the allegiance of white workers to the system and the importance of Black revolt for opening the emancipatory horizons of the entire workers' movement. The global experience of violent dispossession and attacks on collective ways of life to establish capitalist social relations, also set out in *Capital*, gave leading CPA members dynamic analytical tools to first theorise the relationship between Aboriginal oppression and workers' struggle in Australia.

However, there were also real weaknesses in Marx and Engels' writings on Anglosphere settler-colonies that have not been properly accounted for in existing scholarship. Conceiving of both North America and Australia as *terra nullius* disoriented the revolutionary workers' movement. Neither continent was empty awaiting settlement. Both were occupied by Indigenous peoples who, while not numerically strong enough to strike back at the system with the same force as armed uprisings in colonies such as India or Ireland, fiercely resisted genocide. This resistance frustrated capitalist expansion and, as Moxon argued in 1931, provided a consistent reminder of the illegitimacy and violence of the capitalist regime.¹⁹⁶ A break with the ideology of *terra nullius* by the CPA, when the party first started to connect with Aboriginal people challenging the system, would prove to be a crucial precondition for the fruitful application to the Australian context of Marx's theory about the potential power of revolutionary working-class solidarity with anti-colonial struggle.

¹⁹⁶ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

Chapter Two

‘The Australian natives are not to be reckoned with at all’

1920-26

Despite the important role that the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) would come to play in the struggle for Aboriginal rights, ignorance and an acceptance of some hegemonic, racist ideas, characterised the CPA’s attitude to Aboriginal people and their struggle for most of the first decade after the party was founded in 1920. The Communist International (Third International or Comintern), formed in 1919 in the wake of the Russian Revolution, was committed to revolutionary anti-colonialism, professing a strident support for racial equality and self-determination for colonised peoples. Initially, however, the CPA did not consider these commitments relevant to the situation facing Aboriginal people and displayed no recognition of Aboriginal political agency. As far as we can tell from the records, Australian communists totally ignored the existence of a major Sydney based organisation, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA), who forcefully demanded self-determination between 1924 and 1929.¹

A number of factors explain the CPA’s failure to support the contemporary Aboriginal struggle. Crucially, the CPA was disoriented by a belief that Australia was oppressed by British imperialism and that nationalist demands for Australian independence constituted a genuine anti-imperialism. This ignored the fact that the Australian nation state, forged out of former British colonies, was a sub-imperialist power in its own right. Australia practiced its own forms of colonial oppression, both at the level of individual states that kept local Aboriginal populations under tight control² and through Commonwealth control of the Northern Territory, New Guinea and surrounding islands.³ A focus on British imperialism meant that CPA leaders failed to develop a critique of these particular forms of Australian

¹ The most comprehensive history of the AAPA is by John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

² Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), 22-26.

³ Roger Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific: The Expansionist Era 1820-1920* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 212-213.

colonial domination, or of the specific features of settler-nationalism propagated by the Australian bourgeoisie. Hegemonic racist ideology characterising Aboriginal people as inferior and doomed to disappear was reinforced within the CPA by the position of Lewis Morgan and Frederick Engels' deterministic evolutionary anthropology as foundational texts in the Marxist tradition. This racism will be given detailed attention in this chapter, building on the critique of Morgan and Engels put forward in Chapter One. Finally, the CPA had a conflicted position with regard to the White Australia policy and the question of how Australian unions should relate to racialised "cheap labour".⁴ This led to an ambivalence about how to respond to the hyper-exploitation of Aboriginal workers in the pastoral industry. Indeed, there was some suggestion in the CPA press that these workers should be excluded from employment in favour of unionised whites, and the CPA made no call to lift the racist restrictions on Aboriginal workers joining many unions.

Foundations of the Communist Party of Australia

The CPA was born out of a global process of upheaval and radicalisation following the carnage of WWI.⁵ The most decisive event, one that opened a new chapter in the history of both global working-class organisation and anti-colonial revolt, was the Russian revolution. In 1917 the Bolshevik party, avowed Marxists, led workers and insurrectionary peasants in the first successful socialist revolution in human history, ending Russia's involvement in the war, dismantling the imperial state, expropriating both the capitalist and landlord classes and placing control over production in the hands of democratic councils of workers, peasants and soldiers.⁶

This breakthrough in Russia was a profound inspiration to millions of people in struggle, right around the world. There were mass revolts across Europe,⁷ and the Indian revolutionary Manabendra Nath (M. N.) Roy described "a generalised uprising of the colonial peoples"

⁴ Jon Piccini and Evan Smith, "The White Australia Policy Must Go!" in John Piccini, Evan Smith and Matthey Worley eds., *The Far Left in Australia Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2018), 77-96.

⁵ Frank Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour: The Left in Australia, 1919-1939* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981), xi.

⁶ China Mieville, *October: the story of the Russian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017).

⁷ Todd Cretien, "Introduction to 1917," in *Eyewitnesses to the Russian Revolution*, ed. Todd Cretien (Haymarket Books: Chicago, 2017), 17.

from Egypt to Korea.⁸ The Bolsheviks conceived of their revolution as the opening act in a global overthrow of world capitalism. Lenin argued, “the existence of the Soviet republic side by side with imperialist powers for any length of time is inconceivable”⁹ and placed an enormous emphasis on organising these world revolutionary forces, with the first Congress of the Comintern held in 1919.¹⁰

The Comintern presented itself as the rightful heir of the revolutionary tradition of the First International that Marx had led.¹¹ There was a clear and profound break with both the theory and practice of the Second International, formed in 1889, that had collapsed following the outbreak of WWI. The Second International was centred on mass working-class parties in Europe.¹² Despite Marxist rhetoric, these parties moved away from revolutionary politics, advocating instead for gradual reform of capitalism. This followed growing representation in parliament, and a stake in massive new trade union bureaucracies that tied them to the existing system.¹³ When war broke out in 1914, the major European parties affiliated to the Second International abandoned previous internationalist and anti-war pretensions “and became recruiting sergeants for the First World War”.¹⁴

Deep anger at this betrayal ran through the early Comintern congresses. One of the key areas in which the Comintern differentiated itself was on the question of imperialism and its relationship to the colonised world. As Bolshevik leader Grigory Zinoviev argued:

Even in its best days the Second International took the view that "civilised" Europe can and must act as tutor to "barbarous" Asia. Already in 1907, at the International Congress held in Stuttgart, the majority of the official Social-Democrats expressed themselves in favour of the need for a so-called "progressive" colonial policy... when

⁸ Manabendra Nath (M.N.) Roy, “Speech in Discussion of the Eastern Question,” in *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, ed. John Riddell (Chicago: Haymarket 2012), 688.

⁹ Tom O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism* (Sydney: Stained Wattle Press, 1985), 11.

¹⁰ Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1985), 10.

¹¹ Hallas, *Comintern*, 22-25.

¹² Hallas, *Comintern*, 14.

¹³ Donny Glukstein, “Classical Marxism and the Question of Reformism,” *International Socialism Journal* 143 (June 2014), <http://isj.org.uk/classical-marxism-and-the-question-of-reformism/>.

¹⁴ Hallas, *Comintern*, 15.

the War of 1914 came, this Second International, rotten through and through, which already in 1907 had declared for helping the bourgeoisie with white skins to oppress the peoples with black and yellow skins – this Second International naturally sold itself to the bourgeoisie, but then at once collapsed like a house of cards.¹⁵

The Comintern united leaders of colonial uprisings with socialists in the industrial heartlands of Europe and North America for the first time in history.¹⁶ Roy, cited above (who, as we shall see in Chapter Two, had an important impact on debates about the tasks facing the Australian party), assisted Lenin with preparation of “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions” adopted by the Second Congress in 1920.¹⁷ The existence of large-scale movements for national liberation within the boundaries of the Russian Empire had made these questions of central strategic importance for revolutionaries seeking to overthrow the Russian regime.¹⁸ Lenin had drawn direct inspiration from the writings of Marx on the relationship between struggles for self-determination and socialist revolution in his intensive theoretical work on this question leading up to and during WWI.¹⁹ To gain admittance to the Comintern, aspiring revolutionary parties needed to demonstrate a commitment to the liberation of all colonised peoples. The Manifesto of the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920 proclaimed:

The socialist who aids directly or indirectly in perpetuating the privileged position of one nation at the expense of another, who accommodates himself to colonial slavery, who draws a distinction between races and colours in the matter of human rights, helps the bourgeoisie in the metropolis to maintain its rule over the colonies instead of aiding

¹⁵ Grigory Zinoviev, “Speech to the First Session,” First Session of the Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East, September 1, 1920, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/baku/ch01.htm>.

¹⁶ John Riddell, “Introduction,” in *To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920, First Congress of the Peoples of the East*, ed. John Riddell (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1993), 11-35.

¹⁷ John Haithcox, “The Roy-Lenin Debate on Colonial Policy: A New Interpretation,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (November 1963): 93-101.

¹⁸ Eric Blanc, “Anti-Imperial Marxism,” *International Socialist Review* 100 (Spring, 2016), <https://isreview.org/issue/100/anti-imperial-marxism>.

¹⁹ V.I. Lenin, “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” First published 1916, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm>.

the armed uprising of the colonies... such a "socialist" deserves, if not to be shot, then to be branded with infamy.²⁰

The Russian revolution reverberated strongly in Australia, where the trauma of WWI had also caused major social fissures and an unprecedented radicalisation in the labour movement.²¹ Conferences of major trade unions and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) enthusiastically welcomed the revolution.²² The dominant conception of "socialism" in Australia was a far cry from the vision of the Comintern, with continuing commitments to change through parliament and no clear break with the politics of "White Australia".²³ There was, however, a small but determined group of socialists looking to emulate the Bolsheviks and sink roots for the Comintern in Australia.

At the core of this group were members of socialist factions that had long maintained a hostility to the ALP. The Australian Socialist Party (ASP), with "a few hundred members at most",²⁴ held a conference in Sydney in 1920 that declared the formation of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). This conference attracted representatives from other groups including the International Workers of the World (IWW), radical trade union leaders, "celebrated rebels" like Adela Pankhurst Walsh and Guido Barrachi and representatives of pro-Bolshevik Russian immigrants. All had been through massive struggles and faced severe repression through the war and after.²⁵

In 1922 the radical tide that had surged at the end of the war began to seriously ebb. The revolutionary society in Russia was in deep crisis, blockaded by imperialist armies, beset by famine and civil war.²⁶ In Australia, days lost to strikes dropped away significantly.²⁷ The CPA had suffered through splits and intense factional rivalries. Numerous scholars have

²⁰ Leon Trotsky, "Manifesto of the Second World Congress (1920)," in *The first five years of the Communist International: Volume I* (New York: Pathfinder, 1996), 125.

²¹ O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 29-30.

²² Farrell, *International Socialism*, 95.

²³ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 88; "Where Stands the O.B.U.?", *The Australian Communist*, March 18, 1921, 4.

²⁴ Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 19.

²⁵ MacIntyre, *The Reds*, 18-23.

²⁶ Hallas, *Comintern*, 84-86.

²⁷ O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 29.

argued the party was “in the political wilderness”²⁸ for a number of years in the mid-1920s, characterised by disorientation and, at times, extreme demoralisation.²⁹ National membership did not grow beyond a few hundred people until the Depression.³⁰

The early embrace by the CPA of the anti-imperialism of the Comintern, however, particularly the commitment to anti-racism and support for struggles for self-determination of colonised peoples, had an important impact on the trajectory of the Australian socialist left. The CPA press through the 1920s carried unprecedented sympathetic coverage of national liberation movements across the globe, particularly in China,³¹ Egypt,³² India³³ and Ireland.³⁴ Reports detailing the brutality of imperialist domination elsewhere in Africa³⁵ and Asia³⁶ also featured. Despite inconsistencies in CPA opposition to the White Australia policy³⁷ (explored later in this chapter), party activists made early and strident denunciations of the policy as a crippling division that separated white workers from others within Australia and across the region, while stoking the flames of race hatred and war.³⁸

One of the most successful CPA-led campaigns in Australia during the 1920s was the “Hands off China!” movement, promoted in earnest in the *Workers’ Weekly* from 1925.³⁹ Despite their small numbers, communists played a crucial role mobilising thousands of workers

²⁸ James Bennett, “*Rats and Revolutionaries*”: *The Labour Movement in Australia & New Zealand 1890-1940* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2004), 29; O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 31; Barbara Curthoys, “The Communist Party and the Communist International (1927 – 1929),” *Labour History* 64, no. 4 (May 1993), 55; Macintyre, *The Reds*, 70.

²⁹ Jeff Sparrow, *Communism A Love Story* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 149-151.

³⁰ Alastair Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 53, 61.

³¹ “What is Happening in China?,” *The Communist*, February 23, 1923, 3; K.G. Hsian, “The Women’s Movement in China,” *WW*, March 21, 1924, 4; “Hands Off China,” *WW*, July 10, 1925, 2.

³² “Hands Off Egypt! Dirty Imperialist Aggression,” *WW*, November 28, 1924, 2; “Egyptians Silenced,” *WW*, December 5, 1924, 1.

³³ “Mass Murder in India,” *The Communist*, May 11, 1923, 1; “India,” *WW*, July 27, 1924, 4.

³⁴ “The Irish Situation,” *The Communist*, September 19, 1922, 4; “Ireland Enchained,” *The Communist*, May 4, 1923, 1.

³⁵ “A Land of Great Charm: French Imperialism and the African Negro,” *The Communist*, February 2, 1923, 1.

³⁶ “Javan Workers Stirring,” *WW*, June 5, 1925, 3; “American Imperialism,” *The Communist*, December 1, 1922.

³⁷ Piccini and Smith, “The White Australia Policy Must Go!,” 77-96.

³⁸ Norman Jeffery, “Communism and the Colour Problem,” *The Australian Communist*, December 31, 1920, 4; P. Finn, “White Australia and Yellow Japan,” *The Communist*, June 17, 1921, 4-5; A.I.S. “The Chinese Footballers and the Australian Workers,” *WW*, October 26, 1923, 2.

³⁹ “Hands off China,” *WW*, June 12, 1925, 3; “Hands off China Demonstration,” *WW*, June 19, 1925, 2.

across Australia and won support from numerous trade unions and ALP leaders.⁴⁰ They challenged intervention by British imperialism and its allies to crush the burgeoning Chinese revolution, including the planned use of an Australian navy vessel.⁴¹ Farrell has emphasised the widespread support for this campaign across the left wing of the labour movement,⁴² demonstrating the impact of Comintern-inspired anti-imperialist politics beyond the small ranks of the CPA. The founding conference of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in 1927 committed the new Council to “solidarity with the working masses of China... in their struggle to throw off the unbearable yoke of the imperialist and foreign powers”.⁴³

Yet, for most of the 1920s, the CPA did not extend this solidarity to Aboriginal struggles. While communists developed a powerful critique of the racism justifying imperialist domination in much of the world, they remained trapped within an ideology of Aboriginal inferiority that legitimised settler-colonial domination of the Australian continent. Scandals about the horrific treatment of Aboriginal people often got an airing in the mainstream press through the 1920s and were occasionally noted in CPA papers.⁴⁴ However, as Farrell observed, some CPA articles repeated the idea, hegemonic in Australia, that Aboriginal people were a “doomed race”.⁴⁵ In *The Communist* in July 1922, for example, a section titled “Odds and Ends from Everywhere” carried a subheading “The Last of the Blacks” and claimed “the blacks are dying out from venereal disease”.⁴⁶ There was never any recognition of Aboriginal resistance or capacity for political agency. One crucial factor contributing to this failure of solidarity was a mistaken belief that Australian settler-society was oppressed by British imperialism. This stifled the development of a critical focus on the particular features of Australian settler-colonialism and the anti-Indigenous racism at its foundations.

Australia – an oppressor nation?

⁴⁰ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 110-11.

⁴¹ “Hands off China,” WW, July 10, 1925, 2.

⁴² Farrell, *International Socialism*, 107-108.

⁴³ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 111.

⁴⁴ F.L.H., “6d a Week for Aboriginal Girls,” WW, February 20, 1925, 2.

⁴⁵ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 88.

⁴⁶ “Odds and Ends from Everywhere,” *The Communist*, July 14, 1922, 2.

By affiliating to the Comintern, the CPA pledged an adherence to “21 conditions” laid down by the Second Congress in 1920 that included this stipulation:

Parties in countries whose bourgeoisie possess colonies and oppress other nations... must ruthlessly expose the colonial machinations of the imperialists of its “own” country... [and] inculcate in the hearts of the workers of its own country an attitude of true brotherhood with the working population of the colonies and the oppressed nations.⁴⁷

Where did Australia fit into this picture? Before 1928, the Comintern never attempted to systematically theorise the dynamics of settler-colonies where the Indigenous population was a minority.⁴⁸ At the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922, however, in a resolution on “The Eastern Question”, both Australia and Canada, alongside the US, Japan and Britain, were characterised as imperialist, oppressor nations of the Pacific.⁴⁹ Prominent in formulating the theses and leading the Congress session was M. N. Roy.⁵⁰ The White Australia Policy, and other racist immigration restrictions operating in Canada and the United States, were analysed as tools of imperialism, “deepening the antagonism between coloured and white workers, fragmenting and weakening unity of the workers movement” and helping to lay the basis for another major war.⁵¹

The important insights provided in this short characterisation were not assimilated by the Australian party, nor by other Comintern leaders with whom the party corresponded in the following years. Up until 1928, the idea that predominated within both the CPA press and in

⁴⁷ V.I. Lenin, “Terms of Admission to the Communist International,” Second Congress of the Communist International, 1920, Marxist Internets Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x01.htm>.

⁴⁸ The Sixth Congress in 1928 provided the first substantive resolution addressing the particular dynamics of different settler-colonies where Indigenous people were a minority. “Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries Adopted by the Sixth Comintern Congress”, *International Press Correspondence (Inprecor)*, 8 No. 88, Vienna, December 12, 1928, 1662.

⁴⁹ “Theses on the Eastern Question: vii) *The tasks of the proletariat in countries of the Pacific*,” in *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, ed. John Riddell (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 1188-1189.

⁵⁰ Riddell, *Towards the United Front*, 686.

⁵¹ Riddell, *Towards the United Front*, 188-189.

correspondence with the Comintern,⁵² was that Australia, as a British dominion, was a colony under British control⁵³ and it was Britain, rather than Australia, that was understood to be the “oppressor nation” the CPA was obliged to struggle against. For example, a lengthy 1925 article denouncing British imperialism, explained that it was the duty of each “section” of the Comintern to expose “their own” country:

Therefore, the Australian section... will, in the course of its work, examine the government methods of Great Britain. While aiding in every way possible the victims of British imperialism... it will, at the same time, expose the dying legend of British freedom.⁵⁴

In this schema, white workers within Australia held a contradictory position that was never fully explored. On the one hand, they were recognised as British, and were thought to be bound to British imperialism through ideas of racial superiority in precisely the same way as white workers in Britain.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Australia was often characterised as an exploited colony of Britain,⁵⁶ and some articles appealed to Australian nationalism by framing attacks on Australian workers as driven by British imperialism.⁵⁷

This analysis was incorrect and fundamentally disorienting. From the second half of the nineteenth century, an independent centre of capital accumulation formed in Australia, with a specifically Australian bourgeoisie increasingly conscious of the necessity of military hegemony in the South Pacific.⁵⁸ Historian Roger Thompson has usefully described Australia

⁵² See in particular the 1926 correspondence collated in David Lovell and Kevin Windle, eds., *Our Unswerving Loyalty: A documentary survey of relations between the Communist Party of Australia and Moscow 1920-1940* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), 193-220.

⁵³ Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism and the Communist International,” in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, 2nd Ed, ed. Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 10, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-91206-6_140-1

⁵⁴ “The British Empire: A Commonwealth of Bayonets,” WW, April 17, 1925, 3.

⁵⁵ “Our Sham Civilisation,” WW, December 10, 1926, 4.

⁵⁶ Paul Freeman, “The Birth of the Communist Movement in Australia: Australia as a Colony,” Report to the Communist International, April-May 1921, in *Our Unswerving Loyalty*, ed. Lovell and Windle, 99-101.

⁵⁷ “Bosses Want Cheap Labor,” WW, July 3, 1925, 4; “The Path to Socialism,” WW, December 3, 1926, 2.

⁵⁸ Phillip Griffiths, “The Making of White Australia: Ruling Class Agendas, 1876-1888,” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2006), 61-76; Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific*, 21-178; Padraic Gibson, “Imperialism, ANZAC nationalism and the Aboriginal experience of warfare,” *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* 6, no. 3 (February 2015), 67-73.

as a “sub-imperialist” power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁹ This characterisation recognised the continuing alliance with, and reliance on, the greater military power of the British Empire, while also recognising the distinct interests and independent planning and initiative of the Australian bourgeoisie. While still operating under the umbrella of the British Empire, Australia entered WWI to aggressively prosecute its own imperialist interests, moving immediately to seize German controlled New Guinea and occupying Nauru and other Pacific islands.⁶⁰ Formerly German colonies of New Guinea, the Bismark Archipelago and Nauru were transferred to Australian administration after WWI, controlled from Canberra and patrolled by Australian forces.⁶¹ Similarly, on the continent of Australia, it was the specific needs of Australian capitalism in different regions that conditioned the shape of the state and Commonwealth Protection regimes that oppressed Aboriginal people and it was Australian police forces, or white Australian settlers, that meted out brutal colonial violence.⁶²

There was an important reason that Lenin had insisted communists focus on colonial oppression practised by “their own” bourgeoisie first and foremost.⁶³ Each imperialist power exercised quite particular forms of domination, and developed a nationalism to justify this domination with unique features. “Anti-British” sentiment did nothing to fundamentally challenge the allegiance of Australian workers to the Australian state⁶⁴ or the ideology of Indigenous inferiority that justified settler-colonial domination. As Chapter Three will demonstrate, it was only after the development of a clear analysis that Australia was an imperialist power in its own right, and the CPA had a duty to oppose this imperialism, that

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific*, 1-7.

⁶⁰ Gibson, “Imperialism,” 72.

⁶¹ Tom O’Lincoln, *The Neighbour From Hell: Two Centuries of Australian Imperialism* (Melbourne: Interventions, 2014), 27-28.

⁶² This point was strongly emphasised in CPA writing on Aboriginal oppression in the early 1930s, discussed in Chapters Three and Four. For an analysis about the relationship between Australian capitalism and the Protection regime see Padraic Gibson, “Capitalism and Aboriginal Oppression,” *Solidarity* (November 2015), <https://www.solidarity.net.au/aboriginal/capitalism-and-aboriginal-oppression/>. A number of histories examining the development of Protection in different jurisdictions emphasise the response to local economic and political conditions. Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 104-294; Barry Morris, *Domesticating Resistance: The Dhan-Gadi Aborigines and the Australian State* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1989), 90-135; Gordon Briscoe, “Aborigines and Class in Australian History,” (Honours thesis, Australian National University, 1986).

⁶³ Lenin, “Terms of Admission to the Communist International”.

⁶⁴ ALP leaders seeking to form government for example, often counter-posed loyalty to Australia with British imperialism in this period. Neville Kirk, “‘Australians for Australia’: The Right, the Labor Party and Contested Loyalties to Nation and Empire in Australia, 1917 to the Early 1930s,” *Labour History* 91 (November 2006), 102-104.

Australian communists began to more critically analyse the phenomena of Aboriginal oppression and resistance.

In 1926, CPA leader Hector Ross visited Moscow for meetings with the Comintern leadership. During these discussions, Australian nationalism was used a synonym for anti-imperialist sentiment in Australia. Comintern leaders criticised Australian communists for not pursuing the struggle for Australian independence with sufficient vigour, arguing this would help “break up” the British Empire.⁶⁵ In response to questioning about the position of Aboriginal people in one of these meetings, Ross asserted that “the Australian natives are not to be reckoned with at all”.⁶⁶ This was at precisely the same time that a very significant campaign for Aboriginal rights was at its height in NSW, driven by self-organisation of Aboriginal people on an extraordinary scale.⁶⁷ “Australian natives” were in fact determined to be reckoned with, they were just being ignored by the CPA.

Before providing a more detailed critique of the racism of the CPA press in the 1920s, I will first provide an account of the nature of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) leading this movement in NSW. This is crucial background both for understanding the significance of the CPA’s short-comings in the 1920s and the subsequent development of its pro-Aboriginal position in 1931.

Global revolt and the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association

The AAPA’s campaign headquarters were in Sydney, Australia’s largest city and home, from 1923, of the CPA’s flagship newspaper the *Workers’ Weekly*.⁶⁸ From early in the twentieth century, Aboriginal activists in Sydney had been involved in the Coloured Progressive Association, which included Black seamen from the United States, along with “members from the ‘Black Commonwealth’ that included people living in Australia and other visiting

⁶⁵ Hector Ross, Minutes of the British Secretariat, April 15, 1926. There had been some criticism of “Australia First” nationalism in the CPA press by leading party intellectual Esmonde Higgins, but this did not extend to an analysis that Australia was imperialist. E.M. Higgins, “Australia the Superior,” *The Communist* (February 1925), 12-13.

⁶⁶ Hector Ross, Minutes of the British Secretariat, April 15, 1926. Microfilm of documents related to the CPA 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495-72-14.

⁶⁷ John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 77-92.

⁶⁸ “Our Program Explained,” WW, June 22, 1923, 1.

West Indian, Indian, African, Maori and Islander merchant sailors.”⁶⁹ In 1924, a number of these activists went on to form the AAPA.⁷⁰ Worimi historian John Maynard, whose grandfather Fred Maynard played a leading role in the AAPA, argues that the organisation was driven by a commitment to self-determination, with a platform “centred on land rights, citizenship, protection of Aboriginal culture, calls for a Royal Commission and a concerted attempt to end the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families”.⁷¹ The AAPA held a founding conference of more than 200 Aboriginal people in Sydney,⁷² a conference in Kempsey of an extraordinary 700 people, in 1925,⁷³ and subsequent successful conferences in Grafton and Lismore. There were 13 branches and a membership of more than 600 people, more than double the size of the Communist Party at this time. Until a retreat from the public spotlight in 1929, the AAPA maintained an office on Crown Street in Sydney, “with the phone connected”.⁷⁴

AAPA activists were fiercely proud of the egalitarian nature of Aboriginal culture that had flourished for thousands of years prior to colonisation. This pride was a source of strength and inspiration to challenge the NSW Aborigines Protection Board (APB). At the conference in Kempsey, entire papers were delivered in Aboriginal languages.⁷⁵ In a letter to the NSW Labor Premier Jack Lang in 1927, a document that bristles with anger at suggestions of Aboriginal incapability for self-determination, Fred Maynard wrote:

We accept no condition of inferiority as compared with European people.... Your present scheme of Old Age Pensions was obtained from our ancient code, as likewise your Child Endowment Scheme and widow’s pensions. Our divorce laws may yet find a place on your statute books... The members of [the AAPA] have also noted the strenuous efforts of the Trade Union leaders to attain the conditions which existed in our country at the time of invasion by Europeans – the men only worked when necessary - we called no man “Master” and we had no king.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ John Maynard, “‘The men only worked when necessary, we called no man master, and we had no King’,” *Queensland Journal of Labour History* 26 (March 2018): 41.

⁷⁰ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 42-44.

⁷¹ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 6-8.

⁷² Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 53.

⁷³ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 45.

⁷⁴ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 44.

⁷⁵ Maynard, “The men worked only when necessary,” 45.

⁷⁶ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 104-105.

The emergence of the AAPA had roots in the global wave of anti-racist and anti-colonial protest that followed WWI. As Roy had argued, the “centralisation of world capitalism” which took place through the war created new opportunities for struggle, including through new connections and experiences arising from the mobilisation of millions of troops and workers from colonies across Asia and Africa into Europe.⁷⁷ Comintern discussion of the “Black Question” noted that mobilisation for war had both massively accelerated integration of African-Americans into northern industry in the USA and created a wave of protest in the rural south when confident, demobilised Black soldiers returned home to Jim Crow oppression.⁷⁸

The United States is the centre of Black culture and the focus of Black protests... Combined with the impact of the Blacks’ integration into industry in the North, this assigns to American Blacks, especially in the North, a place in the vanguard of the struggle against oppression in Africa.⁷⁹

The most potent expression of this phenomenon was the rise of Jamaican Black leader Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The UNIA was founded in Harlem in 1916 and this urban base was a crucial hub for the emergence of an extraordinary movement based on demands for Black self-determination and Black pride that united Black people across the world.⁸⁰ By the mid-1920s there were UNIA chapters in 41 countries.⁸¹ While the communist movement in the USA would become bitter rivals with the UNIA, Garvey heralded the Russian revolution as a profound moment of liberation, and there was significant early cross-pollination between the UNIA and Black communists.⁸²

⁷⁷ Manabendra Nath (M. N.) Roy, “Supplementary Theses on the National and Colonial Question,” Second Congress of the Communist International, July 1920, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch04.htm>.

⁷⁸ John Reed, “Speech on The Negro Question in America,” Second Congress of the Communist International, July 1920, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch04.htm>.

⁷⁹ “Theses on the Black Question,” in *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, John Riddell, ed. (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), 947-951.

⁸⁰ Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 115-162.

⁸¹ John Maynard, “Garvey, Marcus Mosiah 1887-1940,” in *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, ed. Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 437.

⁸² Paul Heideman, “The Impact of the Russian Revolution on the Black Left in the United States,” Paper presented at Socialism 2017 Conference, Chicago, United States, July 6-9. Audio, 55:51,

Maynard has drawn direct parallels between the post-war developments that were decisive for the emergence of the UNIA and the experience of the AAPA in Australia.⁸³ There was a UNIA branch established in Sydney in 1920, drawing on a similar constituency to the Coloured Progressive Association of the previous decade, with a more prominent Aboriginal membership.⁸⁴ The UNIA paper *The Negro World*, printed in New York, carried far more detailed, insightful and regular articles about the oppression of Aboriginal people⁸⁵ than did the communist press in Sydney. The Aboriginal members of this group went on to form the AAPA, profoundly influenced by Garveyist principles.

The First World War had seen an acceleration of Aboriginal oppression. As “White Australia” sentiment intensified through the wartime period of patriotic fervour,⁸⁶ the NSW government accelerated a systematic campaign of child removal, ultimately aimed at the eradication of Aboriginality.⁸⁷ Managers were increasingly imposed upon remaining reserve communities and hard-won reserve lands were confiscated for returned soldiers, or sold to fund the administration of the APB.⁸⁸ Historian Heather Goodall has called this a “relentless second dispossession”.⁸⁹ At the same time, many Aboriginal people had gained political confidence from their service in the Army and others were drawn into new opportunities for industrial work generated by the war-time mobilisation.⁹⁰ It was from the ranks of these proletarianised Aboriginal people that the anger of dispossessed reserve communities found a coherent political expression in the AAPA.

The leaders of the AAPA based in Sydney were mostly unionists and industrial workers, with family ties in the Hunter valley region and connections all the way up the north coast to

<https://wearemany.org/a/2017/08/impact-of-russian-revolution-on-black-left-in-united-states>; Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 236.

⁸³ John Maynard, “Fred Maynard and Marcus Garvey: Storming the Urban Space,” in *Exploring Urban Identities and Histories*, ed. Christine Hansen and Kathleen Butler (Canberra: AIATSIS, 2013), 153-159.

⁸⁴ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 42.

⁸⁵ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 32-34.

⁸⁶ Peter Cochrane, *Best We Forget: The War for White Australia* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2018), 9-33.

⁸⁷ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 37.

⁸⁸ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 149-177.

⁸⁹ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 125.

⁹⁰ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 157.

communities hardest hit by the “second dispossession”.⁹¹ Secretary Sid Ridgeway worked at the Chullora railyards.⁹² President Fred Maynard and his brother Arthur were wharf labourers.⁹³ Records from the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF) archives show that Arthur was a member from 1911 and Fred’s name appears on the membership lists almost every year between 1912 and 1940.⁹⁴ Maynard argues that, due to the mixture of harsh working conditions and militant unionism, “the wharf was the place to harden one’s resolve and hone a political outlook to a razor edge... it was here that [Fred Maynard’s] bubbling anger took a more political form”.⁹⁵ Along with Fred’s “experiences in the trade union movement”, the waterfront had been the crucial site of contact between the AAPA leadership and the Black sailors who carried UNIA literature around the world.⁹⁶

Here then, were prime conditions for the development of a campaign of solidarity between this extraordinary movement for Aboriginal rights and communist militants in Sydney, ostensibly committed to building support in the white working class for struggles against racism and for self-determination. No such campaign ever materialised, however. It is possible that no one influential in the CPA had heard about the AAPA at this time. In 1925 the CPA hit rock bottom in terms of both party morale and size, with only about 100 financial members in Sydney.⁹⁷ There was not an organised communist presence in the WWF Sydney branch until the early 1930s.⁹⁸ There was, however, consistent interaction between communists and militant maritime unionists in Sydney through enthusiastic CPA efforts to mobilise support for major strikes of the WWF and Seamen’s Union in 1924-25.⁹⁹ Seamen’s Union leader Tom Walsh, who participated in the early years of the CPA,¹⁰⁰ publicly

⁹¹ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 150-151.

⁹² Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 133.

⁹³ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 17.

⁹⁴ I am grateful to Professor John Maynard for directing my attention to these records. Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia, Sydney Branch and Sydney Mechanical Branch, Financial Membership Registers (Membership Rolls), 1909-1945, Items 8-40, AU NBAC Z248. Fred’s only absence from these lists is in 1921.

⁹⁵ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 17.

⁹⁶ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 28-29.

⁹⁷ Sparrow, *Communism A Love Story*, 144.

⁹⁸ Christine Sutherland Claridge, “The Sussex Street Men: A Study of the influence of the Communist Party of Australia on the Sydney Branch of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia,” (PhD diss., University of Queensland, 1994), 57-58.

⁹⁹ “The Left-Wing Movement,” WW, November 14, 1924, 3; “Scab Bureau to Go – Waterside Workers’ Win,” WW, December 19, 1924, 1; “Lies from the Black Paper,” WW, January 16, 1925, 4; “Seamen Fight for Life,” WW, January 16, 1925, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 48.

attacked the White Australia policy and said his union was proud to have “coloured” members working the Australia coast.¹⁰¹ It is very likely there was at least some relationship between militant white maritime unionists in Sydney associated with the CPA and the “coloured” Sydney waterfront milieu that was so decisive for the formation of the AAPA.

Further indication that such connections existed can be found in the Comintern minutes from Hector Ross’s visit to Moscow in 1926.¹⁰² At one point during a meeting with Comintern leaders, Ross discussed the CPA response to a visit of the US Navy Fleet to Sydney in 1925.¹⁰³ When the fleet steamed into Sydney Harbour, the CPA and the New South Wales Labour Council, led by CPA member Jock Garden, issued appeals to the sailors, calling on them to join the ranks of the social revolution.¹⁰⁴

Alongside this agitation, Ross claimed that a special reception was given to “coloured” members of the US fleet by the “coloured sections of the New South Wales Labour Council”, hosted in the Communist Hall.¹⁰⁵ In an edit to the transcript stored in the Comintern archives, the typed phrase “coloured sections of the New South Wales Labour Council” has been crossed out and replaced with a hand written reference to “the Negro national movement”.¹⁰⁶ This phrase was used within the Comintern at the time to refer to emancipation struggle of Black people in the United States, particularly Garvey’s UNIA that had so profoundly influenced the AAPA.¹⁰⁷ This group of “coloured” unionists in Sydney may have included a similar constituency to the Sydney UNIA branch (discussed above) that was operating in the early 1920s, with workers from the “Black Commonwealth” involved in the maritime industry, Black seamen from the USA and Aboriginal workers who went on to form the AAPA.¹⁰⁸ Reference to the “Negro national movement” could be an indication that there had been some discussion of the Garveyist politics on these “coloured” workers, rather than a suggestion that they were all necessarily of African descent.

¹⁰¹ “Attack on ‘White Australia – Tom Walsh’s Speech – Plea for ‘colored’ unionists,” *The Herald*, January 18, 1924, 5.

¹⁰² Curthoys, “The Communist Party and the Communist International (1927 – 1929),” 55.

¹⁰³ Ross, Minutes of the British Secretariat, April 15, 1926.

¹⁰⁴ Ross, Minutes of the British Secretariat April 15, 1926; “Welcome the Bosses’ War Machine? U.S. Fleet is Workers’ Enemy – U.S. Sailors are Fellow Workers,” WW, July 24, 1925, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Ross, Minutes of the British Secretariat April 15, 1926.

¹⁰⁶ Hector Ross, Minutes of the British Secretariat, April 15, 1926.

¹⁰⁷ Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism 1919-1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 354.

¹⁰⁸ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 40-42.

The CPA press did not report on this extraordinary meeting of “coloured” unionists, providing further illustration of the way the party failed to take opportunities to connect with self-organised struggles against racism in this period. The AAPA issued appeals “to men and women of NSW” to support their struggle.¹⁰⁹ Maynard has noted that the Sydney AAPA conference in 1925 was “front page news” with headlines emphasising the demand for “self-determination”.¹¹⁰ Although consistent coverage was restricted to small regional newspapers, the ALP-controlled *Labor Daily* wrote a sympathetic report on the Kempsey conference in 1926 that emphasised demands for land and self-determination, while claiming Aboriginal speakers urged the crowd to “seize the opportunities presented by a progressive [ie Labor] government”.¹¹¹ In reality, the Labor government of Jack Lang, elected in 1925, had done nothing to challenge dispossession and oppression by the APB.¹¹² Lang’s defeat by Nationalist Thomas Bavin in October 1927, however, coincided with the beginning of a decisive crack-down on the AAPA by the APB and the police, which eventually forced the organisation to retreat from consistent public agitation.¹¹³ The last documented public speech by Maynard on behalf of the AAPA was at a Labor Party branch meeting in Chatswood in February, 1929, indicating at least some active connections with politically organised workers through this time of growing repression.¹¹⁴

Despite the fact that the CPA ignored the AAPA throughout the 1920s, the organisation eventually had a profound impact on the development of CPA’s program for Aboriginal liberation, written by Herbert Moxon in September 1931. Chapters Two and Three will explore how the CPA’s shift towards recognition that Australia was an imperialist power gave the party a framework to recognise the significance of the AAPA’s struggle for self-determination from a revolutionary working-class perspective. In this program, Moxon in fact retrospectively chastised the CPA for failing to defend the AAPA from repression: “the rank and file organisation set up by the aborigines was allowed to be broken up by the APB, the missionaries and the police”.¹¹⁵ Moxon’s criticism in the program, however, that “hitherto,

¹⁰⁹ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 47.

¹¹⁰ Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary,” 45.

¹¹¹ “Ashes of the Past,” *Labor Daily*, January 5, 1926, 4.

¹¹² Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 104-105.

¹¹³ John Maynard described the impact of the repression but does not suggest any relation to the change of government. *Fight for Liberty*, 132-133.

¹¹⁴ “Aboriginal Orators Will Put Their Case,” *Labor Daily*, February 2, 1929, 6.

¹¹⁵ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

the conditions of the Aborigines have not been considered by workers in the revolutionary movement”,¹¹⁶ was only half right. As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, there had in fact been some limited discussion of the position of Aboriginal people in the communist press throughout the 1920s. What stifled the possibility of solidarity were the racist assumptions evident in many of these articles.

The legacy of Engels’ racist ethnology in Australia

The idea that Aboriginal people were inferior, and destined to “die out”, was embedded in Australian society in the early 1920s, an important component of Australian settler-nationalism that naturalised genocide and dispossession.¹¹⁷ This ideological context decisively influenced the continuing racist attitude of the CPA through the early years of the party’s existence. A crucial task the party set itself as part of the Bolshevik approach to revolutionary organisation, was to “carry on a ceaseless war against all forms of bourgeois ideology”.¹¹⁸ The Marxist tradition, and particularly the innovations developed through the Russian Revolution and Comintern, provided the CPA with powerful tools to critique hegemonic ideas in many other areas of Australian life. When trying to understand the position of Aboriginal people, however, party intellectuals turned not to Comintern theory about the relationship between racism and colonial oppression, but to the discussion of Aboriginal society in Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.¹¹⁹

Origin featured prominently on recommended reading lists from the earliest editions of communist newspapers in Australia¹²⁰ and local study groups utilised the text.¹²¹ Engels’ praise of Lewis Morgan’s *Ancient Society* as one of the most important books published in history, supposedly following an historical materialist methodology fully in accord with that

¹¹⁶ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

¹¹⁷ Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australia and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), ix. See for example Daisy Bates, “Vanishing Aborigines,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 17, 1922, 7; “A Dying Race – Aboriginal Population,” *The Age*, March 23, 1927, 14; John Sandes, “Black Australians – Passing Away,” *The Sun*, September 8, 1923, 4.

¹¹⁸ Hector Ross, “The Role of the Communist Party of Australia,” *The Communist*, (January 1925), 13.

¹¹⁹ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1978). First published 1884.

¹²⁰ “The Origin of the Family,” *The Communist*, August 5, 1921, 5; “The Communist Party Literature Department – Books for Communists,” *The Communist*, August 12, 1921, 8.

¹²¹ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 83-84.

of Karl Marx,¹²² ensured that Morgan's work was also promoted.¹²³ The CPA press also recommended other racist anthropological work in its early years, such as John Howard Moore's book which emphasised the inferior mental capacity of "savages... they are child races".¹²⁴

This attitude permeated the small number of CPA reports in the 1920s that raised some criticism of the horrible conditions facing Aboriginal people. In one report on the exploitation of Aboriginal workers on remote pastoral stations in WA for example, a correspondent wrote that these workers did not realise they were being underpaid because of "their childish minds".¹²⁵ There were also a number of examples of denigration of Aboriginal people as a way of insulting others. The British flag was at one point described as a rag which even "the blackfellows wouldn't wipe their noses on".¹²⁶ A Christian missionary was lampooned in an article called "Good Christians":

Speaking of the aborigines of Northern Australia, [the missionary] described them as the lowest human beings on earth to-day, in fact they belonged to the Stone Age of 30,000 years ago; "but", said the dear brother a little later, "they will make very good Christians!" The dear old thing unconsciously uttered a truth. Stone Age people certainly do make very good Christians!¹²⁷

More sophisticated expressions of this derogatory attitude were written in *The Communist: A Journal for the Theory and Practice of Marxism*, published in 1925-26. The journal carried rare theoretical articles editor Guido Barrachi had brought back from his time working for Comintern publications in Europe¹²⁸ and also made a concerted effort to produce original

¹²² Engels, *Origin*, 4.

¹²³ "The Communist Party Literature Department – Books for Communists," *The Communist*, August 26, 1921, 8; "Latest Literature," WW, June 13, 1924, 4; George Winter, "The Significance of Lewis Morgan," *The Communist* (January 1925), 11.

¹²⁴ John Howard Moore, *Savage Survivals* (Chicago: Kerr & Co, 1915), 92-94; "Literature Department: Books and Pamphlets," *The Communist*, September 1, 1922, 4.

¹²⁵ "Odds and Ends from Everywhere," *The Communist*, July 14, 1922, 2.

¹²⁶ Schoolboy, "Salute the Rag," WW, September 4, 1925, 4.

¹²⁷ Julius, "Good Christians," WW, April 7, 1926, 4.

¹²⁸ Sparrow, *Communism A Love Story*, 147. A number of these articles were analysed in the previous chapter, including: Karl Marx, "British Rule in India," *The Communist* (May 1925), 5-8 and Karl Marx, "The Inaugural Address of the International Workingmen's Association," *The Communist* (September-October 1925), 2-5.

analyses looking at the peculiarities of Australian history¹²⁹ and political economy.¹³⁰

Every edition of the journal included essays by Marxist scholar George Winter, part of an “ethnological series on the Australian aborigines”¹³¹ and Pacific Island societies.¹³² Each of Winter’s essays exceeded 1500 words, meaning there was more written about Aboriginal people by Winter in *The Communist* in 1925 than in all the other articles published on Aboriginal issues by the CPA in the first decade of the party combined. As in Engels’ work, both Aboriginal people and the peoples of the Pacific Islands were written about as anthropological curiosities, with an almost exclusive focus on rules around marriage and sex. There was no recognition that Indigenous societies were both being transformed by, and resisting colonisation. There was only one, off-hand, reference to the destruction wrought by imperialism, as a way of explaining the lack of anthropological data on Tasmanian tribes.¹³³

Winter’s series mounted a defence of the integrity of Lewis Morgan’s “revolutionary doctrine” and, by extension, the work of Engels. Winter argued that the most important aspect of Morgan’s work was his proof that the rigid class divisions in contemporary capitalism are “not eternal... in primitive man... there existed a spirit of brotherhood and equality unknown in days of civilisation”.¹³⁴ Winter said the CPA had a special obligation to extend Morgan’s work:

Unlike the European proletariat, we have the material for a study of primitive peoples almost at our doors. It is for us to show, by facts of easy verification, where Morgan was right – and if necessary, where he was wrong.¹³⁵

There is a sad irony in the publication of this article in 1925. This was at precisely the time that the AAPA were in the midst of their campaign to fight the NSW APB. Winter had said Australian communists had a special obligation to study “primitive peoples almost at our

¹²⁹ C.J.S. “Fragments of Australian History,” *The Communist* (January-February 1926), 13-16.

¹³⁰ D. Healy, “Australia’s Economic Resources,” *The Communist* (May 1925), 10-13.

¹³¹ “‘The Communist’ – Special Paris Commune Number,” WW, March 20, 1925, 2.

¹³² Winter’s series was cut short when he passed away in March 1926. He was eulogised in the journal as a “keen student of sociology” and a “diligent, if quiet, worker” for the labour movement. “Queries and Answers,” *The Communist* (March 1926), 16.

¹³³ George Winter, “Individual Pairing and Group Marriage,” *The Communist* (February 1925), 4.

¹³⁴ George Winter, “The Significance of Lewis Morgan,” *The Communist* (January 1925), 11.

¹³⁵ Winter, “The Significance of Lewis Morgan,” 12.

doors,” no doubt referring to Aboriginal people in remote Australia still living off their lands. The AAPA were much closer still to the CPA’s operations. The first AAPA conference was held in inner Sydney in early 1925,¹³⁶ at a church hall less than a kilometre from the print shop in Goulburn Street running off copies of *The Communist*, but the organisation was never reported on by the CPA.¹³⁷

The AAPA struggle demonstrated the radical potential of the dynamic clash between Australian capitalism and Aboriginal people, with a distinct, living culture being shaped by global anti-colonial rebellion. For Winter, however, Aboriginal people were anthropological specimens, with no political agency. In dry academic prose, Winter gave an outline of the marriage rules of the Kamilaroi¹³⁸ and the Urabunna (Arabuna) in Central Australia,¹³⁹ as well as offering some speculation about the “Tasmanians” and discussion of the implications of the work of Australian anthropologists Spencer and Gillen for Morgan’s system.¹⁴⁰ This was all evidence marshalled to reaffirm the position of Aboriginal people as “the lowest race which has been closely observed”.¹⁴¹ Winter rejected suggestions by some anthropologists that the sophistication of the boomerang complicated this position on the bottom rung of the evolutionary ladder, insisting “the boomerang [was] known to the primitive tribes of India and Egypt to which [Aboriginal people] are racially akin”.¹⁴² There was a consistent denigration of Aboriginal people and a callous ignorance of the realities of both historical and contemporary Aboriginal life, with statements such as, “it is doubtful whether any discovery of importance was made, during the whole period of aboriginal occupation of Australia, by the Aborigines themselves”¹⁴³ and “though they used fire, they did not know how to make it”.¹⁴⁴ Winter cited evidence from Aboriginal tribes to challenge Morgan’s argument that

¹³⁶ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 53-54.

¹³⁷ The journal was printed by Tomalin & Wigmore at 1-3 Goulbourn St, Sydney: *The Communist* (January 1925), 16.

¹³⁸ Winter, “The Kamilaroi Group System,” *The Communist* (March 1925), 11-13.

¹³⁹ Winter, “The Two-Class Marriage System,” *The Communist* (April 1925), 11-12.

¹⁴⁰ George Winter, “Individual Pairing and Group Marriage,” *The Communist* (February 1925), 4-5.

¹⁴¹ Winter, “Individual Pairing and Group Marriage,” 5.

¹⁴² George Winter, “General Conclusions from Australian Development,” *The Communist* (May 1925), 13.

¹⁴³ Winter, “General Conclusions from Australian Development,” 13.

¹⁴⁴ Winter, “Individual Pairing and Group Marriage,” 4. Winter’s claim here related specifically to “Tasmanians”. Historian Rebe Taylor argues that the myth that Aboriginal people in Tasmania had no capacity to make fire was propagated from the early nineteenth century and endured in academic scholarship well into the 1990s. Rebe Taylor, “The polemics of making fire in Tasmania: the historical evidence revisited,” *Aboriginal History* 32 (2008), 1-26.

fishing societies predated hunting ones. Winter argued that Aboriginal societies were based on hunting and that, while some had fish in their diet, their methods were so “primitive” that they “did not deserve the title of fishermen”.¹⁴⁵

The hyper-visibility of Aboriginal people as anthropological specimens in Winter’s writings complemented their complete invisibility in the essays on Australian history published in *The Communist*. Both approaches dehumanised Aboriginal people and demonstrated the continuing hold of *terra nullius* ideology on the CPA. One historical article focused on the “unparalleled brutality” towards convicts, and said the First Fleet was carrying “the first inhabitants of New South Wales”.¹⁴⁶ Another article, a survey of the remote cattle industry, made a point of ensuring Aboriginal people were erased from the Australian landscape:

The big meat company Vestey bros [sic] occupies 50,000 square miles of the Northern Territory. Their average *white* staff on the stations was thirty-two, which meant in this case one man to 15,000 square miles... an empty land [emphasis added].¹⁴⁷

The first CPA intellectual to seriously consider the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal people was the author Katharine Susannah Prichard, who helped to found a CPA branch in Perth in 1920.¹⁴⁸ Engels’ analysis of women’s oppression in *Origin* informed Prichard’s path-breaking work advancing women’s liberation.¹⁴⁹ These commitments also influenced her major novel *Coonardoo*, based on notebooks written during a three month stay at Turee, a cattle station in far north-west Western Australia, in 1926.¹⁵⁰ In later years, Prichard said: “The motive of the book was to draw attention to the abuse of Aboriginal women by white

¹⁴⁵ Winter, “General Conclusions from Australian Development,” 14. Bruce Pascoe has demonstrated that there were many different ingenious Indigenous systems for harvesting fish and eels across the continent. Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu* (Broome: Magabala Books, 2014).

¹⁴⁶ C.J.S., “Fragments of Australian History,” 16.

¹⁴⁷ Healy, “Australia’s Economic Resources,” 13.

¹⁴⁸ John Hay, “Prichard, Katharine Susannah (1883–1969),” in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1988, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/prichard-katharine-susannah-8112/text14165>.

¹⁴⁹ Liz Ross, “Love’s Coming of Age: Australian socialist and communist parties and sexuality,” *The La Trobe Journal*, 87 (May 2011), 114.

¹⁵⁰ Austin-Crowe, Marion, “Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo*: an historical study,” (Master’s thesis, Edith Cowan University, 1996), 15-16.

men – a subject that demanded immediate attention”.¹⁵¹ This caused a scandal and took real courage in a deeply racist cultural landscape.¹⁵²

There is also, however, a deep paternalism expressed in *Coonardoo*, flowing from Prichard’s belief, grounded in evolutionary anthropology, in the inherent mental inferiority of Aboriginal people.¹⁵³ For example, the main Aboriginal protagonist, Coonardoo, was presented “without powers of thought or conceptualization ... intellectually she is not far above a faithful horse or dog”.¹⁵⁴ Prichard cited anthropological evidence to argue that “the aboriginal stands somewhere near the bottom of the great evolutionary rung we have ascended”¹⁵⁵ and a number of scholars have argued that *Origin* influenced her presentation of Aboriginal sex and family life in the novel.¹⁵⁶

Prichard’s critique of the Aboriginal condition focused on the abuses of unscrupulous individuals, not the “ostensible slavery” of life on the stations,¹⁵⁷ nor the racist powers held by the Western Australian Aborigines Department. Prichard in fact advocated for this supposedly benevolent authority to “protect” Aboriginal people.¹⁵⁸ Despite evidence in the book of extreme violence holding Aboriginal people in bondage,¹⁵⁹ in Prichard’s foreword she insisted that “on the isolated stations in the Nor’ West”, Aboriginal people were “treated with consideration and kindness”.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵¹ Carmel Bird, “An overview of the presence of Indigenous characters in Australian fiction,” Lecture at the University of Granada, December, 2001, <http://www.carmelbird.com/indigenous.htm>.

¹⁵² Jacqueline Wright, “On ‘Coonardoo’, by Katharine Susannah Prichard,” *Griffith Review Online*, 2014. <https://www.griffithreview.com/coonardoo-katharine-susannah-prichard/>.

¹⁵³ Austin-Crowe, “Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Coonardoo: an historical study,” 143.

¹⁵⁴ Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (Sydney: Allan & Unwin, 1991), 54.

¹⁵⁵ Prichard, *Coonardoo*, v.

¹⁵⁶ Ellen Smith, “Writing Native: The Aboriginal in Australian Cultural Nationalism 1927-1945,” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2012), 86-93; Cath Ellis, “A tragic convergence: a reading of Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Coonardoo,” *Westerly* 40, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 63-71.

¹⁵⁷ Larissa Behrendt, *Finding Eliza: Power and Colonial Storytelling* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2016), 86.

¹⁵⁸ Behrendt, *Finding Eliza*, 84.

¹⁵⁹ For example, Coonardoo’s mother was murdered by the station master after she “back answered and refused to do something he told her”. Katherine Susannah Prichard, *Coonardoo* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1975), 8. First published 1928.

¹⁶⁰ Prichard, *Coonardoo*, v.

Prichard thanked Inspector Ernst Mitchell, from the Aborigines Department in WA, for his critical feedback on drafts of the manuscript.¹⁶¹ She went so far as to praise the work of the Department, particularly for recent regulations that “prevent a white man from taking rooms for a gin, or half-caste in a hotel”.¹⁶² When Mitchell retired from his position the following year, Prichard celebrated his years of service in the Perth *Daily News*.¹⁶³

Eualeyai/Kamilaroi writer and legal scholar Larissa Behrendt has written an insightful critical analysis of the politics and philosophy expressed in *Coonardoo*.¹⁶⁴ Behrendt contends that Prichard’s writing robbed Aboriginal people of political agency, blinding both the author and her readership to the possibility of change through struggle. Prichard “[did] not advocate the emancipation and decolonisation of Aboriginal people”. This forestalled appreciation of the “blossoming political rights movements within Indigenous communities when the book was penned.”¹⁶⁵ This same critique could apply to the CPA as a whole for most of the 1920s.

Black workers in White Australia

From the earliest publications of the CPA, there was a critique of the racism inherent in the White Australia policy, which was a clear affront to the communist slogan “workers of the world unite!”.¹⁶⁶ Despite this, however, for much of the 1920s some CPA writers seemed to accept the notion that racialised “cheap labour” posed a threat to the conditions of unionised whites, and that regulations to exclude these workers from the Australian labour market could be an acceptable policy solution. This ambivalent position on White Australia has already been thoroughly explored by a number of historians.¹⁶⁷ The final section of this chapter will provide a short assessment of the relationship of White Australia to Australian imperialism and the way the CPA’s ambivalence shaped the party’s attitude to Aboriginal workers.

¹⁶¹ Prichard, *Coonardoo*, v.

¹⁶² Prichard, *Coonardoo*, v-vi.

¹⁶³ Katharine Susannah Prichard, “Aborigines’ Friend – Chief Inspector Retires,” *The Daily News*, October 18, 1930, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Behrendt, *Finding Eliza*, 81-99.

¹⁶⁵ Behrendt, *Finding Eliza*, 98.

¹⁶⁶ Pearl Hanks, “The Color Problem,” *Proletarian Review*, December 7, 1920, 11-13; “Where stands the O.B.U.,” *The Australian Communist*, March 18, 1931, 4-5.

¹⁶⁷ Piccini and Smith, “The White Australia Policy Must Go!,” 77-82; Oleksa Drachewych, “The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia on Questions of Imperialism, Nationality and Race, 1919-1943,” (PhD dis., McMaster University, 2017), 223-230; Farrell, *International Socialism*, 82-92.

The White Australia policy was a cornerstone of Australian nationalism. Marxist historian Phil Griffiths has persuasively argued against the idea, dominant in Australian historiography, that the labour movement was responsible for the implementation of the policy, enshrined in the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901).¹⁶⁸ While trade union leaders vigorously championed White Australia, Griffiths points out that they lacked the social power to enforce this policy.¹⁶⁹ Griffiths locates the genesis of the policy in the development of a distinct Australian bourgeoisie, that crystalised as a ruling class in the second half of the nineteenth century (particularly the 1870s and 80s), developing a strategy to secure control of the continent and military dominance in the South Pacific.¹⁷⁰ Some Australian capitalists wanted to expand the use of indentured labour from the Pacific and Asia on plantations in north Australia and there were serious misgivings in Britain over restrictions on the movement of “coloured” colonial citizens. However, by the final decade of the nineteenth century:

The dominant elements in the ruling class had already agreed that any serious move towards federation was to be conditional on the building of a white, predominantly British, population across the whole continent, and they imposed that policy on their own societies and the British government.¹⁷¹

The most important factor driving this policy, according to Griffiths, was a strategic fear about the rise of China and other potential imperialist rivals in Asia:

Having stolen a continent they were unable to fully use or develop, [the Australian bourgeoisie] feared other powers wanting a share, and they feared those who could develop the continent pushing them aside... [They also feared] the possibility of future war with China, or the possibility that a large Chinese population could be a fifth column during a war with one of the major European powers.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Griffiths, Phil. "Racism: Whitewashing the Class Divide." In *Class and Struggle in Australia*, edited by Rick Kuhn (Sydney: Pearson Education Australia, 2004), 162-165; Griffiths, "The making of White Australia."

¹⁶⁹ Griffiths, "The making of White Australia," xv-xvi.

¹⁷⁰ Griffiths, "The making of White Australia," 61-76.

¹⁷¹ Griffiths, "The making of White Australia," xvi.

¹⁷² Griffiths, "The making of White Australia," 42.

There was some understanding in the CPA press about the promotion of White Australia by the ruling class as a means to bind workers to imperialism,¹⁷³ though this took place in the context of agitation against “British imperialism” already described. However, overwhelmingly, CPA discussion of the White Australia policy accepted the myth that it was an achievement of working-class struggle,¹⁷⁴ in terms outlined by Griffiths:

In the labourist version of this myth, White Australia was seen as the product of a class struggle between pastoralists and sugar planters, who wanted to exploit “cheap coloured labour”, and the working people who fought to stop them.¹⁷⁵

William Earsman, an Australian CPA delegate to the Comintern Congress in 1922, made a speech to the Congress that professed the CPA’s commitment to fight White Australia. However, in doing so he stressed that the policy had played a historic role in defending the living standards of unionised workers.¹⁷⁶ Despite there being no serious initiative to challenge White Australia by any section of the ruling class in this period,¹⁷⁷ Earsman argued that the capitalist class was still “making great efforts” to introduce indentured forms of labour into Australia, and trade union opposition to “coloured immigration” was the force stopping them.¹⁷⁸

Throughout the 1920s, the CPA often sought to challenge the racist assumptions about docile “coloured labour” that informed working-class support for White Australia.¹⁷⁹ However, the

¹⁷³ “Down with Imperialism,” WW, July 10, 1925, 2.

¹⁷⁴ “Programme and Policy of the Communist Party,” WW, January 18, 1924, 2.

¹⁷⁵ Griffiths, “The making of White Australia,” 5.

¹⁷⁶ William Earsman, “Speech on the Eastern Question,” in *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Second Congress*, ed. Riddell, 718.

¹⁷⁷ Indeed, WWI led to an intensification and consolidation of the hegemony of White Australia. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 241-331; Julia Martinez, in a survey of Conservative advocates of “coloured labour” in this period, emphasised the position of SA Premier Henry Barwell, who in 1922 advocated “Asiatic labour” in “tropical areas”. Langfield has demonstrated that Barwell’s position was considered “blasphemy” by the Australian establishment, and there was a “settled policy on restricted immigration in Australia in the 1920s”. Julia Martinez, “Plural Australia: Aboriginal and Asian Labour in Tropical White Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2000), 136-144; Michele Langfield, “Peopling the Northing Territory Part 2: The White Elephant Laid to Rest? In the Inter-War Years,” *Journal of Northern Territory History* 12 (2001), 17.

¹⁷⁸ Earsman, “Speech on the Eastern Question,” 717.

¹⁷⁹ P. Finn, “White Australia and Yellow Japan,” *The Communist*, June 17, 1921, 4-5.

party also offered pained qualifications, insisting the CPA maintained an opposition to the importation of “cheap labour” that might compromise Australian living standards.¹⁸⁰ Commonly, the party also raised opposition to assisted immigration from Britain and pointed to this to insist their approach was not racist.¹⁸¹ As will be seen, however, it was impossible for the CPA to divorce expressions of racism from any position in favour of restricted access to the Australian labour market.

While the White Australia policy was most immediately directed against racialised immigrants, it had a devastating impact on the lives of Aboriginal people.¹⁸² There was significant hostility to this “coloured” population living within “White Australia”, through both merciless persecution by the state and anti-Aboriginal campaigns by white citizens,¹⁸³ conditioned to believe that any disruption of white homogeneity was a threat, or an affront. There were not always the same formal restrictions on Aboriginal membership of unions in Australia as existed against other “coloured races”.¹⁸⁴ However, exclusion from unions was widespread, particularly in the rural pastoral industry, and union officials played a role negotiating explicitly discriminatory wage rates and forms of indenture under the Protection system.¹⁸⁵ The fact that the CPA accepted, at least to some extent, the need to restrict racialised sources of “cheap labour” from entering the labour market, is reflected in the attitude displayed to Aboriginal workers in this period.

One of the first mentions of Aboriginal people in the communist press came in 1922, in a series of brief reports from different areas around NSW during a major shearers’ strike. One report from a correspondent in north-west NSW said, “the cooks are solid [still on strike], particularly Walgett way. In that district the sheds that are crook [working through the strike] have small boards with many blackfellows employed”.¹⁸⁶ Another report noted the Aboriginality of a station hand scabbing on the strike.¹⁸⁷ There were no calls for inter-racial

¹⁸⁰ “Programme and Policy of the Communist Party,” WW, January 18, 1924, 2.

¹⁸¹ “Our Programme and Policy: How to Deal With Immigration,” WW, January 16, 1915, 2.

¹⁸² Bennett, *Rats and Revolutionaries*, 43.

¹⁸³ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 156-157, 208-209.

¹⁸⁴ Andrew Markus, “Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement,” in *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 138-141.

¹⁸⁵ Markus, “Talka Longa Mouth,” 142-144.

¹⁸⁶ “Sidelights on the Shearers’ Strike,” *The Communist*, April 18, 1922, 1.

¹⁸⁷ “Shearers’ Strike Bulletin – News From Everywhere – Coonamble,” *The Communist*, August 25, 1922, 3.

solidarity in this strike, despite widespread Aboriginal participation in the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), the union for shearers in NSW in this period.¹⁸⁸

In the Northern Territory, the North Australian Industrial Union (NAIU) that represented pastoral workers between 1923-27 "scorned" Aboriginal workers and campaigned for their exclusion from stations,¹⁸⁹ while in WA the AWU left the issue up to local branches.¹⁹⁰ Despite a number of articles in the CPA press noting the terrible treatment of Aboriginal workers,¹⁹¹ this exclusion was never criticised and there were no calls to organise and fight for equality. In fact, an apparent call for racial exclusion appeared in an article by Ross, printed on the front page with the banner headline "Advance Australia Fair – the Black Slaves of the Northern Territory" on January 26, 1923. Ross opened with a description of the horrific conditions faced by Aboriginal workers on remote pastoral stations. On the question of how communists should respond, however, Ross continued:

A section of the Australian ruling class... [who] realise that the Australian aboriginal is not numerous or energetic enough for the success of a cheap labour scheme, are busily advocating the wholesale importation of the primitive coolie races of Europe.

In every country where the backward races are in competition with the whites on the industrial field... the cheaper coloured labour is used as a lever to force down the wages and conditions of the white slaves.

This using of one section of the workers against the others, resulted in the recent bloody upheaval on the Rand, where the flower of the South African workers perished at the barricades... This racial competition constitutes a serious menace to the Australian workers, and the lessons of the Rand should not be forgotten.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 159, 219.

¹⁸⁹ Judith Elton, "Comrades or Competition? Union Relations with Aboriginal Workers in the South Australian and Northern Territory Pastoral Industries, 1878-1957" (PhD diss., University of South Australia, 2007), 103-105.

¹⁹⁰ Markus, "Talka Longa Mouth," 142.

¹⁹¹ For example, Hector Ross, "Advance Australia Fair – The Black Slaves of the Northern Territory," *The Communist*, January 26, 1923, 1; "W.A. News – The Skeleton in the Cupboard," *WW*, July 30, 1926, 3.

¹⁹² Ross, "Advance Australia Fair," 1.

The strike on the Rand was an insurrectionary, racist strike of white workers, calling for the exclusion of Black workers from the privileged jobs whites held in the mines.¹⁹³ *The Communist* had carried numerous uncritical reports on the strike, including accounts of the demands for Black exclusion.¹⁹⁴ Ross's call to "remember the lessons of the Rand" can be read as a form of support for exclusion of "primitive coolie races" from the Australian labour market, despite the abstract call for "abolition of slavery", both for white and black workers, that concludes the article.¹⁹⁵

In April 1925, an article announced that numerous workers had been sacked from WA pastoral stations: "The squatters, who prefer coloured labour while it is cheap, have had their leases extended until 1948".¹⁹⁶ The following year, an article by an anonymous correspondent in WA focused on the widespread use of Aboriginal workers with "childish minds", "mercilessly exploited" on "stations north of Geraldton".¹⁹⁷ Implicit in both articles is an argument that the main problem facing the labour movement was the exclusion of white workers in favour of "cheaper" Blacks, rather than a racist division that could be overcome through joint struggle.

Later in 1926, another article from WA argued, "in what practically amounts to chattel slavery, the stations are being run with aboriginals and half castes as workers".¹⁹⁸ The article is a polemic against the failure of the AWU: "the AWU organiser can be seen at the shearing shed, the construction gang and the outback mine, but he avoids the farm as if it were the plague". The concluding call to "help organise the outback rural worker", however, with no mention of the widespread exclusion of Aboriginal workers from the AWU, reads again as a call for white unionised labour to replace them.¹⁹⁹

Conclusion: early roots of working-class solidarity

¹⁹³ Drachewych, "Settler Colonialism and the Communist International," 15.

¹⁹⁴ "Facts About the Rand Strike – Lessons for Australian Workers," *The Communist*, March 24, 1922, 1; "Manifesto on the Rand Strike," *The Communist*, August 4, 1922, 2; "Murder of the South African Strikers," *The Communist*, December 15, 1922, 3.

¹⁹⁵ Ross, "Advance Australia Fair," 1.

¹⁹⁶ "White Australia," *WW*, April 10, 1925, 3.

¹⁹⁷ W.A. Correspondent, "Outback in WA," 3.

¹⁹⁸ "W.A. News – The Skeleton in the Cupboard," *WW*, July 30, 1926, 3.

¹⁹⁹ "W.A. News," 3.

A number of the articles cited above came from correspondents who were either working on stations employing Aboriginal people, or had active experience of this work. The articles were written as part of a tradition of party members being encouraged to take the role of “worker correspondents”.²⁰⁰ An article in 1926 outlined this role:

Worker correspondents of the Communist press are not only mirrors in which the class conflicts are reflected, but hammers to weld the determination of the workers... The capitalist class rules because it is able to divide the workers and break apart their struggles into isolated conflicts.²⁰¹

This chapter has focused on the racist ideology accepted by communists at this time, which meant attempts to “weld the determination of the workers” in the city to struggles in the bush through the CPA press also had a component that actually reinforced the racial divisions in the working class. Within a number of these articles, however, we can see how the experience of shared working life with Aboriginal people also led to a questioning of racist ideology. One article by a comrade C. Arfeldt who had “worked a number of years on the mining fields in the Northern Territory” was written in response to stories in “capitalist papers denouncing the blacks as treacherous murderers”. Arfeldt insisted that “the crimes committed by the whites against the blacks by far exceed” those committed by Aboriginal people.²⁰²

Arfeldt insisted on the crucial importance of Aboriginal knowledge and labour to the pastoral and mining industries. He made no suggestion Aboriginal people should be excluded from work on the stations and he insisted they “deserve better treatment”. He wrote in admiration of Aboriginal collectivism, “all food brought to the camp is equally divided among all”. Still trapped in the mindset outlined in this chapter, Arfeldt emphasised that they were “primitive people” who were “dying out” and there was no call for actual struggle against Aboriginal oppression.²⁰³ As the next chapter will show, however, when the CPA first began to recognise the potential significance of Aboriginal struggle, the perspective and experience of communists like Arfeldt became crucial for developing party consciousness about Aboriginal

²⁰⁰ “Worker Correspondents Wanted!,” WW, November 13, 1925, 2.

²⁰¹ “How to Write for the WW,” WW, April 14, 1926, 4.

²⁰² C. Arfeldt, “Unjust Attacks Upon the Aborigines,” WW, November 7, 1924, 3.

²⁰³ Arfeldt, “Unjust Attacks”.

oppression and putting into practice the new anti-racist perspective. A number of working-class activists who had spent time living and working with Aboriginal people, and who had developed a similar admiration to Arfeldt, lead the first large scale campaigns of solidarity with Northern Territory Aboriginal communities in 1933-34 (discussed in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight). In the process of these struggles to come, the CPA would recognise Aboriginal people were not destined to “die out”, but were fighting back against genocide with a spirit that could inspire the broader revolutionary movement.

Chapter Three

Australian imperialism and Aboriginal comrades

1927-31

Two major shifts in the orientation of communists in Australia laid the basis for the emergence of a clear position of solidarity with Aboriginal struggle in the 1931 program. Firstly, from late in 1927 the CPA began to develop an analysis very similar to that of Historian Roger Thompson's theory of Australian "sub-imperialism" outlined in Chapter Two.¹ While still emphasising the importance of the integration of Australian capitalism into the British Empire for its position in global affairs, there was a new recognition that Australia was also an independent imperialist power practising its own forms of colonial domination.² In this new interpretation of Comintern doctrine, the "duty" of communists in imperialist countries to fight against the oppression of people living under the colonial rule of "their own" bourgeoisie, became understood as an obligation to build solidarity with Indigenous peoples in the Pacific and on the Australian continent subject to discriminatory controls by either the Australian Commonwealth or state governments.³ Secondly, in 1928, the CPA intervened directly in a debate in the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU) in Darwin on an anti-racist basis.⁴ The NAWU excluded Aboriginal workers from union membership and was actively campaigning to exclude these workers from all employment in Darwin as well. The CPA advocated for Aboriginal people to be allowed to join the union and called for white and "coloured" workers to unite in a struggle for equal pay.⁵ This agitation for industrial equality was an important precondition for the development of a practice of solidarity that led to a deeper appreciation of the nature of Aboriginal oppression and the possibilities for resistance.

¹ Roger Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific: The Expansionist Era 1820-1920* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 1-7.

² "On Imperialism," WW, January 20, 1928, 2.

³ "Programmatic Declaration of the Communist Party – Aims of the Communist Movement in Australia," WW, September 4, 1931, 1.

⁴ "At Darwin – The Color Line – A Reactionary Policy," WW, April 13, 1928, 4.

⁵ Jude Elton, "Comrades or Competition? Union Relations with Aboriginal Workers in the South Australian and Northern Territory Pastoral Industries, 1878-1957," (PhD diss., University of South Australia, 2007), 228-229.

The first section of this chapter details the debates within executive bodies of the Comintern on “the Australia question” in September and October of 1927. In these meetings, Indian revolutionary M. N. Roy challenged the position of visiting CPA leader Tom Wright and other Comintern leaders, successfully forcing recognition of an independent Australian imperialism.⁶ This new perspective emerged at a time when both Australian repression and Indigenous resistance in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands was intensifying, and it informed the campaigning of the Australian Section of the League Against Imperialism (LAI), established by the CPA in 1930.⁷ The second half of the chapter analyses the emergence of a CPA branch in Darwin in 1928 and the anti-racist position around which the branch was constituted. A small group of Darwin-based unionists, in dialogue with the CPA leadership in south-east Australia, came to forcefully reject the prevailing attitude within the NAWU that exclusion of Aboriginal people from the labour market was an acceptable strategy for advancing the interests of unionised whites.⁸ This position developed in the context of a party-wide shift towards more strident advocacy against the White Australia Policy and moves across the country to prioritise recruitment of “foreign workers”.⁹ Darwin was a smaller town than most other places in Australia where the CPA had branches, but it had a much larger proportion of Aboriginal workers. This posed the question of Aboriginal oppression particularly sharply for the workers’ movement in Darwin. The experiences of the Darwin CPA branch played a crucial role in advancing the anti-racist consciousness of the entire party.

This chapter will also provide some initial discussion of the impact on the CPA of the ultra-left “Third Period” policy, mandated by the Comintern, which by 1928 was decisively controlled by Stalin.¹⁰ Analysis of CPA activity in both the NAWU and the LAI highlights the contradictory impact of this policy, which demanded communists break all ties with activists in the Labor Party, which was now characterised by the Comintern as a “social fascist” organisation. This at once sharpened the CPA’s critique of Australian racism and

⁶ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 10, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495-3-39.

⁷ “League Against Imperialism – Splendid Progress in Organisation,” WW, September 12, 1930, 6.

⁸ “Indentured Slaves in Darwin,” WW, January 10, 1930, 4.

⁹ J.J. Green, Representative of the CPA, Letter to the Secretariat of the ECCI, October 10, 1928, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495-6-16.

¹⁰ Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1985), 130.

destroyed the capacity of the party to work constructively within the institutions of the existing labour movement.

Roy insists Australia is imperialist

The Communist International went through a long process of change through the 1920s and early 1930s, as a counter-revolution took place within the USSR. By 1928, any semblance of workers' control of industry or the post-revolutionary state had been broken.¹¹ The emergence of the Stalinist dictatorship within Russia was mirrored by the collapse of democracy within the Communist International, which became subordinated to the diplomatic needs of the USSR.¹² When CPA leader Tom Wright visited Moscow in 1927 for further discussion of "the Australia question," however, this process of subordination had not yet been fully achieved. There was lively discussion and debate between Wright and Comintern leaders, and between Comintern leaders themselves,¹³ an experience never again shared by CPA leaders after 1928.¹⁴ Indian revolutionary M. N. Roy played a decisive role in these discussions with Wright.

Roy had been centrally involved in drafting the 1922 Comintern "Resolution on the Eastern Question" that had characterised Australia as an imperialist country and the White Australia policy as a function of imperialism,¹⁵ insights that were subsequently ignored. The influence of Roy's insightful intervention in 1927, however, was felt for many years afterwards, despite Roy himself being expelled from the Comintern the following year due to his close association with German communists who organised opposition to the new Stalinist "Third Period" policy.¹⁶

¹¹ Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World* (London: Verso, 2008), 490-493.

¹² Tom O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism* (Sydney: Stained Wattle Press, 1985), 12-15.

¹³ Tom Wright, Political Report on Australia to the British Secretariat, August 5, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495-3-30.

¹⁴ Barbara Curthoys, "The Communist Party and the Communist International (1927 – 1929)," *Labour History* 64, no 4 (May 1993), 65.

¹⁵ "Theses on the Eastern Question: vii) *The tasks of the proletariat in countries of the Pacific*," in *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, ed. John Riddell (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 1188-1189.

¹⁶ Kris Manjappa, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Dehli: Routledge, 2010), 83.

Wright's visit to Moscow in 1927 occasioned a more serious examination of "the Australia Question" than the trip of Hector Ross the previous year (discussed in Chapter Two). There were discussions on the Anglo-American Secretariat¹⁷ about Australian conditions, the preparation of a resolution through September¹⁸ and then further intensive discussions in October on the Political Secretariat with Comintern General Secretary Nikolai Bukharin.¹⁹ The initial draft of a resolution, prepared by a Russian official, Mingulin, sharply criticised the Australian party's campaigning against immigration schemes, saying that "the Party's attitude to mass immigration is utterly incorrect... the attitude taken up seems to foster the white Australia idea of the Labour [sic] Party".²⁰ Wright defended the CPA, arguing for the need to oppose "contractual immigration" schemes organised by the British and Australian governments, and found some support by other members of the Secretariat.²¹

Just as sharp was the debate on the relationship between Australia and the world imperialist system. Discussion on the Anglo-American Secretariat initially seemed very similar to that held with Ross the previous year. There was no recognition whatsoever of the independent imperialist initiative of the Australian bourgeoisie.²² Similar to Ross, Wright equated the Australian nationalist, anti-British sentiments expressed by some ALP leaders with anti-imperialism. An updated draft resolution argued Australia suffered from a "semi-colonial dependence on England", that Australian involvement in war meant the sacrifice of Australian working-class lives "for the interests of the London bankers", and emphasised the importance of calling for Australian independence.²³

¹⁷ The Anglo-American Secretariat was the subsection of the Comintern executive tasked with providing leadership to the CPA from 1922. Oleksa Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia on Questions of Imperialism, Nationality and Race, 1919-1943" (PhD diss., McMaster University, 2017), 224.

¹⁸ Transcripts and draft resolutions for meetings between August – October 1927 during Tom Wright's stay in Moscow are archived in, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 14, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495–94–31.

²⁰ Minutes of the Anglo-American Secretariat of the ECCI, October 4, 1927, FM4-10415B, 495–94–33.

²¹ Minutes of the Anglo-American Secretariat, October 4, 1927.

²² Minutes of the Anglo-American Secretariat, October 4, 1927.

²³ Resolution prepared for the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 8, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B 495–94–33.

When this draft resolution came before a small group from the Political Secretariat for discussion on 10 October, Roy made his decisive intervention:

The struggle against imperialism in Australia is not of the same character as the struggle against imperialism in a colonial or semi-colonial country. The fact that it is part of the British Empire does not give it any of the characteristics of a colonial or semi-colonial country. Australia has all the characteristics of an independent bourgeois state. It is entering the stage of imperialism. It can even be called an incipient imperialist country... The break-up of the British Empire will have a revolutionary significance in an international sense. But the struggle [against British imperialism] is not one in the national revolutionary sense, in the internal affairs of Australia... The economic and political conditions in Australia are the same as those prevailing in an independent bourgeois country... it must not be confounded with the struggle in a colonial or semi-colonial country.²⁴

Just as in the 1922 resolution, Roy again argued that "White Australia" was an imperialist policy:

In the resolution it has not been made sufficiently clear that a very important task of the communist party of Australia is to fight against the so-called 'white Australian' policy. The white Australian policy is a peculiar form of imperialism which is permeating the ranks of the Australian working class.²⁵

The response by Wright to these criticisms was the least polite of any records that exist of Australians attending Comintern meetings and could be evidence of racism against Roy.²⁶ Wright insisted that the Anglo-American Secretariat had already had long deliberations on the issues raised by Roy, repeatedly stated "Australia is not imperialist" and concluded his

²⁴ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 10, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, NSW 495-3-39.

²⁵ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 10, 1927.

²⁶ Despite the formal anti-racism of the Party, Macintyre cites incidents into the 1930s where the continuing racist attitude of some CPA members saw them chastised during visits to the USSR. Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 179.

point with, “I do not think there would be any hope or use in my staying here and discussing this question”.²⁷

The debate continued on the Political Secretariat on October 14, 1927, with Bukharin making a number of long contributions.²⁸ A new draft of the resolution, dated October 12, tried to accommodate the different opinions put forward in the debate two days previously.²⁹ It called both for the CPA to struggle for complete freedom of workers to come to Australia regardless of race, while continuing to argue for a serious fight against “immigration on the strength of mass contracts”.³⁰ It demanded a fight against Australian control of New Guinea and discussed “the imperialist policy of the Australian bourgeoisie”,³¹ while still stressing elsewhere that Australian foreign policy was subordinate to British imperialism and insisting on the need for a “decisive and energetic struggle for the ultimate separation of Australia from the British Empire”.³²

Bukharin was unhappy with these contradictions and essentially supported Roy’s argument. His authority was obviously accepted by Wright, who made no further challenge. Bukharin argued that the Australian party was wrong to oppose contractual immigration and supported suggestions that this contributed to prejudices against foreign workers:

I think we should fight especially against the way the Australian government exploits these imported workers and not pose the question in terms of protection of Australian workers versus contractually imported workers. We must not fight against imported workers, even if they come by contract... If we ask the question differently, it has a very bad smell.... we will blur all the cards, we ourselves will destroy our own struggle for freedom of emigration.³³

²⁷ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 10, 1927.

²⁸ Minutes of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, October 14, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495–3–40.

²⁹ “Resolution on the tasks of the Communist Party of Australia, October 12, 1927,” in *Our Unswerving Loyalty: A documentary survey of relations between the Communist Party of Australia and Moscow 1920-1940*, ed. David Lovell and Kevin Windle (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), 232 – 238.

³⁰ Resolution on the tasks of the CPA, 236.

³¹ Resolution on the tasks of the CPA, 235.

³² Resolution on the tasks of the CPA, 236.

³³ There has never previously been analysis of Bukharin’s contribution to this meeting, which appears in German in the archives. It was translated for this thesis by socialist historian Kate Davidson, from

Bukharin also said that the continuing demand for independence from England “is not well motivated in this resolution”. Bukharin discussed the British-Australian relationship not as a metropole-colony but rather as an imperialist “bloc” uniting the British and Australian bourgeoisie. He drew a comparison between Australia and the United States, a land also initially colonised by Britain that developed an independent bourgeoisie now fighting for its own interests on the world stage.³⁴ Eugene Varga, another senior Comintern official and leading economic theorist, also argued during this discussion that “Australia is not politically bound to England. The Australian bourgeoisie is an independent state”.³⁵ Varga argued that Australia continued to participate in the British Empire because it served the interests of Australian imperialism, and if it became more advantageous for the bourgeoisie to switch allegiances to the United States they would do so.³⁶ In these circumstances, there was no radical quality to the demand for independence.

The fate of this discussion is not easy to trace. The meeting concluded with Bukharin suggesting more research and further drafting was needed before a resolution could be finalised.³⁷ There is a short note in an October 18 Political Secretariat meeting that the resolution was still being worked on.³⁸ Copies of the 1927 Comintern “October resolution” relied on by existing histories of the CPA often reference drafts dated prior to the October 14 Political Secretariat meeting,³⁹ and only a part of the resolution was presented to the CPA conference in December 1927.⁴⁰ However, as we shall see, a combination of intensifying imperialist operations by Australian forces on Pacific islands, and some transmission of the new Comintern analysis about the existence of Australian imperialism, began to influence the outlook articulated in the CPA press, as the party felt its way towards an understanding of the particular forms of colonial rule practised by the Australian bourgeoisie.

the copy that appears on microfilm held in the Mitchell Library. Minutes of the Political Secretariat, October 14, 1927. Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495–3–40.

³⁴ Minutes of the Political Secretariat, October 14, 1927.

³⁵ Minutes of the Political Secretariat, October 14, 1927.

³⁶ Minutes of the Political Secretariat, October 14, 1927.

³⁷ Minutes of the Political Secretariat, October 14, 1927.

³⁸ Minutes of the Anglo-American Secretariat October 18, 1927, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495-72-27.

³⁹ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 90-91; Curthoys, “The Communist Party and the Communist International,” 55-56; “Resolution on the tasks of the Communist Party of Australia, October 12, 1927.”

⁴⁰ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 91.

Initial opposition to “the Australian Empire builders”

In October 1927, while the Comintern deliberated on the “Australia question”, the HMAS Adelaide, an Australian warship, arrived on the coast of Malaita in the Solomon Islands with machine guns, grenades and 160 “bluejacket” marines ready to kill.⁴¹ This operation is a good case study in Australian sub-imperialism (defined in Chapter Two). Responsibility for the colonial administration on the Solomon Islands following WWI had been divided between Britain and Australia. Malaita was formally under British control, though this relied heavily on Australian staff and resources. Australian capitalists had significant investments across all of the islands⁴² and the head administrator on the Island was an Australian called William Bell.⁴³ On October 3, Bell was collecting a recently imposed “head tax” when he and twelve other administration staff and native police were killed in an attack led by Basaina, a leading warrior from the Kwaio people.⁴⁴

A “punitive expedition” was sent out in reprisal. Led by Australian marines and complemented by deputised European plantation staff, many of them Australian,⁴⁵ as well as tribal rivals from the north of the island, the operation killed between 55 and 70 people. Two hundred Kwaio men were taken prisoner and 31 died of dysentery in the barbed-wire camp established to hold them. Basaina and five other alleged leaders were executed.⁴⁶ This conflict thrust debate about Australian colonial power in the region into the national spotlight. There had been similar public debate the previous year, when Australian forces used machine guns and grenades against “New Guinea natives” in Nakanai as a reprisal for the killing of four Australian miners.⁴⁷ An article eulogising one of the slain miners in the *Sydney Morning Herald* provides further insight into the world of 1920s Australian imperialism. Bruce Marley, thirty years old when killed in Nakanai, fought with the

⁴¹ “Pushing On – Malaita Expedition – Burning Villages,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 27, 1927, 2; “Bitter Fight – Solomon’s Expedition,” *The Sun*, November 9, 1927, 19.

⁴² Clive Moore, *Tulagi: Outpost of the British Empire* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), 106-110.

⁴³ “Bell, William Robert (1876 - 1927),” *Solomon Islands Historical Encyclopaedia, 1893-1978*. 2013, <http://www.solomonencyclopaedia.net/biogs/E000385b.htm>.

⁴⁴ Moore, *Tulagi*, 230.

⁴⁵ Moore, *Tulagi*, 232-237.

⁴⁶ Roger Keesing, “Colonial history as contested ground: The Bell massacre in the Solomons,” *History and Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (1990): 282.

⁴⁷ “Punitive Expedition – New Guinea Natives Killed,” *Australian Worker*, November 24, 1926, 2; “Thrilling Story – Nakanai Murders – Fight with Natives,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 1927, 15.

Australian Light Horse in Palestine and Egypt during the war and had also spent several years on cattle stations on the Victoria River Downs in the NT. It was during his participation in this system of Aboriginal slavery and brutal frontier violence that he gained the “experience in native labour” that saw him appointed as a plantation overseer in New Guinea.⁴⁸

The *Workers’ Weekly* provided extensive coverage of these developments, celebrating Basaina and his Kwaoi warriors.⁴⁹ Discussion of the nature of the Australian military operations in the paper, however, reflected the continued confusion about Australian imperialism being thrashed out on the Comintern executive. In some articles, there was a tendency to appeal to Australian nationalism, presenting Australian participation as the result of slavish subordination to Britain.⁵⁰ A report on November 18 for example, argued the Australian government had “sold out to Britain... solely for the sake of British investors, it has sent Australian sailors to the Solomons”.⁵¹ This nationalist framing did not match up with the reality. Australian soldiers were protecting the interests of Australian investors too, who operated seamlessly across both British and Australian protectorates.⁵² The “British company”, Levers Pacific Island Plantation Ltd, that the CPA emphasised was dominant on Malaita, had its Chairman of Directors, George Fulton, based in Sydney and was reconstituted as an Australian company in 1928.⁵³ Prime Minister Bruce⁵⁴ and the *Sydney Morning Herald* both made strident arguments that a “punitive expedition” was necessary to defend Australian interests in the region.⁵⁵

However, across the CPA reporting there was also a novel, alternative analytical tendency that began to recognise Australian imperialists were prosecuting their own distinct interests in the Pacific. A *Workers’ Weekly* article later in October pinned responsibility for the atrocity

⁴⁸ “Gold Seekers – New Guinea Murders,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 5, 1926, 11.

⁴⁹ “Basianu Executed – Heroic Leader of Solomon Islanders,” WW, July 6, 1928, 1; “Shooting up at Malaita: Villages Burned – Lewis Guns at Work,” WW, November 18, 1927, 5; “In the Solomons – Govt Tyranny,” WW, January 20, 1928, 5; “Solomon’s Revolt – Govt. Report Hides Truth,” WW, March 22, 1929, 4.

⁵⁰ “A Murder Expedition – On Behalf of Levers Ltd – Imperialists Use Australian Workers for their Dirty Work,” WW, October 14, 1927, 2.

⁵¹ “Shooting Up at Malaita,” 5.

⁵² Moore, *Tulagi*, 82- 96, 106 – 110.

⁵³ Moore, *Tulagi*, 17; *The Sun*. 1928. “Companies Registered – Levers Pacific Plantations,” November 12, 1928, 10.

⁵⁴ Stanley Bruce (Prime Minister), Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, October 14, 1927, 568.

⁵⁵ “Outrage in Malaita,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 11, 1927, 10.

in Malaita on the Australian bourgeoisie, framed as a “junior partner” in Pacific imperialism. It linked the massacre to similar instances of “murder, rape and enslavement” in New Guinea, “under direct Australian control”.⁵⁶ This article gives an initial glimpse of the way that a critical focus on the violence of Australian forces in the Pacific provided an important framework for the CPA to also make sense of the colonial oppression suffered by Aboriginal people. The author drew a direct connection between Australian colonial rule in the Pacific and examples of forced labour and frontier violence against Aboriginal people: “When this is considered natural in ‘our’ dependencies, no wonder the same brutality is shown within Australia itself”.⁵⁷

The following week a similar connection was drawn in a review of a play that was critical of missionaries in the “South Sea Islands”, saying the missionary role in “securing and perpetuating exploitation” also applied in the case of Aboriginal people.⁵⁸ In December, an article from a “worker correspondent” in Darwin noting that Aboriginal workers were held in bondage on cattle stations and refused wages⁵⁹ was printed directly adjacent to reports on brutality against indentured New Guinean labour on Australian-run goldfields.⁶⁰

Roy’s intervention in the Comintern discussed above may have already influenced some of the coverage from late 1927. In January 1928 an article outlining the basic principle that workers in imperialist countries must insist on the right of colonised people to self-determination, asked readers to take special note that “Australia has become an imperialist country, with its hold on New Guinea etc”.⁶¹ This was followed by sporadic recognition of Australian imperialism in the *Workers’ Weekly* throughout 1928. An article condemning Aboriginal working conditions in central Australia blamed the Australian “Empire builders who profess to be carrying the white man’s burden and who are loudest in their shouts for White Australia”.⁶²

⁵⁶ “The Slave Compound – New Guinea Horrors – Imperialism Means Rape and Murder,” WW, October 21, 1927, 1.

⁵⁷ “The Slave Compound,” 1.

⁵⁸ “Rain – The Missionary Pestilence of Polynesia,” WW, October 28, 1927, 4.

⁵⁹ Worker Correspondent, “No Wages for Aborigines on Cattle Station,” WW, December 9, 1927, 3.

⁶⁰ “Exploiting New Guinea Natives,” WW, December 9, 1927, 3.

⁶¹ “On Imperialism – the Right to Independence,” WW, January 20, 1928, 2.

⁶² “Leg Irons for Abos – Abominable Treatment in Central Australia,” WW, April 27, 1928, 3.

Following the Coniston massacre in central Australia in October 1928, where scores of Aboriginal people were slaughtered by police,⁶³ the *Workers' Weekly* ran a front page article, condemning the massacre as typical of both “British methods of colonisation” and “Australian pioneering history”.⁶⁴ An article reflecting on the massacre, in March 1929, was politically clearer, however, protesting against “Australian Empire-builders” responsible for both the slaughter at Coniston and also a recent military operation that killed nine people in “a native village in Papua”.⁶⁵ In response to Coniston, there was an unprecedented outcry from missionaries and humanitarian organisations, mostly constituted by middle and upper-class intellectuals.⁶⁶ The prestigious Anti-Slavery Society in London established a special subcommittee to monitor frontier violence in Australia. This marked the beginning of a new period in Aboriginal politics, where political leaders still stridently defended the rights of police to massacre Aboriginal people, but began to face serious opposition in public debate.⁶⁷ The fact that CPA only mustered a few newspaper articles in response to one of the most significant massacres in Australian history is indicative of the party’s continued weakness on questions of Aboriginal oppression and struggle. It would take until 1933 before the CPA took an active campaigning stance on the issue of frontier violence (discussed in Chapter Six). The distinctive, class-based anti-imperialist perspective they eventually brought to this campaigning, however, began to take a more solid form in the wake of Coniston.

In 1929 there was some CPA coverage of a major strike of workers at Rabaul in the Territory of New Guinea.⁶⁸ The Australian administration had conducted mass arrests and sentenced many participants to prison, where they endured beatings and hard labour for up to three years.⁶⁹ While condemning the repression, the *Workers' Weekly* heralded the strike as a

⁶³ Official figures put the number of Aboriginal people killed at 31, though many local Indigenous people believe that more than 100 people were killed. Francis Jupurrula Kelly, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 no. 3 (2014): 1-5; Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 191-200.

⁶⁴ W.J. Morrison, “Kill Aboriginals in the Northern Territory – Capitalism Civilises with Bullets,” WW, November 23, 1928.

⁶⁵ “The White Man’s Burden,” WW, March 22, 1929, 4.

⁶⁶ Rowley, *Destruction*, 288.

⁶⁷ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 198-200.

⁶⁸ “Rabaul Strike for Higher Wages – Fighting Same Bosses as Australian Workers,” WW, March 22, 1929, 4.

⁶⁹ Bill Gammage, “The Rabaul strike, 1929,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 10, no. 3 (January 1975): 24-28.

demonstration, “that the first wave of the world-wide revolt of the oppressed colonial peoples has reached the shores of this colony of Australia”.⁷⁰

In 1930 there was a still more decisive shift to systematically demand withdrawal of Australian forces from “mandated territories” (ie New Guinea, Papua and Nauru) and reject any notion that demands for Australian independence were progressive.⁷¹ This shift was closely bound up in a decisive new phase in the life of the CPA, precipitated by the new “Third Period” line being pushed on communist parties around the world by the now-Stalinised Comintern.

Contradictions of the Third Period

The term “Third Period” refers to the characterisation of the global political situation proclaimed by the Comintern at the Sixth World Congress in 1928. According to this analysis, the international political situation had passed through a First Period of upsurge of global revolutionary movements after the crisis of WWI, then a Second Period of defeats for the working class and stabilization of capitalism across the world through most of the 1920s. Finally, Stalin led an argument that the Third Period would be one of “intense development of contradictions in the world economy... of a general crisis of capitalism... wars of imperialist intervention and national liberation and gigantic class battles”.⁷²

The Wall Street crash and ensuing Depression from October 1929 seemed to confirm the Third Period perspective and certainly helped to strengthen the adherence of rank-and-file communists in Australia.⁷³ Many of the specific features of the analysis, however, were decisively influenced more by the demands of internal struggles taking place within the Soviet bureaucracy than by a serious assessment of global political developments.⁷⁴ By 1928, after many years of struggle about the future direction of the besieged Russian revolution, faction fights inside Russia had seen many Bolshevik leaders purged. The classical Bolshevik perspective had emphasised that a revolutionary society in Russia could not survive unless

⁷⁰ “Rabaul Strike for Higher Wages,” 4.

⁷¹ “The Meaning of Australia First,” WW, August 1, 1930, 2.

⁷² Hallas, *Comintern*, 130.

⁷³ Beris Penrose, “The Communist Party and trade union work in Queensland in the third period: 1928-1935,” (PhD diss., University of Queensland, 1994), 351-353.

⁷⁴ Hallas, *Comintern*, 131-133.

revolution continued to spread globally, and particularly into the European heartlands of industrial capitalism. In 1926, Stalin had led a sharp break with this analysis, asserting the possibility of “socialism in one country” and winning this position as the policy of the Soviet government.⁷⁵ In the Third Period, deviations from this perspective were denounced as heresy.⁷⁶

In 1928, Stalin moved to resolve a deep crisis in the Russian economy through a brutal process of state-controlled industrialization. This relied on both the forced requisition of grain and land from the peasantry, sharp increases in labour discipline in the cities and towns and a “vast network of forced labour camps” for anyone resisting the process.⁷⁷ The main source of opposition to this policy within the Russian Communist Party leadership came from Nikolai Bukharin, General Secretary of the Comintern Executive Committee (ECCI). Bukharin had placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of alliances with reformist workers’ parties through the mid-1920s. The Third Period policy decisively rejected this approach, as part of a general attack by Stalin and his allies on the authority of Bukharin within the Comintern. Reformist parties were branded “social fascist” and communists were instructed to treat them as more of a threat than actual fascists.⁷⁸ As a CPA circular, “points for propagandists” argued in November 1929:

A Labor Government is worse than a Nationalist Govt. because it can and does gain contact with the masses of the workers through the Unions etc. and the policy of social-fascism of the Labor Party is supported by workers who as yet do not realise their class interests.⁷⁹

Since its congresses in the early 1920s, the Comintern had defined itself in opposition to the reformism of major social-democratic parties. This sharp distinction, however, always came with careful warnings from Comintern leaders that the millions of workers who followed

⁷⁵ O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 11-13.

⁷⁶ “Leninism and Socialism in One Country,” WW, September 8, 1933, 2.

⁷⁷ Hallas, *Comintern*, 128-129.

⁷⁸ Frank Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour: The Left in Australia, 1919-1939* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981), 178-188.

⁷⁹ To Communist Speakers in Victorian State Election Campaign: Points for Propagandists, November 11, 1929, 2, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10240.

reformist parties could not simply be denounced into supporting revolution.⁸⁰ Reformist consciousness is the most common response to capitalist injustice and active alliances with reformist parties around “united fronts”, platforms of joint struggle, were argued to be a crucial strategy both for defending existing conditions and demonstrating in practice the superiority of revolutionary politics.⁸¹ Now, at precisely the time Stalin was establishing a dictatorship that decisively crushed the revolutionary democracy won in 1917 within Russia, his rhetoric on the world stage took an ultra-left turn, abandoning “united front” politics.

The Comintern insistence on this new sectarian perspective threw the CPA into crisis. Every successful campaign the CPA had been involved in over its short life had relied on the “united front” approach and many party members had strong relationships with militant activists and union leaders who remained in the ALP.⁸² The existing CPA leadership resisted the Comintern push to brand the ALP “social fascist”. Loyalty to the Comintern leadership in Moscow, however, was very strong amongst CPA cadre, who drew enormous inspiration from the experience of the Russian revolution and rejected stories about growing authoritarianism in Russia as bourgeois propaganda.⁸³ At the CPA national conference in December 1929, a new leadership was elected that embraced Third Period policy in its totality. This new leadership saw itself as accountable to Moscow first and foremost, not to the membership of the party.⁸⁴ Similar to developments in communist parties across the world in this period, democratic party structures were broken up and replaced by the rule of the party centre. Debate all but disappeared from the pages of the party press.⁸⁵

This sharp jag towards the politics of ultra-left sectarianism had a contradictory impact on the CPA. On the one hand, the party became very isolated from the mainstream labour movement and took a destructive approach to any political initiative coming from the left wing of the ALP, now denounced as “social fascists”.⁸⁶ At the same time, however, the CPA

⁸⁰ John Riddell, “The Origins of the United Front Policy,” *International Socialism* 130 (April 2011), <http://isj.org.uk/the-origins-of-the-united-front-policy/>.

⁸¹ See for example, Executive Committee of the Communist International, “December 1921 Theses on the Workers’ United Front,” in *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, ed. John Riddell (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), 1164-1174.

⁸² Farrell, *International Socialism*, 178-188.

⁸³ O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 16.

⁸⁴ Penrose, “Hebert Moxon, a Victim of the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the Communist Party,” 97.

⁸⁵ Curthoys, “The Communist International and the CPA,” 65-67.

⁸⁶ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 178-188.

grew very rapidly amongst the ranks of the unemployed as the Depression intensified. The fact that Labor governments at both the federal and state levels were often overseeing drastic attacks on workers and the unemployed during the Depression, meant that the “social fascist” tag made sense to some people increasingly destitute and desperate.⁸⁷ These two developments profoundly shaped CPA activity for the remainder of the period under study in this thesis. Rapid growth amongst the unemployed drove growing CPA contact with Aboriginal people which will be explored in detail in Chapter Four. As Chapter Six will argue, however, it was not until a moderation in anti-Labor sectarianism in the second half of 1933 that the CPA was able to win the support of broader political forces and successfully campaign on an Aboriginal rights issue.

Another spin-off from the Third Period-driven condemnation of the ALP was a new focus on a critique of the Australian nationalism, and calls for greater independence from Britain, that characterised Labor’s general ideology and approach to international affairs.⁸⁸ For example, a letter from the ECCI to the CPA in October 1930 argued:

[The CPA] must expose the propaganda unfolded by the pseudo-left against British imperialism and point out that through such demagoguery they want to distract the workers of the struggle from the main enemy of the Australian masses, the imperialist Australian bourgeoisie and their agents the Labor Party and Labor government.⁸⁹

Herbert Moxon, who would go on to write the CPA’s Aboriginal rights program published in 1931 (analysed in Chapter Four), was an ardent champion of the Third Period perspective. Moxon moved from Queensland to Sydney to take on the role of party General Secretary in 1930.⁹⁰ In April 1931, at the CPA Congress, he denounced elements within the CPA that were continuing to question the existence of an independent Australian imperialism:

⁸⁷ O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 37-38.

⁸⁸ This was a strong theme through discussions at the CPA Congress in April 1931. See the Political Report by Moore and ensuing discussion. Minutes of the Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, April 1931, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10417, 495-94-67.

⁸⁹ Political Secretariat of the ECCI, Supplement to the Letter to the CP and Australia, October 27, 1930, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495-4-65. Similar sentiments were expressed in a letter from the ECCI to the CPA in November 1929, “Open Letter from the Communist International,” WW, December 6, 1929, 3.

⁹⁰ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 100.

For years the Australian [Communist] Party held the theory that Australian capitalism was an appendage of British Imperialism and the agents of social fascism inside the Communist Party still put forward that theory in order to shield the bourgeoisie from the workers.⁹¹

Throughout 1930, the *Workers' Weekly* had run articles on the brutality of colonialism in New Guinea to attack the Scullin Labor government.⁹² Also in 1930, for the first time, the issue of Australian imperialism was taken up not just through articles in the CPA press, but by a campaigning body, the Australian Section of the LAI, with a stated mission of uniting militants from across the working class, along with humanitarians, in a public campaign against colonial oppression.⁹³ Despite the importance of the perspective on Australian imperialism put forward by the LAI, its campaigning efforts were badly hamstrung by the anti-Labor sectarian war being waged simultaneously by the CPA.

The League Against Imperialism

The LAI had been launched internationally three years prior to the formation of the Australian Section, at a major conference in Brussels in 1927. This was a Comintern initiative to co-ordinate global anti-imperialist struggle.⁹⁴ Initially, it had genuine support outside of the communist parties. There was serious representation of nationalist leaders from anti-colonial movements at 1927 League events, including Jawaharlal Nehru, who would go on to become India's first prime minister, Kusno Sosrodihardjo (Sukarno), future president of Indonesia, and Nguyen Ai Quoc, known in later years as North Vietnamese leader, Ho Chi Minh. There were independent socialist intellectuals including Albert Einstein and radical labour movement figures including British Labour Party vice-president, George Lansbury.⁹⁵ By late 1929, however, with the Third Period denunciations of "social fascists" in full swing

⁹¹ Herbert Moxon, Minutes of the Congress of the Communist Party of Australia, April 1931, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10417, 495-94 -67.

⁹² "The Latest Phase of Labor Treachery," WW, April 25, 1930, 3; "On the Lap of the Gods," WW, September 26, 1930, 4.

⁹³ "League Against Imperialism – Splendid Progress in Organisation," WW, September 12, 1930, 6.

⁹⁴ Fredrik Petersson, "Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement," *Interventions* 16 no. 1 (January 2014): 50.

⁹⁵ John Ellison, *The League against Imperialism: The Hidden History of the British Section* (London: Communist Party, 2017), 6-8.

in Europe, Communist Party leaders within the LAI drove out anyone unwilling to commit completely to the Third Period perspective,⁹⁶ and the organisation lost any capacity to seriously mobilise against imperialism.⁹⁷

The Australian Section of the LAI was established in 1930.⁹⁸ This followed an enthusiastic report on the 1929 global LAI Congress in the *Workers' Weekly* which noted the Rabaul strike and the important work to be done in Australia in solidarity with revolt on “islands subject to Australian control”.⁹⁹ An anti-war demonstration in August 1930 opposed the “murder machine” of Australian capitalism, used against the “frightfully enslaved masses in New Guinea” and the first LAI Congress the following week welcomed the “upsurge” of resistance in New Guinea.¹⁰⁰

A number of histories of the radical labour movement in this period have pointed out that the CPA had enjoyed success mobilising beyond their own ranks for internationalist causes before 1930, speaking alongside left ALP politicians and trade union leaders.¹⁰¹ The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) maintained an affiliation to the Comintern-initiated Pan-Pacific Trade Union Congress right up until 1930. From this point on, however, Third Period anti-Labor rhetoric allowed the right wing of the union movement to more easily isolate both communists and former CPA sympathisers in the ALP, now denounced by the CPA as “left social fascists”.¹⁰²

The first National Secretary of the Australian LAI was Esmonde Higgins, a leading CPA member who in 1930 was still resisting the extreme sectarianism of the Third Period.¹⁰³ He managed to attract some broader support for the first Congress and early events of the LAI,

⁹⁶ Fredrik Petersson, “The ‘Colonial Conference’ and Dilemma of the Comintern’s Colonial Work, 1928-29,” in *Communist Histories Volume 1*, ed. Vijay Prashad (Dehli: Leftword, 2016), 125.

⁹⁷ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 212.

⁹⁸ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 212.

⁹⁹ “Against Imperialism – World Congress,” WW, July 19, 1929, 1.

¹⁰⁰ “The Meaning of August First,” WW, August 1, 1930, 2.

¹⁰¹ Frank Farrell, *International Socialism*, 73-143; Robin Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communist and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1975), 15-19; See for example “Sydney Workers’ Protest – Mighty Stop-work Demonstration – Sacco and Vanzetti Murdered,” WW, August 26, 1927, 2.

¹⁰² Frank Farrell, “International Solidarity? White Australia and the Australian Council of Trade Unions,” in *Who Are Our Enemies: Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus, 134-135 (Neutral Bay: Hale & Iremonger, 1978).

¹⁰³ Penrose, “The CPA and Trade Union Work in Qld,” 198.

including from left wing Labor senator, Arthur Rae, Labor councillors and representatives from a number of left-wing trade unions.¹⁰⁴ But as Higgins was being pushed out of the CPA, his non-communist allies were also “publicly denigrated” by the party and the LAI became almost exclusively the preserve of party activists.¹⁰⁵

There were numerous references in LAI events and material in 1930 and 1931 to the importance of the struggle in New Guinea.¹⁰⁶ One *Workers' Weekly* article claimed that:

[M]eans have been devised to reach [New Guinea natives] with the message of revolution, with the slogan of immediate and complete independence... we must energetically raise the slogan for the New Guineans to secure weapons.¹⁰⁷

In reality, even by the CPA's own accounts, the LAI remained an isolated “propaganda organisation”,¹⁰⁸ hardly capable of fomenting an uprising in New Guinea or offering meaningful solidarity from Australia. Undoubtedly, however, the focus on the Australian state as a locus of colonial oppression and the new enthusiasm for supporting “native” resistance against Australian colonialism, provided a crucial backdrop for the development of Herbert Moxon's program in 1931.

On September 4, 1931, the week before the first of Moxon's campaigning articles on Aboriginal rights appeared in the *Workers' Weekly*, the CPA leadership issued a circular framing Aboriginal oppression as a function of Australian imperialism that should be fought by the LAI:

[T]he Australian bourgeoisie conducts an imperialist policy in relation to its colonial possessions (New Guinea and the Pacific Islands) and subjects its native races at home to the most vicious oppression and social subjection. The Australian Section of

¹⁰⁴ Penrose, “The CPA and Trade Union Work in Qld,” 198-199.

¹⁰⁵ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 212.

¹⁰⁶ For example, “Against Imperialism,” WW, October 2, 1930, 2; “Not Empire Day – But First of August,” WW, May 22, 1931, 1; “League Against Imperialism – Speaker's Notes, Pamphlets,” WW, January 16, 1931, 6.

¹⁰⁷ “Drive Slave Holders From New Guinea,” WW, September 26, 1930, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Central Committee – Communist Party of Australia Organisation Dept, Organisation Letter No. 2, To all Committees, Organisers and Units, September 4, 1931, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10420.

the LAI has the great and important task of developing the anti-imperialist struggle against the Australian bourgeoisie, in harmony with the movements and aspirations of the subject native races.¹⁰⁹

The *Workers' Weekly* on the same day printed the first call for Aboriginal self-determination in the history of the CPA, in a very similar paragraph:

We will end the imperialist policy of the Australian bourgeoisie in their subjection and exploitation of native races, at home, in New Guinea, and other possessions in the Pacific. We will give to these native races our friendship and economic co-operation with the unqualified right of self-determination.¹¹⁰

While Comintern theory about Australian imperialism played a crucial role in framing this demand, the emergence of Aboriginal people as active political subjects within this framework came directly out of growing contact between CPA members and Aboriginal people themselves.

Communists, unionists and Aboriginal workers in Darwin

In 1928, a CPA branch formed in Darwin with clear roots in pro-Aboriginal agitation. A crucial moment in the momentum towards establishing the branch was the publication of an article in the *Workers' Weekly* that challenged a racist campaign by the NAWU, which was trying to drive Aboriginal workers from jobs in Darwin in favour of white union labour.¹¹¹ This article itself was a breakthrough for the CPA, the first time that an article not only condemned brutal treatment but also recognised the potential political agency of Aboriginal people and made a positive call for readers to take action for Aboriginal rights. This stand precipitated recruitment of key union militants to the CPA and was the beginning of a number of years of pro-Aboriginal activism in Darwin that spurred on the development of important relationships and a more sophisticated analysis of Aboriginal oppression.

¹⁰⁹ Organisation Letter No. 2, September 4, 1931.

¹¹⁰ "Programmatic Declaration of the Communist Party – Aims of the Communist Movement in Australia," WW, September 4, 1931, 1.

¹¹¹ "At Darwin – The Color Line – A Reactionary Policy," WW, April 13, 1928, 2.

Between 1928 and the publication of Moxon's program in 1931, reports from northern Australia published in the communist press explicitly broke with many of the racist ideas that had hitherto framed CPA writing on Aboriginal issues. There was a clear challenge to the idea of Aboriginal inferiority,¹¹² calls to protest for Aboriginal rights,¹¹³ and condemnation of people being driven off their land by violent police operations.¹¹⁴ Studies by Jude Elton and Julia Martinez document well the impact of communists on debates within the NAWU and many of the anti-racist activities of the early years of the Darwin CPA.¹¹⁵ The remainder of this chapter will clarify crucial details surrounding the formation of the branch, drawing on Commonwealth Intelligence Branch files and the CPA archives. Analysis of the impact of the CPA will be restricted here to political developments within the NAWU around the key communist demand for industrial equality between white and "coloured" workers in the two years following the formation of the Darwin branch. This was a particular manifestation of the shift within the CPA during this period towards a harder line against the White Australia policy and racially exclusive unionism.¹¹⁶

The first evidence in the CPA press of an active communist presence in Darwin is an article in December 1927, when the *Workers' Weekly* published a short report from a "Worker Correspondent".¹¹⁷ This article was a commentary on Arbitration Court hearings in Darwin on the award for pastoral workers. The report notes comments from the Northern Territory's Chief Protector of Aborigines, that his office did not press requirements for Aboriginal workers to be paid any cash at all, even into a trust fund controlled by the Protector, so long as "the camp aborigines employed by the station are supplied with food".¹¹⁸ There was still no argument about how to address these conditions in the article or any critical commentary on the racist position of the NAWU, which was actively working to exclude Aboriginal and other "coloured" workers from jobs in the pastoral industry, in favour of white, unionised labour.¹¹⁹

¹¹² "Aboriginals – Ruthlessly Exploited," WW, May 16, 1930, 2; "The Antics," WW, June 6, 1930, 3.

¹¹³ "Indentured Slaves in Darwin," WW, January 10, 1930, 4.

¹¹⁴ "Aboriginals Chained and Killed in West Australia," WW, April 4, 1930, 4.

¹¹⁵ Elton, "Comrades or Competition?," 254-304; Julia Martinez, "Plural Australia: Aboriginal and Asian Labour in Tropical White Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940," (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2000), 94-125.

¹¹⁶ Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of SA, Canada and Australia," 226-230.

¹¹⁷ "No Wages for Aborigines on Cattle Station," WW, December 9, 1927, 3.

¹¹⁸ "No Wages for Aborigines on Cattle Station".

¹¹⁹ Elton, "Comrades or Competition?" 220.

In early 1928, the political activity of town-based NAWU activists centred on a racist campaign to exclude Aboriginal workers from employment in Darwin.¹²⁰ The Commonwealth government Protection system allowed for the severe exploitation of Aboriginal workers held in places like the Kahlin compound.¹²¹ They were put out to work by the Chief Protector for local businesses, households and government agencies to perform menial labour for virtually no pay.¹²² As a severe economic downturn began to hit Darwin, large numbers of unionised white workers were losing jobs and the NT Administration was trying to force unemployed men to leave the town. The NAWU argued that Aboriginal workers should be put off instead, to create opportunities for their white members.¹²³

This 1928 campaign was just the latest manifestation of the racist politics of exclusion that had hitherto dominated the strategy of white unionists in the Northern Territory. The NAWU formed in January of 1927, adopting rules from the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) that prohibited membership of most categories of "coloured" worker.¹²⁴ So-called "half caste" workers could be NAWU members if they were born in Australia and had one white parent, but the rhetoric and practice of the union undoubtedly favoured those recognised as "British".¹²⁵

The main strategy deployed in the NAWU campaign was a consumer boycott of any hotels employing Aboriginal workers.¹²⁶ As late as May 1928,¹²⁷ future leading CPA activists John Waldie and Lawrence Mahoney, both members of the NAWU executive, were enthusiastically supporting the boycott campaign, moving motions to take harsh disciplinary action against union members who had patronised the hotels.¹²⁸ The intervention of the CPA into this dispute, however, catalysed organisation around an alternative political perspective

¹²⁰ Bernie Brian, "The Northern Territory's One Big Union: The Rise and Fall of the North Australian Workers' Union, 1911-1972," (PhD diss., Northern Territory University, 2001), 110-111.

¹²¹ Martinez, "Plural Australia," 180-181.

¹²² Martinez, "Plural Australia," 112-113.

¹²³ Elton, "Comrades or Competition?" 194-195.

¹²⁴ Martinez, "Plural Australia," 112-113.

¹²⁵ "Foreigners on Construction," *Northern Standard*, June 19, 1928, 4.

¹²⁶ Records of most NAWU meetings that discussed this campaign were printed in *Northern Standard*. See for example, "The Abo. Problem," *Northern Standard*, February 14, 1928, 2; "N.A.W.U.," *Northern Standard*, April 3, 1928, 2; "Mass Meeting," *Northern Standard*, May 11, 1928, 2.

¹²⁷ "Mass Meeting," *Northern Standard*, May 11, 1928, 2.

¹²⁸ "N.A.W.U.," *Northern Standard*, April 3, 1928, 2.

in Darwin, one based on principles of solidarity between workers regardless of colour.

On April 13, 1928, the *Workers' Weekly* carried an article titled, "At Darwin - the Colour Line - A Reactionary Policy". The article introduced the NAWU boycott campaign and then argued:

Our opposition to the proposal is based upon a refusal to tolerate the color line being drawn among the toiling masses, which is one of the most important means the boss employs to divide our forces. If the workers at Darwin are convinced that the low wages of the aboriginals are operating to the detriment of the prevailing standard of living, then the correct policy is to fight for the full wage for all workers irrespective of color.¹²⁹

This article was the first published in the party press that viewed Aboriginal people as having agency – as potential union members: "in increasing numbers they are being absorbed into industry and there is no reason why they should not be organised with the rest of the workers in the trade unions".¹³⁰ It was also the first article that actually put forward a call to fight for Aboriginal rights. This strategy was limited by a narrow focus on demands for industrial equality and organisation as workers. The colonised status of Aboriginal people was foreshadowed, however:

The aboriginals are an oppressed people. They have been driven from their natural hunting grounds by the capitalist class and they have been degraded into bumming on the Government or Missions.¹³¹

The introduction to the article made clear that the author was not actually in Darwin, citing information from "press reports". But the CPA must have had either members or supporters present in the town to receive and distribute party press, evidenced by the 1927 article written by a "worker correspondent" from Darwin and quoted above.¹³² Martinez notes that even the CPA theoretical journal *The Communist* must have had quite an extensive readership during 1928: "when one [NAWU] member plagiarised this journal in a *Northern Standard* article,

¹²⁹ "At Darwin – The Color Line".

¹³⁰ "At Darwin – The Color Line".

¹³¹ "At Darwin – The Color Line".

¹³² Worker Correspondent, "No Wages for Aborigines on Cattle Station".

his plagiarism was immediately picked up by other unionists, including the NAWU President John McGorry".¹³³

Simply reading the communist press, however, did not mean that NAWU members accepted the arguments being made against racism. The man accused of plagiarism was James McCarthy, a well-known militant construction worker. McCarthy wrote long articles against the growing threat of world war for the *Northern Standard*, drawing heavily on *The Communist*.¹³⁴ But he was a whole-hearted supporter of the anti-Aboriginal boycott campaign and also campaigned inside the union for exclusion of workers from southern Europe.¹³⁵

Nevertheless, there was evidence of a shift within the union in the wake of the CPA intervention. The annual NAWU meeting on 28 August 1928 resolved to hold a plebiscite of members to change the union rules to specify: "that any coloured person born in Australia who has passed a 3rd class school examination of State school standard be admitted to membership."¹³⁶ Martinez noted that the restriction to Australian born workers would have excluded veteran Darwin "coloured" personalities such as Antonio Cubillo, born in the Philippines, who had attempted to organise a branch of the IWW in Darwin in 1915.¹³⁷ The lack of education available to Aboriginal people at this time, outside of the few educated by missionaries, meant the new rules would have also done little to bring many Aboriginal workers into the ranks of the union.¹³⁸ Despite these limitations, support across the NAWU leadership for the ballot does indicate cracks in hegemonic racism.¹³⁹

Martinez argues that the resolution was "perhaps inspired by the communist stance" published in the *Workers' Weekly* in April,¹⁴⁰ and historian Andrew Markus similarly credits "left wing pressure" and the influence of the CPA.¹⁴¹ This suggestion is strengthened by

¹³³ Martinez, "Plural Australia," 114.

¹³⁴ J. McCarthy, "The Coming War – Part II The Cock Pit," *Northern Standard* August 4, 1928, 5.

¹³⁵ James McCarthy, "Wake Up!," *Northern Standard*, June 15, 1928, 3.

¹³⁶ "N.A.W.U.," *Northern Standard*, August 28, 1928, 5.

¹³⁷ Martinez, "Plural Australia," 115. The important contribution of the Cubillo family to UWM struggles in Darwin in the early 1930s will be discussed in Chapter Five.

¹³⁸ Martinez, "Plural Australia," 115.

¹³⁹ Andrew Markus, "Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement," in *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus, (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 149-150.

¹⁴⁰ Martinez, "Plural Australia," 114.

¹⁴¹ Markus, "Talka Longa Mouth," 149-150.

consideration of intelligence files that indicate an actual CPA branch in Darwin had just begun operating, perhaps covertly, before the August 28 meeting when the rule change was suggested. Archived correspondence between officers within the Commonwealth Investigation Branch on John Waldie says:

Waldie has been known as a member of the Executive of the Darwin [CPA] group and, as such, visited Sydney in 1928 to receive instructions. He is looked upon as being an able organiser and possessing brains. He is considered a dangerous propagandist whose movements should be watched.¹⁴²

Another letter specifies: “[Waldie] visited Sydney in 1928 and received instructions [from CPA leaders] for further activities in demonstrations and direct actions, which took place at Darwin later”.¹⁴³

Waldie was an executive member of the NAWU in 1928. He was a prominent contributor to meetings, with his name noted moving motions or making points in each month of 1928 up until a union meeting on June 17.¹⁴⁴ At this meeting he seconded a motion from McCarthy, condemning the “scabby tactics of Mediterraneans” and calling on their exclusion from construction projects. The following week, Waldie was fined for drunkenness in Darwin.¹⁴⁵ There is then no record of Waldie at NAWU meetings throughout July or most of August and his name is conspicuously absent from a heated debate about strategy during an oil tanker strike in late July, where both Mahoney and McCarthy made substantial arguments for a militant position on the public record.¹⁴⁶ Waldie’s name does not appear again in the *Northern Standard* until the August 28 annual meeting which moved the resolution to take a ballot on “coloured” membership.¹⁴⁷ This suggests that Waldie’s trip to meet with the CPA leadership in Sydney took place during July and August of 1928. There are reports noting

¹⁴² H.E. Jones, Letter to the Inspector-in-Charge, September 11, 1933, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, John Basil Waldie, NAA: A6126, 1107.

¹⁴³ Inspector D.A. Mackiehan, Letter to The Director, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Brisbane, February 1932, NAA: A6126, 1107.

¹⁴⁴ “Foreigners on Construction,” *Northern Standard*, June 19, 1928, 4.

¹⁴⁵ A.V. Stretton, NT Superintendent of Police, Letter re Movements of Communists, August 21, 1933, NAA: A6126, 110.

¹⁴⁶ “Trouble on Oil Tanks,” *Northern Standard*, July 20, 1928, 2; C. Mahoney and J. McCarthy, “On Playing the Game,” *Northern Standard*, July 27, 1928, 6.

¹⁴⁷ “N.A.W.U.,” *Northern Standard*, August 28, 1928, 5.

Waldie's presence in Darwin regularly for the rest of 1928 in the *Northern Standard*,¹⁴⁸ and his activity took on a markedly different character.

Waldie and Mahoney ceased their racist commentary and proposals in NAWU meetings. Immediately on his return, Waldie set about organising a committee of unemployed workers and is recognised in the *Northern Standard* as a "representative of the unemployed" from August 31.¹⁴⁹ Rather than excluding Aboriginal workers to create positions for white unemployed, Waldie's committee began to organise militant demonstrations from December 1928, demanding relief work, without seeking to specify the nationality or race of those who would be employed.¹⁵⁰

Challenging racially exclusionary union practices and organising unemployed workers were two initiatives being pushed nationally by the CPA at this time.¹⁵¹ Immediately adjacent to the April 1928 article arguing against the hotel boycott in Darwin, the *Workers' Weekly* featured an article titled "Organise the Foreign Workers", calling for the AWU to appoint organisers "from within their ranks" of southern European migrants moving into timber cutting regions in WA.¹⁵² Continued Comintern insistence on the need for more effort to support "foreign workers"¹⁵³ helped encourage these initiatives, evidenced both in the party press and in correspondence with the Comintern.¹⁵⁴ The imposition of censorship of communist literature in non-English languages by Customs hampered these efforts.¹⁵⁵

There were further articles in the *Workers' Weekly* in 1929 written by correspondents from

¹⁴⁸ For example, "N.A.W.U. Meeting," *Northern Standard*, September 11, 1928, 2; "Treatment of Katherine Unemployed," *Northern Standard*, October 9, 1928, 1; "Football," *Northern Standard*, December 11, 1928, 3.

¹⁴⁹ "N.A.W.U.," *Northern Standard*, August 31, 1928, 5; "Treatment of Katherine Unemployed".

¹⁵⁰ "Starvation, Deportation or Fanny Bay," *Northern Standard*, December 18, 1928, 2.

¹⁵¹ There was a CPA-initiated nationwide demonstration for relief work on July 1, 1928. The *Workers' Weekly* carried reports from groups in major capital cities and noting the establishment of unemployed organisations in regional areas following this. "Unemployed Rally," WW, June 28, 1928, 1; "Unemployed for Action in Townsville," WW, August 3, 1928, 2.

¹⁵² "Organise Foreign Workers," WW, April 13, 1928, 2.

¹⁵³ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 87-88.

¹⁵⁴ Oleksa Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia," 226-230; J.J. Green, Representative of the CPA, Letter to the Secretariat of the ECCI, October 10, 1928, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10415B, 495-6-16.

¹⁵⁵ Prohibited Working Class Literature, October 27, 1928, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10417, 495-94-53.

the new NT branch condemning the brutal conditions faced by Aboriginal workers and arguing for the NAWU to abandon all racist restrictions on membership: “only when the white and colored workers join forces can an effective attack be launched against the exploiters”.¹⁵⁶ At the CPA Congress in 1929, the exclusion of Aboriginal workers from the NAWU was noted in a resolution about the White Australia policy, used as a potent example of the destructive impact of working class conditions generally when “colored” workers are excluded from the union “and reduced to a state of chattel slavery”. This was also the first clear CPA resolution condemning racist immigration restrictions, without qualifying this with any references to opposing “contractual immigration”.¹⁵⁷

In May 1930, a detailed article calling for unionisation of “full-blooded as well as half-caste aboriginals”,¹⁵⁸ specifically addressed the racist stereotypes about Aboriginal inferiority that was common across the labour movement and had characterised the CPA’s own reporting just a few years prior:

Although most of us know a little about the exploitation of the native population of other countries, we do not know much of the intense exploitation of these natives [Aboriginal people] being exploited by the same white-skinned parasites who exploit us, we brush it aside as being unimportant and assume that being “superior” we have no need to worry about such primitive people as the Australian natives... Let us look at things as members of the International working class and not as isolated, supposedly superior workers.¹⁵⁹

Just as with the LAI, the process of putting into action the new CPA commitment to agitate for union membership and equal pay for Aboriginal workers was hamstrung by the Third Period sectarianism adopted by the party following the December 1929 Congress. Elton argues that, despite the continuing hegemony of racist ideas about Aboriginal workers amongst the ALP-aligned leadership of the NAWU, there were some genuine cracks in this

¹⁵⁶ North Worker (Darwin), “Vestey’s Starvation Methods – Stockmen Expected to Live on Beef Alone,” WW, October 4, 1929, 3: “Indentured Slaves in Darwin,” WW, January 10, 1930, 2.

¹⁵⁷ A section of this resolution, including the reference to Darwin was printed in “White Australia – Communist Party’s Policy,” WW, March 7, 1930, 3.

¹⁵⁸ “Aboriginals – Ruthlessly Exploited,” WW, May 16, 1930, 5.

¹⁵⁹ “Aboriginals – Ruthlessly Exploited”.

approach that were not effectively engaged with by the CPA.¹⁶⁰ Some developments evidenced openness to a “class rather than race based approach to union organising”, specifically advocacy of equal pay for Aboriginal workers in particular jobs in the pastoral industry.¹⁶¹ For example, NAWU organiser Owen Rowe and Secretary Robert Toupein made a case for full award conditions for Aboriginal drovers at a conference with pastoralists in May 1930. They challenged the idea that Aboriginal labour was of inferior quality and that Aboriginal people were incapable of managing money.¹⁶² Elton argues that the CPA’s new hard-line position against racial exclusion within the union had an influence on the NAWU pushing for award wages.¹⁶³ Significantly, Rowe travelled in the aftermath of the conference to a remote station where three white drovers had been sacked in favour of Aboriginal workers. He successfully made an anti-racist argument about the need to win equal pay for Aboriginal drovers, rather than trying to exclude them from the industry.¹⁶⁴

In 1929, the NAWU affiliated to the ACTU.¹⁶⁵ Despite the weakness of the CPA within the union movement at this time, the ACTU had resolved during its foundation in August 1927 to affiliate to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat (PPTUS), a Comintern initiative clearly aligned with the USSR.¹⁶⁶ ACTU attempts to organise a conference of labour movement representatives from across the Pacific were promptly prohibited by the Federal government.¹⁶⁷ Gollan argues that widespread left wing support for joining the PPTUS was guided by commitments to peace activism that existed amongst a broad layer of socialists in the unions and the left of the Labor Party, born out of the radicalisation at the end of WWI.¹⁶⁸ In formal terms, the PPTUS was opposed to all doctrines of racial superiority and supported free immigration of all workers. In practice, however, while defending the importance of fraternal relations with unions across the Pacific, in 1928 the ACTU President, W. J. Duggan, asserted that “the ACTU stood solidly for the White Australia policy”.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁰ Elton, “Comrades or Competition?” 254.

¹⁶¹ Elton, “Comrades or Competition?” 253.

¹⁶² Elton, “Comrades or Competition?” 241-244.

¹⁶³ Elton, “Comrades or Competition?” 228.

¹⁶⁴ Elton, “Comrades or Competition?” 246.

¹⁶⁵ “Industrial Items,” *Northern Standard*, May 17, 1929, 2.

¹⁶⁶ Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists*, 15.

¹⁶⁷ “Bruce Bans Pan-Pacific Trade Union Congress,” *Pan-Pacific Worker*, July 1. 1928, 7-9; “Protests Wanted,” *WW*, August 3, 1929, 3.

¹⁶⁸ Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists*, 15-17.

¹⁶⁹ Frank Farrell, “International Solidarity?” 132.

Many left-wing unionists insisted that their support for White Australia was not in contradiction with important internationalist principles of peace and support for struggles of workers in other Pacific countries.¹⁷⁰ In the course of these debates, however, communists taking a harder line against White Australia did find an audience. One sign of the opportunities presented here is that NAWU Secretary Toupein contributed an article to the PPTUS journal in 1929 condemning the slave system faced by Aboriginal pastoral workers in North Australia, “one of the most oppressed and intensely exploited people on the face of the earth”.¹⁷¹

There was no clear call from Toupein to unionise Aboriginal workers and more than a hint of paternalism. It was significant, however, that the NAWU Secretary was willing to write for a journal advocating revolutionary anti-imperialism.¹⁷² Rowe and Toupein also both participated in a number of communist-initiated international solidarity events in Darwin and provided important support to the early militant activities of the unemployed committee chaired by Waldie.¹⁷³

On the whole, the ALP-aligned NAWU leadership retained a racist outlook. There were no moves by Toupein or Rowe to change union rules to allow the vast majority of NT Aboriginal workers into the union. In the same conference where they advocated for equal pay for some Aboriginal stock workers, they agreed with the removal of “half-caste” children from stations.¹⁷⁴ However, the new CPA Darwin branch did not couple criticism of this racism with any serious attempt to relate to positive steps by the NAWU such as the push for award wages for Aboriginal drovers. As the Third Period perspective set in, CPA criticism of the NAWU became both increasingly vitriolic and hollow. CPA policy on White Australia in 1930 argued that “a vigorous attack upon the chauvinistic White Australia policy of the Australian Social Fascists (ALP) and the color bar of the AWU and other unions must be waged”.¹⁷⁵ This “attack” did not include any political strategy for actually winning such changes. In 1930, at the national level, condemnation of the ALP as “social fascists” worked to alienate left-Labor supporters at the ACTU during debates on White Australia, and the

¹⁷⁰ Farrell, “International Solidarity?” 133.

¹⁷¹ Robert Toupein, “Exploitation of Aborigines in Northern Australia,” *Pan-Pacific Worker*, September 1, 1929, 12-13.

¹⁷² “Our Preamble,” *Pan-Pacific Worker*, June 1, 1929, inside cover.

¹⁷³ Brian, “The Northern Territory’s One Big Union,” 120-121.

¹⁷⁴ Elton, “Comrades or Competition?” 245-246.

¹⁷⁵ “White Australia – Communist Party’s Policy”.

right-wing were able to finally win a vote to disaffiliate from the PPTUS.¹⁷⁶

A *Workers' Weekly* report on an attempt by CPA members in May 1930 to argue against racist exclusion clauses at an NAWU meeting was full of invective about the “treachery” and “cowardice” of leading ALP-aligned union members and officials, described as “reactionaries” and “tools of the boss”.¹⁷⁷ Elton points to an attempt to change the union rules a few months later at the NAWU AGM to demonstrate the CPA’s focus on rhetorical condemnation of “social fascists” in this period, rather than strategic political initiative to win change. Mahoney put a motion from the floor “that all bona fide workers irrespective of colour, shall be admitted to full membership of the NAWU”. The branch President, a prominent ALP member, ruled the motion out of order, because the mandated seven days-notice of a motion to change union rules had not been given. He was attacked in the *Workers' Weekly* as a racist and a reactionary. Elton emphasises, however, that the CPA let the motion lapse, rather than try a legitimate submission to future meetings within the union rules.¹⁷⁸

At this same AGM, there was a union election and Waldie and Mahoney lost their positions on the NAWU Council, receiving just 15 and 13 votes respectively.¹⁷⁹ In a similar NAWU Council election just two years previously, Mahoney had received almost five times this number, polling highest with 62 votes.¹⁸⁰ Viewed solely through the prism of NAWU politics, this seems like a huge blow to the political influence of both activists. However, at the same time they became isolated within the NAWU, the Darwin branch of the CPA was responsible for more new subscriptions to the *Workers' Weekly* than any other branch in Australia, outselling the Sydney branch in 1930 with 264 subscriptions to 258, with Mahoney personally responsible for 144.¹⁸¹ As in other areas of Australia, CPA influence had increased rapidly amongst the growing ranks of the unemployed, as Waldie and Mahoney spearheaded a vibrant, multi-racial unemployed workers’ movement.

Conclusion

This chapter charted the development of a clear CPA position of support for Indigenous

¹⁷⁶ Farrell, “International Solidarity?” 134-135.

¹⁷⁷ “Darwin Communists and the Aborigines – Labor Fakirs Hide Their Treachery,” WW, May 30, 1930, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Elton, “Comrades or Competition?” 261.

¹⁷⁹ “N.A.W.U. Annual General Meeting,” *Northern Standard*, September 2, 1930, 2.

¹⁸⁰ “N.A.W.U.,” *Northern Standard*, March 13, 1928, 1.

¹⁸¹ “Hurrah for Darwin,” WW, February 20, 1931, 4.

peoples oppressed by Australia, the first flickers of recognition of Aboriginal political agency, and active agitation for industrial equality. These developments all began just prior to the consolidation of Stalin's power within the Comintern and the hegemony of the Third Period policy over the global movement. A crucial breakthrough for the CPA came with recognition that Australia was an imperialist power practicing particular forms of colonial domination. This anti-imperialist framework eventually led to recognition of the importance of the Australian working-class movement supporting Aboriginal struggles for self-determination. This perspective was fought for by Roy and Bukharin in 1927, two influential Comintern officials deposed soon after the Third Period policy was adopted. Agitation against the NAWU "colour bar" led to the formation of a CPA branch in Darwin in 1928 that would go on to play a decisive role in the development of a pro-Aboriginal perspective within the party as a whole.

The full adoption of Third Period politics at the December 1929 CPA Congress had a contradictory impact. The CPA's anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics sharpened as the party sought rhetorical weapons to attack the ALP. The political cost of anti-Labor sectarianism was high, guaranteeing isolation from the trade unions and left-Labor activists. However, Third Period politics also fuelled the rapid growth of the CPA amongst the ranks of the unemployed. As we shall see in the next chapter, this unemployed movement would bring the party into direct contact with the struggles of Aboriginal people themselves, with profound implications for the development of Marxist analyses of Aboriginal oppression.

Chapter Four

‘Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines’

Herbert Moxon and the 1931 Program

On September 24, 1931, the *Workers’ Weekly* printed a lengthy article, “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines: Draft Program for the Struggle Against Slavery”,¹ the first systematic Marxist analysis of Aboriginal oppression and resistance. The author was former CPA General Secretary and current Political Bureau member, Herbert Moxon, who also wrote a number of associated articles in the same month. Moxon described a continuing process of genocide² across Australia through frontier homicide, starvation and forced child removal.³ He identified the roots of this process in the imperatives of Australian capitalism. Moxon argued that having stolen an entire continent through imperialist expansion, the Australian ruling class was trying to permanently erase the presence of the Aboriginal peoples and cultures that provided a constant reminder of this injustice.⁴ Against the rigid “caste” distinctions dominant in mainstream Australia, these writings made the case for a struggle uniting Aboriginal people in “all states and territories”,⁵ together with the revolutionary working-class movement, to win “freedom and self-determination”.⁶ While the CPA had ignored the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) when the organisation was politically active in NSW in the 1920s, Moxon’s apparent knowledge of the experiences of the AAPA had an important impact on his writings in 1931.

¹ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery,” WW, September 24, 1931, 2.

² The term “genocide” did not exist at the time of Moxon’s writings and was first used by legal scholar Raphael Lemkin in 1944 to mean “coordinated or systematic actions aimed at destroying a racial, ethnic or religious group’s essential foundations”. Lemkin’s concept, however, provides a useful description of the process of “racial extermination” Moxon argued was being inflicted on Aboriginal people. For discussion of Lemkin’s definition and its applicability in Australia, see Colin Tatz, *AITAIS Research Discussion Paper: Genocide in Australia*, no. 8, Canberra: 1999.

³ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

⁴ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

⁵ H.J.M., “Massacre! Rape! Slavery! The ‘White Man’s Burden’ in White Australia,” RL, September 11, 3.

⁶ “The Native Races and Imperialism,” WW, September 18, 1931, 2.

Moxon's articles were the product of increasing contact between communists and Aboriginal people across Australia, as party membership grew exponentially in the Depression through its leadership of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM). After first analysing these articles in detail, this chapter then documents the way that Depression conditions influenced growing contact between Aboriginal people and white unemployed activists, first in Darwin, then in Sydney and country towns across NSW. Joint experiences of economic hardship and political repression played a crucial role in allowing for a deeper appreciation of Aboriginal circumstances by a number of communists. The chapter concludes with the story of Moxon's attempt in October and November 1931 to support the anti-racist activism of the UWM in Bourke, efforts that were swiftly crushed by the police and right-wing vigilantes.

“Struggle with the aborigines against Australian Imperialism!”⁷

On August 29 1931, Herbert Moxon reported to the CPA Political Bureau (a subsection of the Central Committee), on the “question of the Aborigines”. Chapter Three noted the rise of Moxon to the position of CPA General Secretary, elected in the summer of 1929 to oversee the full implementation of the Third Period perspective in Australia.⁸ Moxon had been involved in socialist organisation from 19 years of age.⁹ In 1926, an intelligence agent described him as a “clever and dangerous Communist” and powerful orator.¹⁰ He presided over a six-fold increase in party membership, but had been stood down from the General Secretary position earlier in 1931,¹¹ due to a series of political clashes inside the party that will be fully discussed later in this chapter. At this August 29 meeting, Moxon was still a member of the Political Bureau. He argued for a “tentative program of demands” for Aboriginal rights struggle.¹² A column in the minutes marked “action point” says that “further information is to be obtained” and a “campaign [is] to be commenced in the [Workers'] Weekly”.¹³ On September 12, minutes note that the Bureau endorsed the “draft

⁷ This was the concluding line of the CPA's 1931 program, “Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines”.

⁸ Beris Penrose, “Hebert Moxon, a Victim of the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the Communist Party,” *Labour History* 70 (May 1996): 97.

⁹ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 99.

¹⁰ Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department Minute Paper, Moxon, Herbert, May 1926, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Moxon, Herbert John, NAA: A6119, 388.

¹¹ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 105.

¹² Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, August 29, 1931, Sydney, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419.

¹³ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, August 29, 1931.

statement” prepared by Moxon with “minor amendments”.¹⁴

The “program of demands” referred to here was published in the *Workers’ Weekly* on September 24 under the headline, “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery”. The program was crafted as a manifesto for Aboriginal liberation.¹⁵ It opened with over 1000 words of analysis and reportage, describing continuing attempts at “extermination” of Aboriginal people and different patterns of political repression across the country. A list of 14 demands called for “full economic, political and social rights”, along with specific demands for rights to Aboriginal culture, land and self-determination.¹⁶ The campaign in the *Workers’ Weekly* turned out to be very modest, with a handful of articles¹⁷ and an editorial demanding Aboriginal self-determination.¹⁸ Apart from a campaigning trip into western NSW by Moxon in November, an initiative crushed by police and right-wing vigilantes,¹⁹ little was done by the CPA to carry out actual campaign work informed by the program. But along with his further articles in the CPA-controlled *Red Leader* in September,²⁰ Moxon was able to make a rare and profound contribution to the development of an understanding of Aboriginal oppression within the labour movement.²¹

Chapter Three argued that there were two important theoretical positions adopted by the CPA from 1928. These laid the basis for Moxon’s analysis. Firstly, to fight against the hyper-exploitation of Aboriginal labour, communists had argued to recruit Aboriginal workers into

¹⁴ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, September 12, 1931, Sydney, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419.

¹⁵ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

¹⁶ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

¹⁷ H.J.M., “Slave Labor - Imagined and Real,” WW, September 11, 1931, 1; Michael Sawtell, “Aboriginals - An Appreciation,” WW, September 18, 1931, 2; “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”; D.D., “Barbarities Practiced on W. Qld. Aboriginals,” WW, October 9, 1931, 4.

¹⁸ “The Native Races and Imperialism”.

¹⁹ “Communists. Developments at Bourke. Tense Situation,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 14, 1931, 13; “Fascism in West NSW – Bourke’s Bashers As A Worker Sees Them,” RL, December 4, 1931, 8.

²⁰ H.J.M., “Massacre! Rape! Slavery!”, H.J.M., “Hands Off the Aborigines! N.S.W. Blacks Suffer under ‘Labor’,” RL, September 25, 1931, 2.

²¹ “Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement,” in *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus, 148 (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978); Bob Boughton, “The Communist Party of Australia’s Involvement in the Struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Rights 1920-1970,” Paper presented at the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History Conference, Proceedings, Wollongong, NSW, October 2-4, 1999, 38.

unions and fight for industrial equality.²² As discussed in Chapters One and Two, however, from the time of Karl Marx's writings on Ireland,²³ the most insightful Marxist analyses emphasised that building unity between workers from an oppressed, colonised people and those from imperialist "oppressor" nations required the latter to unequivocally oppose the exercise of colonial power.²⁴ Central to this was supporting the right of colonised peoples to self-determination, including their right to political independence. In this context, this second insight discussed in Chapter Three, recognition that Australia was an imperialist power practising its own forms of colonial domination, became crucial.

Along with being printed as a "draft" policy of the CPA in the *Workers' Weekly*, Moxon's program was also prepared as a policy for the League Against Imperialism (LAI). The CPA leadership asserted the need for the LAI to take up demands for Aboriginal self-determination contemporaneously with the preparation of Moxon's program,²⁵ and the LAI adopted an abbreviated version at a national conference in December, 1931.²⁶ The editorial of the *Workers' Weekly* on September 18 was titled "The Native Races and Imperialism".²⁷ It explained the significance of Moxon's series "in drawing the attention of the working class" to the continuing slaughter of Aboriginal people, "one of the great crimes of history, one which has not been completed". The editorial seamlessly moved between discussion of Aboriginal oppression and the Australian occupation of New Guinea, before concluding, "we demand freedom and self-determination for the natives of the Australian continent. We will fight relentlessly to protect New Guinea from the murderous claws of Australian imperialism".²⁸ An article reporting on the Ninth Plenum of the Comintern in the edition of the *Workers' Weekly* that published Moxon's program, argued that the primary contribution the CPA could make to the global struggle "of the colonial masses" was "more vigorous fulfilment of our tasks... in relation to the struggle of the peoples of New Guinea against

²² "At Darwin – The Color Line – A Reactionary Policy," WW, April 13, 1928, 2.

²³ See for example Karl Marx, "Confidential Communication," March 1870, MECW 21, 119-121.

²⁴ Eric Blanc, "Anti-Imperial Marxism," *International Socialist Review* 100 (Spring 2016), <https://isreview.org/issue/100/anti-imperial-marxism>.

²⁵ Central Committee – Communist Party of Australia Organisation Dept, Organisation Letter No. 2, To all Committees, Organisers and Units, September 4, 1931, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10420.

²⁶ League Against Imperialism, Statement on the Position of Australian Aborigines, Sydney District Conference, December 10, 1931, JNRC, AU NBAC N57-426.

²⁷ "The Native Races and Imperialism".

²⁸ "The Native Races and Imperialism".

Australian imperialism, and also the struggle of our own exploited aboriginal population against capitalist rapacity”.²⁹

Moxon’s program opened with a vivid description of the continuing genocide being perpetrated against Aboriginal people.³⁰ As discussed in Chapter One, both Moxon’s analysis and style of prose mirrored very closely that of Karl Marx’s writings in *Capital*, where Marx described the violent dispossession of many colonised peoples as part of the global process of “primitive accumulation” required to establish capitalist social relations.³¹ A number of extracts from this section of *Capital* had been published in the *Workers’ Weekly* over the preceding three months³² and seem to have directly inspired Moxon when he wrote:

The aboriginal race, the original inhabitants of Australia, are among the most exploited subject peoples in the world. Not only are inhuman exploitation, forced labour and actual slavery forced upon the Aborigines, but a campaign of mass physical extermination is being and has been carried on against them... Such gentle British colonising devices as “Abo shooting hunts,” poisoning of the only water holes in the desert country, cyanide in the meat, and strychnine in the flour, police shooting parties, burning the bush over their heads, segregating sexes, kidnapping the children – particularly females – and putting them to work hundreds of miles away from their race and parents, killing off the game on the territory inhabited by Aborigines, thus starving them to death, arresting without any warrant or for that matter, any cause whatever, the most virile men in the tribes (after killing off the aged and infirm) and forcing the arrested to work with chains around their necks on Government roads and for station owners, issuing licences to any capitalist desiring to employ “unlimited numbers of natives without pay for an indefinite period,” setting up organisations of crawlers and kidnappers, known as “Aborigines Protection Boards” to enslave the remaining members of the tribes, and “Mission Stations,” under dope-peddlers to muster the youth so that they can be sold into slavery – such truly British methods were used, and are still being used to enslave the Australian aborigines and to totally

²⁹ W.M., “XI. Plenum - Need to Carry Out Decisions,” September 24, 1931, 2.

³⁰ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

³¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. 1*, 1867, MECW 35, 739-742.

³² Karl Marx, “Barbarous! The Beginnings of Capitalism,” WW, June 26, 1931, 2; Karl Marx, “Birth of Capitalism,” WW, July 17, 1931, 2; Karl Marx, “How Duchess of Sunderland became a Capitalist,” WW, August 7, 1931, 2.

exterminate the race so that the crimes of British and Australian imperialists may be covered up.³³

Recognition by the CPA, from late in 1927, that Australia was an imperialist power, had led to an almost immediate understanding that this created an obligation on the Australian party to demand self-determination for New Guinea, a colony of Australia.³⁴ Moxon provided a more sophisticated analysis, integrating an understanding that the establishment of the geographical territory of the entire Australian nation state was itself an imperialist project, driven first by British imperialism and then extended and consolidated by an independent Australian bourgeoisie. Maintaining the political hegemony of “White Australia” on stolen Aboriginal land, argued Moxon, necessitated the development of particular forms of colonial control over Indigenous people across the entire continent. In the frontier areas where Australian capitalism was still encroaching onto territories hitherto only occupied by Indigenous people, colonial violence resembled a form of open warfare. In the long-colonised areas a program of “extermination” also continued, through policies of forced child removal and the resultant “segregation of the sexes”.³⁵

The women of the aboriginal race are... sent as domestics into the town and station homesteads, while the male aboriginals are kept miles away from the females... This present method is a little slower than the murder campaigns of the past, but is actually more certain. It is racial extermination!³⁶

Moxon argued that these policies of extermination were largely driven by an ideological imperative, “so that the crimes of the... imperialists may be covered up”.³⁷ The complete erasure of Aboriginal people from the Australian landscape also erased any memory of the violent theft of the land and natural resources that lay at the foundation of Australia. For Moxon, this same logic, of attempting to hide this most brutal fact about Australia, also drove a process of suppression of Aboriginal political activism, a strong theme throughout the program. No longer a “helpless” people, objects of the paternalistic pity that characterised CPA writing in the 1920s, Aboriginal political activists are represented in the 1931 program

³³ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

³⁴ “On Imperialism – the Right to Independence,” WW, January 20, 1928, 2.

³⁵ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

³⁶ H.J.M., “Slave Labor - Imagined and Real”.

³⁷ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

as courageous fighters, standing up against attempts to permanently silence their message of truth about the fundamental violence and injustice of Australia as a national project. As will be argued later in this chapter, descriptions of some of this political repression, as it played out in north Australia, drew on the experiences already chronicled in the *Workers' Weekly* by Darwin-based communists.

Moxon also demonstrated a knowledge of the political repression suffered by the AAPA in NSW in the late 1920s. As discussed in Chapter Two, AAPA leaders were hounded out of the public spotlight by threats from the police, and particularly threats to remove their children.³⁸ One of Moxon's first articles contained a subheading "Aborigines must keep off politics!" and put a case that was repeated in the program itself two week later:

Political freedom is denied the aborigines – and woe betide him who is caught taking an active part in politics. Threats (often carried into effect) to take away their children and hire them out as slaves, arrests on false charges... or some other form of terror is adopted to prevent any political activity on behalf of the aboriginal race.³⁹

Moxon noted the success that state terrorism had on disrupting Aboriginal political organisation. He criticised the Communist Party in particular for failing to recognise and defend this struggle:

Hitherto, the conditions of the Aborigines have not been considered by the revolutionary movement, and the rank and file organisation of the Aborigines was allowed to be broken up by the A.P.B. the missionaries and the police.⁴⁰

"Rank and file organisation" in this context likely meant an organisation run by Aboriginal people themselves and this is almost certainly a direct reference to the AAPA. John Maynard argues that this discussion in the CPA program confirms his analysis about the hostile forces that collaborated to stifle the agitation of his grandfather, Fred Maynard, and comrades.⁴¹

³⁸ John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 132-133.

³⁹ H.J.M., "Slave Labor - Imagined and Real".

⁴⁰ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁴¹ John Maynard, "'The men only worked when necessary, we called no man master, and we had no King'," *Queensland Journal of Labour History* 26 (March 2018): 50. When Professor Maynard

Given Moxon's knowledge of the political repression suffered by this movement, it is possible he had direct contact with Aboriginal people who had participated in the AAPA. There are some striking similarities between Moxon's analysis of Aboriginal oppression and many of the arguments made by AAPA leaders in the late 1920s. For example, in 1928 submissions to a Constitutional Commission the AAPA had also argued that there was a continuing attempt at Aboriginal "extermination" across the continent, under the guise of the "Protection" system.⁴² Potential sources of contact between communists and AAPA members will be explored later in this chapter.

Since the formation of the Darwin CPA branch, occasional articles in the communist press had criticised the conditions in compounds controlled by the Chief Protector.⁴³ Moxon was the first in the party to theorise the operations of the Protection system in general. Emphasis was placed primarily on the efforts of various Protection authorities to round up Aboriginal people, control their movement and remove their children, all with the aim of eventual "extermination". Aborigines Protection Boards were described variously as "special organisations of crawlers and bloodhounds",⁴⁴ "organisation[s] of kidnappers and crawlers" and "capitalism's slave recruiting agencies and terror organisations".⁴⁵ The program called for the abolition of all Protection laws and bodies, and "liquidation of all missions and so-called homes for Aborigines", where people were held against their will.⁴⁶

"Struggle Against Slavery" was in the subheading of the program and there was a strong focus on horrific working conditions. However, Aboriginal slavery was analysed as an opportunistic function of the extreme political vulnerability of a people being slowly exterminated, rather than the primary rationale driving Aboriginal oppression. One article argued that by the APB marshalling free labour for employers, "capitalism's insatiable greed is temporarily satisfied" while the "exterminators of the Aboriginal race" accomplish their

presented this paper to the National Labour History Conference on September 25, 2017, he acknowledged that I had first alerted him to this content about repression of Aboriginal activists in the CPA program.

⁴² Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 123.

⁴³ "Civilising Them – Appalling Conditions of the Darwin Aborigines," WW, June 19, 1931, 3; "Youth Correspondents: Youth Exploitation in Darwin," WW, February 27, 1931, 5.

⁴⁴ H.J.M., "Slave Labor – Imagined and Real".

⁴⁵ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁴⁶ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

aim of disrupting Aboriginal family life and reproduction.⁴⁷ Another article focused on NSW, noted APB efforts to “drive the children into mission schools” to at once “provide a reservoir of cheap labour” and ensure “that the policy of segregating the sexes may continue”.⁴⁸ Under a subheading in the program, “Women Persecuted”, Moxon further condemned the systematic rape of Aboriginal women, similarly vulnerable and isolated living under the extreme power of various “protectors”, including “station owners and government officials” who committed heinous sexual abuse with impunity.⁴⁹ This was an issue that was of great concern to Fred Maynard, whose efforts to expose this abuse and support victims were suppressed by the APB.⁵⁰

The persecution of “Aboriginal intellectuals” and Aboriginal culture was also cited by Moxon as evidence of a drive to erase Aboriginality from Australia. He argued that Aboriginal intellectuals were being denied the right “to participate in their chosen profession”, particularly Aboriginal teachers being stopped from “teach[ing] even the children of their own race”.⁵¹ The exclusion of Aboriginal children from a number of schools in NSW was said to be “for the set purpose of preventing the children from developing as intellectuals”.⁵² Moxon argued that attacks on Aboriginal culture - “tribal customs and arts are stifled” - were part of this persecution of Aboriginal intellectual development. To defend and promote Aboriginal culture and education, the program demanded self-determination across Australia, with point 12 stipulating:

⁴⁷ H.J.M., “Slave Labor – Imagined and Real”.

⁴⁸ H.J.M., “Hands Off the Aborigines!”

⁴⁹ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

⁵⁰ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 107-109

⁵¹ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”. This reference may have been informed by the experiences of Shadrach James, then resident in Melbourne, with strong connections in the trade union movement. James was a Yorta Yorta man from the Cummeragunja reserve, trained as a teacher by his Indian and Mauritian father Thomas Shadrach James. James was denied the opportunity to take on the role of Head Teacher at Cummeragunja after being expelled as a “trouble maker”, along with his father, in the early 1920s. In 1929-30 he wrote a series of letters advocating for Aboriginal rights, including protests against Aboriginal people being excluded from employment in the public service and professions such as teaching. George and Robynne Nelson, *Dharmalan Dana* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), 198-199; Shadrach James, “The Wrongs of the Australian Aboriginal,” *Australian Intercollegian*, May 1, 1929 and “Help My People,” *Herald*, March 24, 1930 in *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines’ League*, ed. Andrew Markus and Bain Attwood (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), 30, 33; George E. Nelson, “James, Shadrach Livingstone (1890-1956),” in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1996, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/james-shadrach-livingstone-10710>.

⁵² H.J.M., “Hands Off the Aborigines!”

Full right of aborigines to develop native culture. Right to establish their own schools, train their own teachers, for the children of the aborigines and half-castes. The Australian Government to make available sums of money for such purposes, to be paid into and controlled by committees comprised solely of aborigines and half-castes.⁵³

Despite using the language of “caste” that was hegemonic at the time, in Moxon’s 1931 writings, there was a marked insistence that “Aborigines and half-castes” suffered the same deprivations. No political distinction was ever drawn between their experiences, except in places where Moxon emphasised common oppression. For example, when discussing the forced removal of children, he argued, “this happens every day in all parts of Australia not only to full-blooded Aborigines but the half-castes as well”.⁵⁴ Similarly, there was an active attempt to counteract the common view that atrocities against Aboriginal people were confined to frontier regions of Australia. Moxon’s first article in the series argued:

Not sufficient to say “poor abos”, or imagine they are a low people living in central Australia. Right here in New South Wales, under Lang’s Labor government, and in Queensland, South and Central Australia and all states... there are the problems of the aborigines to be taken up and fought for by the Australian workers.⁵⁵

The leadership of the AAPA had also consistently called for “the emancipation of the aboriginal people”, right across Australia, without making any distinctions along the lines of “caste”.⁵⁶ As noted in Chapter Two, this national perspective was coupled with increasingly national political initiatives in the year prior to the AAPA being driven underground.⁵⁷ The similarity in approach to the question of caste between Moxon’s program and the AAPA could be further indication that the CPA was being directly informed by activists with some experience of the organisation and its perspective. Whether there was direct contact or not however, knowledge that an Aboriginal organisation involving “half-castes” had existed in south-east Australia seems to have been an important factor in allowing Moxon to see the potential outlines of a continent-wide struggle by an oppressed people across lines of “caste”.

⁵³ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

⁵⁴ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

⁵⁵ H.J.M., “Massacre! Rape! Slavery!”.

⁵⁶ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 128.

⁵⁷ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 121-128.

Central to Moxon's argument about the political strategy for this liberation movement was the importance of mobilising working-class power to win change. The program called for "the fifty thousand aborigines in the Federal territories, the few hundred in each State and the tens of thousands of half-caste workers in each State and the territory", to unite with "white workers in unions and other mass organisations" and the Communist Party in a "fighting front against murderous, rapacious imperialism".⁵⁸ As discussed in Chapter Two, the proletarian leadership of the AAPA had retained kinship connections to reserve communities and gave political expression to the demands of those communities.⁵⁹ In Moxon's analysis, active efforts by their unionised white workmates to build solidarity with the struggle of the AAPA could have built serious power behind these demands, a real missed opportunity and a mistake not to be repeated.

From the earliest days of the Comintern, there had been profound development of Marx's theory of proletarian anti-colonialism, discussed in Chapter One. Marx had insisted that to build alliances with colonised people, there needed to be a reckoning with the ideologies of racial superiority often deeply held within the working class of "oppressor nations" that both justified the exercise of colonial power and entrenched divisions.⁶⁰ Crucial for this was building support for demands for self-determination for those suffering under colonial rule. Moxon achieved a novel and dynamic application of this theory to the Australian context. The CPA program demanded Aboriginal self-determination in education, cultural development and the administration of justice. The final demand of the 1931 program, number 14, was for:

The handing over to the aborigines of large tracts of watered and fertile country, with towns, seaports, railways, roads, etc., to become one or more independent aboriginal states or republics. The handing back to the aborigines of all Central, Northern, and North West Australia to enable the aborigines to develop their native pursuits. These aboriginal republics to be independent of Australian or other foreign powers. To have

⁵⁸ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁵⁹ Maynard, "'The men only worked when necessary,'" 38-39.

⁶⁰ V.I. Lenin, "Draft Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions," Second Congress of the Communist International," 1920, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>.

the right to make treaties with foreign powers, including Australia, establish their own army, governments, industries, and in every way be independent of imperialism.⁶¹

This demand was so radical, it was still being highlighted in ASIO documents during the 1960s.⁶² It demonstrates a recognition by the CPA of continuing Aboriginal sovereignty, at a time when the very humanity of Aboriginal people was still the subject of national debate. Unlike the other detailed demands in Moxon's program, however, there is no evidence of any Aboriginal initiative or support for this particular form of political independence. Rather, point 14 of the CPA's program represented a formulaic reproduction of Comintern policy in respect to oppressed racial minorities living within the borders of different nation states, applied in many other places around the world during the Third Period.⁶³ This will be discussed further in Chapter Five, which critiques other Stalinist limitations that impacted on Moxon's analysis.

One issue that shone through in Moxon's writings with a particular urgency, addressed under a subheading "Starvation Rations" in the program, was the extreme discrimination in dole payments and "intensified and repressive measures on behalf of the police" used against Aboriginal people in the Depression.⁶⁴ John Maynard argued that Depression conditions played an important role in helping to cripple the AAPA. Without reliable work and with young families to support, leading activists were even more vulnerable to threats made by police.⁶⁵ While the AAPA did not survive to raise protests about these experiences as an organisation, it was through campaigning against Depression hardships, that a rapidly growing CPA connected with Aboriginal people fighting for their rights, providing both the inspiration and the important details that formed the basis of Moxon's writings.

CPA grows in the Depression

⁶¹ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁶² Boughton, "The CPA's Involvement in Struggles for ATSI Rights," 267.

⁶³ Oleksa Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada and Australia on Questions of Imperialism, Nationality and Race, 1919-1943," (PhD dis., McMaster University, 2017), 237-238.

⁶⁴ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

⁶⁵ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 130-132.

The Great Depression beginning in 1929 was a cataclysmic event that fundamentally shaped all aspects of Australian politics in the early 1930s.⁶⁶ Unemployment peaked at 32.5 per cent of the unionised workforce in 1932, pushing many workers into previously unthinkable levels of deprivation.⁶⁷ The trade union leadership was completely disoriented. There had been decisive defeats of major industrial disputes in the late 1920s⁶⁸ and when the Arbitration Court imposed a general 10 per cent pay cut across all industries in 1931, the ACTU voted to do nothing.⁶⁹ The Scullin Labor government became deeply implicated in attacks on workers' living standards, including through the savage cuts to public spending in the 1931 "Premiers Plan" made with state governments.⁷⁰

In this context, the CPA focused on organising struggles of unemployed workers. A major party initiative saw the creation of an "Unemployed Workers' Movement" (UWM) in 1930, that united disparate existing committees into nationally co-ordinated organisation, leading protest demonstrations demanding work, contesting cuts to dole payments and defending unemployed tenants from eviction.⁷¹ Police repeatedly attempted to ban or shut down UWM demonstrations and unemployed activists were more than willing to stand and fight to hold their ground. A paramilitary Workers' Defence Corps (WDC) began covert training operations in NSW.⁷² A mass movement against evictions in Sydney in 1930-1931 saved hundreds of working-class tenancies through a strategy of mass picketing, culminating in armed stand offs between UWM activists and police in Newtown and Bankstown in 1931.⁷³ Numerous UWM activists were jailed in this period.⁷⁴

Leading this movement was Moxon, who as we have seen, became General Secretary of the

⁶⁶ Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 120-121.

⁶⁷ Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909-1939," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 1982), 254.

⁶⁸ Tom O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism* (Sydney: Stained Wattle Press, 1985), 42.

⁶⁹ O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, 43.

⁷⁰ "The Fraud of Equal Sacrifice," WW, June 19, 1931, 1.

⁷¹ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 136-140; "Workers and Unemployed United on Militant Program: Unemployed Workers' Movement Holds Vital Conference," WW, August 1, 1930, 6.

⁷² Macintyre, *The Reds*, 143.

⁷³ Nadia Wheatley and Drew Cottle, "Sydney's Anti-Eviction Movement: Community or Conspiracy," in *Labour and Community: Historical Essays*, ed. Ray Markey, 146-173 (Wollongong: University of Wollongong Press, 2001).

⁷⁴ "Agitation For Release Continues," WW, December 12, 1930, 1; "Organise Fight: Force Social Fascism to Release Class War Prisoners," WW, July 10, 1931, 1.

CPA from late in 1929.⁷⁵ Moxon's experiences leading militant strike support in Queensland in 1928-29, when unions such as the Waterside Workers' Federation were violently repressed by the state Labor government,⁷⁶ helped to transform his long-standing critique of Labor into a visceral hatred fuelled by the Comintern's Third Period line. He eagerly led UWM demonstrations into confrontations with police and right-wing vigilante groups on the streets of Sydney. Standing trial for his role in a militant November 1930 demonstration, Moxon refused to acknowledge the authority of the court and said to the magistrate, "you can go to hell and send me to jail".⁷⁷

For most communist parties around the world, Third Period denunciation of social democrats as "social fascists", threw relationships of solidarity between revolutionaries and reformists and the workplace level into crisis, triggering a period of political retreat and loss of membership.⁷⁸ Australia, however, was a major exception to this trend. Party numbers grew ten-fold. At the beginning of 1928, the CPA had approximately 250 members. By November 1931 there were more than 1,500⁷⁹ and by the formal end of the Third Period in 1934, membership had increased to more than 2,800.⁸⁰

Socialist historian, Duncan Hallas, puts these developments in Australia down to two major factors.⁸¹ Firstly, as indicated above, the Third Period line led to recruitment in Australia due to a unique situation where the Labor Party was in power, with the Scullin government at the federal level and also Labor governments in numerous states, including NSW with the re-election of Jack Lang as Premier in October of 1930.⁸² In these circumstances, the Comintern's "social fascist" rhetoric and prophesy of cataclysmic class struggles, undoubtedly struck a chord with many flooding into the ranks of the UWM. Secondly, the

⁷⁵ Penrose, "Hebert Moxon," 97, 105.

⁷⁶ Beris Penrose, "The Communist Party and trade union work in Queensland in the third period: 1928-1935," (PhD diss., University of Queensland, 1994), 101-103.

⁷⁷ "Go To Hell – Outburst in Court," *The Sun*, December 5, 1930, 7.

⁷⁸ Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World* (London: Verso, 2008), 497-498.

⁷⁹ Penrose, "Herbert Moxon," 108.

⁸⁰ Alastair Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 53, 61.

⁸¹ Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1985), 134.

⁸² "Labor Government Launches Wage Cutting Campaign," *WW*, November 7, 1930, 2.

intensity with which the economic depression hit Australia meant that “the ultra-left line fit with a mood of desperation among sections of the working class”.⁸³ Macintyre has written:

For the Depression Communists... the class war was a daily reality. The police, the courts, the press upheld the claims of property over the most basic of all human requirements, the need for food, clothing, shelter and dignity.⁸⁴

For many Aboriginal families, despite a new intensity to the suffering, these conditions of social marginalisation, police violence and intense poverty had been standard for many generations. The documentary film *Lousy Little Sixpence*, drawing heavily on interviews with participants in the Aboriginal rights movement that picked up later in the 1930s, argued that these Depression conditions helped to lay the basis for new bonds of solidarity between Black and white:

For the first time, a lot of whites met with Aborigines and saw the terrible conditions they were forced to live under. Out of these hard times grew the feeling people had to join together and try to make changes.⁸⁵

This chapter will look first at the experience of the Depression in Darwin, where the question of Aboriginal solidarity had been foundational for the new CPA branch, then at the experience in NSW, where evidence of connections with Aboriginal activists is harder to trace, but had a real impact on the development of Moxon’s analysis in 1931.

The Darwin UWM – a multi-racial movement

Chapter Three identified the focus on unemployed struggle by the new CPA branch in Darwin from its formation in August of 1928. On August 31 John Waldie, likely just returned from his trip to visit the CPA leadership in Sydney, was first identified as chair of a new unemployed committee in the Darwin daily paper the *Northern Standard*.⁸⁶ Ten days prior, the same newspaper had printed a letter from a self-identified communist, the first such letter

⁸³ Hallas, *Comintern*, 134.

⁸⁴ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 143-144.

⁸⁵ Alec Morgan, dir, *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1982; San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), Streaming video, 54 min, Kanopy.

⁸⁶ “N.A.W.U.,” *Northern Standard*, August 31, 1928, 5.

to appear. The author condemned Darwin police for continually moving on and arresting Aboriginal people “for being upon ‘a prohibited area’” within the town, arguing they were “the original owners of the Australian soil” and therefore any attempt to exclude them from public land was “a logically absurd indictment”.⁸⁷ This was a novel communist recognition of Aboriginal rights based on prior occupation and an important signification of battle-lines being drawn in Darwin. In the coming years, the unemployed movement would fight numerous battles over the right to occupy public space and hold onto tenancies.⁸⁸ Anti-racism was a strong thread running through many of these struggles.⁸⁹

While the North Australian Workers’ Union (NAWU) maintained racial exclusion clauses in the face of communist opposition, “membership” of the unemployed movement was far more fluid and there was a conscious attempt by communists to encourage participation across the colour line.⁹⁰ Val and Joe McGinness, brothers taken to the “Half-Caste Home” at the Kahlin compound in Darwin as children, both spoke of their participation in unemployed demonstrations led by the communists in Darwin from 1929. Val said, “half-castes, Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, whites, Italians, Greeks and everything was all mixed up in it”.⁹¹

These demonstrations gave political expression to the increasingly shared experiences of hardship between unemployed people from all backgrounds through the Depression. One site of increased contact was the “Police Paddock”, an area set aside for “coloured” residents of Darwin. Joe McGinness described how he lived at the paddock during the time when he was marching in the “processions of the unemployed”.⁹² McGinness said of the Depression, “there was one advantage for us Aborigines... ever since childhood, we had been conditioned to live off the land and were quite used to lean times”.⁹³ Martinez argues that, “the unemployed men who drifted into Darwin made their base near Police Paddock and came to

⁸⁷ Communist, “Round About,” *The Northern Standard*, August 21, 1928, 1.

⁸⁸ M., “Driving Workless out of NT,” WW, February 14, 1930, 4; “NT Workless Hold Hospital Against Police Bullets,” RL, January 15, 1932, 8.

⁸⁹ Julia Martinez, “The Limits of Solidarity: The North Australian Workers’ Union as Advocate of Aboriginal Solidarity,” *Contesting Assimilation*, ed. Tim Rowse and Richard Nile, 109 (Perth: Curtin University Press, 2005).

⁹⁰ “U.W.M. Grows,” WW, October 30, 1931, 4.

⁹¹ Both McGinness brothers went on to play important roles in the Aboriginal rights and labour movements. Quoted in Julia Martinez, “Plural Australia: Aboriginal and Asian Labour in Tropical White Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940,” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2000), 118.

⁹² Joe McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1991), 21.

⁹³ McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu*, 21.

appreciate the solidarity of the 'coloured' community.”⁹⁴ A 1929 *Workers' Weekly* report on unemployed demonstrations explained that “many unemployed here are living on rice supplied by a charitable Chinese store-keeper”.⁹⁵

In July 1929, leading Darwin CPA member Lawrence Mahoney wrote a report for the *Northern Standard* on a meeting he chaired of Police Paddock residents, to discuss their grievances at constant persecution. The NT Administration had recently pulled down some of the “best houses” citing sanitary concerns and a number of Aboriginal families were affected. The residents demanded an end to the demolitions, security of tenure, “full citizen rights” for all residents, relief work for all unemployed and pensions for the frail and elderly. Protests against the demolitions of humpies and houses, part of a broader process of persecuting unemployed people and trying to force them to leave Darwin,⁹⁶ continued throughout the Depression.⁹⁷

Reports from comrades in Darwin had an important impact on the perspective of the broader CPA, introducing an unprecedented level of coverage of Aboriginal issues. A detailed account of the horrible conditions faced by Aboriginal and “half-caste” youth held “like dogs” in separate compounds, both only allowed out “to be exploited by members of the superior white race”, was printed in a section of the *Workers' Weekly* dedicated to writing from “youth correspondents”.⁹⁸ One of the first editions of the new newspaper *Working Woman*, also included a report from Darwin on the “virtual slavery” of Aboriginal women held in a compound, only allowed out to provide domestic service for the “snobs and upstarts” in the town, paying “blood money” to the NT Administration.⁹⁹ The author called for a “nation-wide campaign of protest and exposure... for the whole aboriginal population of Australia”.¹⁰⁰

Despite the growing isolation of the CPA within the NAWU throughout 1930 (discussed in

⁹⁴ Martinez, “Plural Australia,” 203.

⁹⁵ “Darwin Workless Win Relief,” WW, October 4, 1929, 2.

⁹⁶ “Driving Workless Out of NT”.

⁹⁷ “Darwin Reforms Awaited – Cruel Officials – Unemployed Persecuted,” *Northern Standard*, April 8, 1930, 4.

⁹⁸ “Youth Correspondents: Youth Exploitation in Darwin,” WW, February 27, 1931, 5.

⁹⁹ “Intolerable Conditions of Aboriginal Women – What Scullin Government Means to Colored Slaves,” *Working Woman*, October 15, 1930, 4.

¹⁰⁰ “Intolerable Conditions of Aboriginal Women”.

Chapter Three), the unemployed movement itself developed significant independent momentum, and had a number of small victories that helped people to survive in desperate times.¹⁰¹ Between 1929 and 1931, one tactic consistently used was to occupy the veranda, and sometimes the building housing the Government Resident, a senior official in the NT, to demand relief.¹⁰² Photographs of a number of these occupations show the multi-racial character of the movement.¹⁰³ On a number of occasions, crowds only dispersed after winning rations, or promises of relief payment.¹⁰⁴ From mid-1930, government-directed brutality against these occupations increased markedly. A May Day demonstration that marched to the Resident's building and raised the red flag was attacked not just by police, but by "armed civil servants" and "patriotically doped jingo elements amongst the returned soldiers".¹⁰⁵ The unemployed were "batoned and battered", 16 were arrested and many jailed, including John Waldie who was given a three-month sentence.¹⁰⁶

Amongst the *Workers' Weekly* reports of violence against the unemployed in Darwin, there was an unprecedented focus on police brutality against Aboriginal people. Through facing a common enemy in the police, communists came to a greater understanding of the particular patterns of anti-Aboriginal policing operating in a starkly colonial situation. One article in June of 1929 opened, "Comrade editor, there is great indignation here at the brutality of the police". The leading anecdote was about police "thrashing" Aboriginal witnesses to try to secure a murder conviction against an Aboriginal man, Tommy Moyle.¹⁰⁷ This story was immediately followed by condemnation of the bashing and jailing of an unemployed activist who had joined the recent occupation of the Government Resident's building.¹⁰⁸ An August 1929 article on the mass jailing of still more unemployed demonstrators¹⁰⁹ was run adjacent to a report on a police expedition moving through remote regions looking to "slaughter the

¹⁰¹ "U.W.M. Wins – Strike at Darwin," WW, August 21, 1931, 4.

¹⁰² Bernie Brian, "The Northern Territory's One Big Union: The Rise and Fall of the North Australian Workers' Union, 1911-1972," (PhD diss., Northern Territory University, 2001), 115-116.

¹⁰³ For example, Joe McGinness and a number of other "part-Aboriginal and Asian workers" feature in a photo from the January 1931 occupation. Bernie Brian, "The Northern Territory's One Big Union," 125.

¹⁰⁴ "Darwin Workless Win Relief," WW, October 24, 1929, 2; "N.T. Workless Win Rations," WW, November 29, 1929, 4.

¹⁰⁵ "Scullin Arms Fascists – Batons, Gaols, for Workers," WW, May 9, 1930, 1.

¹⁰⁶ "Scullin Arms Fascists".

¹⁰⁷ "Police Brutality in Darwin – Thrash Aboriginal Witnesses to Secure Fake Conviction," WW, June 7, 1929, 2; "Did Darwin Police Kill Aboriginal Witnesses?" WW, July 12, 1929, 2.

¹⁰⁸ "Police Brutality in Darwin".

¹⁰⁹ "Unemployed Sleep on Government Verandah – Old Fighter Gaoled," WW, August 9, 1929, 3.

aboriginals”.¹¹⁰

To support their jailed comrades, Darwin communists established a branch of the International Class War Prisoners Association (ICWPA), the forerunner of the International Labor Defence (ILD) discussed in later chapters that organised legal support and campaigned for the release of political prisoners. The *Workers' Weekly* claimed that a campaign to free the prisoners arrested at May Day in 1930 had some success, emphasised the “colored” membership of the ICWPA and the need for solidarity against police violence.¹¹¹

Experience inside the prisons further radicalised unemployed activists on the question of racism. There are a number of reported protests in this period against the racial segregation that took place inside Fannie Bay Gaol where the terrible conditions for all prisoners were even worse for Aboriginal people held separately from others.¹¹² The new governor of the jail was condemned for “trying to foster racial hatred”, by instructing white and Aboriginal prisoners not to speak to one another.¹¹³

Many of the reports cited above provided an important basis for Moxon’s writings in September and October of 1931. In passages that condemned the federal Labor government of Scullin (overseeing the NT Administration), Moxon discussed the “man hunts” by NT police who either shot people in remote areas¹¹⁴ or dragged prisoners to Darwin, the use of violence to extract confessions and false evidence,¹¹⁵ the compounds used as “reservoirs of cheap labour”, the particular brutality directed at anyone involved in political struggle¹¹⁶ and the enslaved Aboriginal workers that formed the basis of the cattle industry in the NT.¹¹⁷ The consistent agitation in Darwin against the racist operations of the justice system informed a novel demand in the CPA program, with point six stipulating, “unconditional release from

¹¹⁰ “Police on the Warpath,” WW, August 9, 1929, 3. There was very little detail provided on the police operation mentioned in this article. It is most likely a reference to a police patrol sent out in response to alleged attack on a police camp by Aboriginal warriors two hundred miles south-west of Darwin in June 1929. “One Hundred Blacks Attack Camp – Sleeping Police Surprised”, *The Argus*, June 21, 1929, 7.

¹¹¹ “Darwin Unemployed Workers – Recruits for I.C.W.P.A.,” WW, August 22, 1930, 5.

¹¹² “Five in One Gaol Cell,” *Northern Standard*, March 24, 1931, 4; “Persecuted! Unemployed Prisoners,” RL, March 11, 1932, 4.

¹¹³ “Gaolers Foster Racial Hatred,” WW, December 19, 1930, 5.

¹¹⁴ H.J.M. “Massacre! Rape! Slavery!”.

¹¹⁵ H.J.M. “Slave Labor – Imagined and Real”.

¹¹⁶ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

¹¹⁷ H.J.M. “Slave Labor – Imagined and Real”.

gaol of all aborigines or half-castes, and no further arrests until aboriginal juries can hear and decide cases”.¹¹⁸

Consistent anti-racist activism by Darwin communists, where Aboriginal people were a strong presence in the town, kept Aboriginal struggle on the agenda in the CPA press in a way not even closely rivalled by any other branch of the party. Despite Aboriginal people comprising a tiny proportion of the population in NSW, however, there is clear evidence that a similar process also took place both in Sydney and across the regions as the Depression intensified. There was growing contact and political sympathy with Aboriginal communities amongst white unemployed workers pushed to the margins, and this took place at precisely the same time a wave of new racist policies and practices hit NSW Aboriginal communities.

Starvation rations and campaigning letters in NSW

Unlike the situation in the NT, many Aboriginal workers in NSW had extensive experience in the mainstream workforce by the time the Depression hit, often as union members with union conditions.¹¹⁹ The Depression had a particularly harsh impact on these workers and their families. Egon Kisch, a prominent Jewish anti-war activist who had been interned in Germany when the Nazi Party first took power in 1933, toured Australia in late 1934 and wrote specifically about the fate of Aboriginal workers under Depression conditions:

Those living in the towns worked during the good times as day-labourers, gardeners, coachmen, and also in factories; but with the outbreak of the economic crisis the first inhabitants of the country became its first victims.¹²⁰

In 1927, 75 per cent of people counted as Aboriginal by the APB had required no assistance from the Board, with most earning a living as wage workers. By 1932, when overall unemployment rates in NSW peaked at 32 per cent of trade unionists, the recorded Aboriginal unemployment rate was an astonishing 85 per cent.¹²¹ Rough Aboriginal camps around country towns began to swell. This provoked a racist backlash from municipal

¹¹⁸ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

¹¹⁹ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 184.

¹²⁰ Egon Kisch, *Australian Landfall* (Melbourne: MacMillan, 1969), 179.

¹²¹ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales,” 253-254.

authorities and police.¹²² The camps of mostly white unemployed were consistently persecuted and broken up at this time, with demands that the unemployed keep moving in search of work.¹²³ For Aboriginal people, the drive was to confine families on reserves and stations. Large numbers of Aboriginal workers who had never lived under APB control were now forced to suffer racial persecution, segregation and dictatorial control.¹²⁴

There was a marked intensification of the power of the police and the APB. In 1930, regulations were changed around the Family Endowment payment, an initially non-discriminatory welfare scheme introduced in NSW in 1927.¹²⁵ The APB now received the Endowment, supposedly to be “held in trust” for Aboriginal families, who were then forced to move onto stations to draw APB rations.¹²⁶ Police or other government officials administering the relief payment scheme for unemployed workers (first systematically introduced in NSW in 1930), also often denied these payments to Aboriginal people, who were ordered to APB stations and reserves instead. In July 1931 this situation was codified in a circular from the Director of Food Relief giving police discretion to refuse anyone who had “an admixture of Aboriginal blood”.¹²⁷ The rations provided on APB stations were well below the rate of relief given to white unemployed.¹²⁸

This racism, and the extreme poverty and misery it inflicted on the NSW Aboriginal population, was a very strong theme throughout Moxon’s writings in 1931. Under a subheading “Starvation Rations”, he framed the drive to force Aboriginal families into decrepit conditions on APB stations within the larger narrative of continuing genocide:

In NSW the scale of rations of Aborigines is 3/10 per week for adults and 1/10 for children – little more than half that granted to white workers – which is just part of the general drive against the aborigines to make their standard of living considerably

¹²² Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 180-181, 193.

¹²³ “Against Breaking-up of Camps,” WW, September 19, 1930, 3; “Lang’s Starvation Stratagem,” RL, August 28, 1931, 3; “Labor’s Reign of Terror Against Travelling Unemployed – Abolish Dole Regulations!,” RL, October 23, 1931, 8.

¹²⁴ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales,” 253-286.

¹²⁵ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales,” 258-259.

¹²⁶ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales,” 259.

¹²⁷ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales,” 263.

¹²⁸ H.J.M. “Hands Off NSW Blacks!”

lower than that for other unemployed workers, as is part of the drive to exterminate the race.¹²⁹

The ration scale cited by Moxon, accords with the estimates made by Goodall from this period,¹³⁰ and also the testimony of socialist activist Jack Booth, who joined the CPA in Dubbo later in the 1930s.¹³¹ In the light of Moxon's discussion about these conditions forming part of an "extermination" drive, it is worth noting that the NSW Colonial Secretary, answering questions in parliament on behalf of the APB, admitted that "the ration scale is in itself insufficient for a healthy child".¹³² Goodall documented the "rapid deterioration in living conditions and public health" on APB stations in the early 1930s, including "major epidemics of respiratory and eye infections".¹³³

Goodall also argued there was an "early and continuing" practice of Aboriginal people writing protest letters, to both the APB and politicians, fiercely objecting to the new requirements.¹³⁴ From December 1930 until the publication of Moxon's articles, at least five different members of the NSW Parliament made representations on behalf of aggrieved Aboriginal constituents, citing letters written to their office. Most complaints related to being forced onto missions to collect their unemployment sustenance or child endowment payments. In March 1931, William Missingham, the member for Lismore, said he had received a letter "that sets out the case of hundreds of such people".¹³⁵ During debate about one particular case the previous month, Alfred McLelland, MLA for Dubbo, had said there were "similar cases all over the state".¹³⁶ Protests from Urunga,¹³⁷ South-West Rocks¹³⁸ and

¹²⁹ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines".

¹³⁰ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales," 261-263. Goodall's estimates are approximate only, citing differences across the regions as a result of freight costs and other local peculiarities.

¹³¹ Jack Booth, Interview by Heather Goodall, May 21, 1981, 13, Interview Transcript supplied by Heather Goodall.

¹³² Mark Gosling (Colonial Secretary), New South Wales, *Questions and Answers*, Legislative Assembly, January 20, 1931, 742.

¹³³ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 194.

¹³⁴ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales," 274.

¹³⁵ William Missingham MLA, New South Wales, *Questions and Answers*, Legislative Assembly, March 4, 1931, 1650.

¹³⁶ Alfred McLelland MLA, New South Wales, *Questions and Answers*, Legislative Assembly, February 4, 1931, 1057.

¹³⁷ Arthur Tonge MLA, New South Wales, *Questions and Answers*, Legislative Assembly, December 9, 1930, 316.

¹³⁸ Roy Vincent MLA, New South Wales, *Questions and Answers*, Legislative Assembly, March 18, 1931, 1965.

Yass¹³⁹ were also registered in the *Hansard*. A strong component of a number of protest letters in this period was an appeal to class solidarity – with Aboriginal workers writing about their long experience working for Award wages alongside whites.¹⁴⁰

Some of these campaigning letters protesting Depression conditions were likely to have also been sent to the Communist Party. In Moxon's 1931 series on Aboriginal rights, an article focused on NSW explained the relationship between police repression and the new ration regime, citing such correspondence:

The police of N.S.W. no less than the police of [Prime Minister] Scullin in N.A. [the Northern Territory] have an open "go" at the aborigines. These people are used to assist in driving the aborigines to the "missions" under the A.P.B. as slave labor, to tell worker aborigines that they do not deserve rations, but should "go on to the missions" and to prove their statement refuse them even the miserly fare of the Government. We are in possession of letters from all over N.S.W. and Australia describing the treatment meted out to our fellow exploited – the Aborigines.¹⁴¹

In this article, Moxon provided details about the operations of the APB at Urunga, on Gumbayngirr country near Nambucca Heads, mid-north coast NSW. Along with information about the new dole regime, Moxon recounted the case of an Aboriginal youth being framed on false charges and sent to a home by APB official Mr Smithers, the former manager of Urunga, "because the lad was a nuisance". The article then condemned the recent promotion of Smithers within the APB to the position of state-wide inspector, "to supervise the kidnapping of the aboriginal and half-caste children".¹⁴²

Urunga was in a heartland of AAPA territory. A report on the growth of the AAPA in the

¹³⁹ George Ardill MLA, New South Wales, *Questions and Answers*, Legislative Assembly, August 18, 1931, 5362.

¹⁴⁰ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales," 274-275.

¹⁴¹ H.J.M., "Hands Off the Aborigines!"

¹⁴² H.J.M., "Hands Off the Aborigines!". Minutes from the APB confirm that Smithers was promoted to the position of Inspector at a Board meeting on September 25, 1929. NSW Aborigines Protection Board Minute Books, 1911-1969, Minute Book 21 Nov 1923 – 4 Mar 1936, NRS-2 2791, NSW State Archives, Sydney; A similar story of Smithers using irregular methods to secure a conviction was reported in the local press in 1929, after Smithers sent an Aboriginal woman into a white man's house and then had him arrested for attempting to kiss her. "An Expensive Kiss – Gin Squeals – Old Man Pays," *Coffs Harbour Advocate*, February 5, 1929, 2.

local Macleay Chronicle in 1925 included quotes from John Donovan, a local Aboriginal leader who said “the Nambucca people had been the first to answer the call of the A.A.P.A”, forming branches at Nambucca Heads, Bowraville and Urunga.¹⁴³ Many Gumbaynggirr retained language, detailed creation stories were still being passed on¹⁴⁴ and initiation and ceremonial gatherings continued.¹⁴⁵ The demands in the CPA manifesto, for Aboriginal people to have control over education and resources to develop their culture, may have been inspired by the struggles of the Gumbaynggirr and perhaps Moxon was receiving letters from John Donovan himself.¹⁴⁶ Donovan was a prolific letter writer who, according to interviews with descendants by Heather Goodall, had built himself a desk in the 1920s specifically for the purposes of writing campaigning letters.¹⁴⁷ As noted above, letters about the Depression conditions at Urunga had also been sent to politicians, who raised the issue in parliament.¹⁴⁸

The UWM and anti-racist struggle from Sydney to the bush

Throughout 1931, Lucy Eatock, the matriarch of a large Aboriginal family in Sydney, was on the NSW State Executive of the UWM.¹⁴⁹ According to police testimony at one of the many court cases arising from protest charges against her, Lucy was “one of the principals in all Communist disturbances in the city and suburbs”.¹⁵⁰ Most of her many children were members of the CPA and fought hard on the frontlines of UWM direct actions. Her son, Dick, was shot in June 1931 during the famous anti-eviction blockade in Bankstown¹⁵¹ and a

¹⁴³ “Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association,” *Macleay Chronicle*, October 7, 1925, 4. Donovan’s activism with the AAPA is discussed in Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 86-87.

¹⁴⁴ Much of the material in the recently produced Gumbaynggirr dreaming story collection draws on oral interviews with language speakers alive in this period. See Steve Morelli, Gary Williams, Dallas Walker, eds., *Gumbaynggirr Yuludarla Jandaygam: Gumbaynggirr Dreaming Story Collection* (Nambucca Heads: Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative, 2016).

¹⁴⁵ National Native Title Tribunal, Registration test decision: Gumbaynggirr People #3, December 2, 2016, 19, NC2016/003.

¹⁴⁶ John Donovan was from a South Coast Aboriginal family that moved into the district in the nineteenth century. His grandson, Warren Mundine, says Donovan was “accepted by the Gumbaynggirr people as part of their mob” and was recognised as a community leader. Warren Mundine, *Warren Mundine in Black and White: Race Politics in Changing Australia* (Sydney: Pantera Press, 2017), 47-50.

¹⁴⁷ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 152.

¹⁴⁸ Arthur Tonge MLA, New South Wales, *Questions and Answers*, Legislative Assembly, December 9, 1930, 316.

¹⁴⁹ Unemployed Workers Movement, NSW State Executive Minutes, August 22, 1931, Communist Party of Australia – further records, ML SLNSW, MLMSS 5021 ADD-ON 1936/Box 16.

¹⁵⁰ Hall Greenland, *Red Hot: The Life and Times of Nick Origlass* (Sydney: Wellington Lane Press, 1999), 39.

¹⁵¹ “Firing to Kill – Land Plan at Bankstown,” WW, June 26, 1931, 1.

number of family members were jailed.¹⁵² Lucy brought her family from Queensland to Sydney prior to WWI and they seem to have been able to avoid the control of the Protection Board.¹⁵³ Lucy's grand-daughter Joan Eatock has written a family history that includes some discussion of Eatock's keen insights into the nature of Aboriginal oppression, from her experiences working across NSW and Queensland.¹⁵⁴ Given Moxon's crucial role leading the UWM in Sydney, he would have certainly known the Eatock family and it is likely Lucy or her sons were important informants for his articles.

Despite this, however, there was nothing in the CPA press that identified the family as Aboriginal.¹⁵⁵ Eatock's history of this period also contained no suggestion that the family's Aboriginality was openly discussed by the CPA.¹⁵⁶ Issy Wyner, a friend of the Eatocks and a CPA member in 1931 who formed part of a Trotskyist split from the party in 1933, told socialist author Hall Greenland in the 1990s:

In those days you ignored it [Aboriginal identity], that was the done thing. We were all part of the brotherhood of man, that kind of thing. Workers of the world unite regardless of creed or race. The progressive thing was not to mention somebody's difference.¹⁵⁷

Stuart Macintyre has written that there were Aboriginal members of the CPA in both Sydney and Perth at this period that were not publicly identified as such for similar reasons.¹⁵⁸ The Eatock family certainly suffered racist persecution by the police and courts.¹⁵⁹ Alec Eatock, defending himself from charges arising from a militant demonstration, that saw him sentenced to 18 months jail, reportedly told the court, "I am not guilty... this whole thing is class and racial oppression".¹⁶⁰ Having leading, visibly Black members of the party was itself a challenge to the intense racism hegemonic within "White Australia" at the time. And there

¹⁵² Greenland, *Red Hot*, 308-311.

¹⁵³ Joan Eatock, *Delusions of Grandeur, a Family's Story of Love and Struggle* (Alice Springs: Jakurrpa Books, 2003), 23-39.

¹⁵⁴ Eatock, *Delusions of Grandeur*, 24-27.

¹⁵⁵ There were more than 50 references to different members of the Eatock family in the *Workers' Weekly* between 1928 and 1934 and more than 20 in the *Red Leader* between 1931 and 1934.

¹⁵⁶ Eatock, *Delusions of Grandeur*, 82-123.

¹⁵⁷ Greenland, *Red Hot*, 40.

¹⁵⁸ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 178-179.

¹⁵⁹ Greenland, *Red Hot*, 40.

¹⁶⁰ Eatock, *Delusions of Grandeur*, 99.

is one intriguing short article in a “job bulletin” called “The Prime Mover”, produced by the CPA group of workers based at the power station at White Bay that may be connected to the family. The article was a challenge to ignorant comments obviously made recently within the workplace, suggesting Aboriginal people regularly starved prior to colonisation. Titled “Little Lessons from the Ignorant Abos”, the article flipped this suggestion on its head, to condemn the starvation inflicted by the apparently “superior” capitalist civilisation: “only intelligent people starve, when starving is unnecessary”. The article was signed “Abo”.¹⁶¹ This could perhaps have been written by Dick Eatock, who worked at the power station.¹⁶²

Goodall noted two other Aboriginal members of the Sydney CPA in 1931. Radical author Kylie Tennant spoke about an Aboriginal organiser from the UWM, who passed through Coonabarabran in 1932 after having been released from jail¹⁶³ and Goodall also states that Charlie Leon, who would become a prominent Aboriginal activist after WWII, was in the CPA at this time.¹⁶⁴ A “widely travelled working man”, Leon had joined the CPA while working on the docks in Tasmania.¹⁶⁵

As with the Police Paddock in Darwin, one of the main cradles for the development of contact between the CPA and Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia were makeshift camps of unemployed workers.¹⁶⁶ Aboriginal people had generations of experience living rough and in dire poverty on the edge of town and many unemployed workers’ camps sprang up next to Aboriginal reserves or existing Aboriginal camps on stock routes and crown lands.¹⁶⁷ One major unemployed camp in Sydney was at La Perouse, directly adjacent to the longstanding Aboriginal reserve in the district, and came to be known as “Happy Valley”. An ABC radio documentary on the “shared history of the Happy Valley camps” documents some of spirit of solidarity in these times:

A number of Aboriginal families from the 'La Per' mission moved into unemployed

¹⁶¹ Abo., The Prime Mover: Bulletin of the White Bay and Ultimo Group of the CPA, June 26, 1931, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10420.

¹⁶² Greenland, *Red Hot*, 311.

¹⁶³ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales,” 281-282.

¹⁶⁴ Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 145.

¹⁶⁵ Goodall and Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience*, 145

¹⁶⁶ Jack Horner, *Bill Ferguson, Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom: A Biography* (Canberra: J. Horner, 1994), 106.

¹⁶⁷ Alec Morgan, dir, *Lousy Little Sixpence*.

camps, where they could experience greater freedom. For the first time black and white people were living side by side at La Perouse, and lived through the communal experience of poverty and 'making do'.¹⁶⁸

Goodall's biographical article on Aboriginal activist Pearl Gibbs, who went on to play a crucial role in Aboriginal politics later in the 1930s, argues that Gibbs' experience of the inter-racial solidarity at Happy Valley had a profound impact on her political development, particularly her opposition to the APB, which tried to "reduce contact between the unemployed workers and the nearby reserve community".¹⁶⁹

There was an active UWM presence at Happy Valley in 1931, fighting against the squalid conditions faced by residents.¹⁷⁰ On 12 June, 1931, the *Workers' Weekly* reported on a UWM petition to "the Chief Secretary's Department about the conditions in the La Perouse camp" and condemned the Secretary's response that "conditions were alright", citing the death of a child in the camp during recent rains.¹⁷¹ On January 16, an editorial in the *Workers' Weekly*, "The Crisis Deepens", cast continuing attempts by the NSW state government to relocate Aboriginal people away from La Perouse in the context of a general offensive against the working class and oppressed groups coming through the austerity policies of the Depression.¹⁷² Significantly, this was the first time the CPA press had ever noted the existence of this long standing Aboriginal community in Sydney.

Many members of the Aboriginal community at La Perouse had detailed, first-hand knowledge of the AAPA's rise and suppression, a knowledge evident in Moxon's writings. There was also a strong cultural identification, including a pride in continued knowledge of Aboriginal languages.¹⁷³ Communists may have even been in direct contact with Maynard himself. Maynard's children remember many trips with him to La Perouse through this period and John Maynard argues he was "still speaking out politically" in the Depression,

¹⁶⁸ Cathy Prior, prod., "Happy Valley Revisited," *Hindsight: ABC Radio National*, June 17, 2007, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/happy-valley-revisited/3233138>.

¹⁶⁹ Heather Goodall, "Gibbs, Pearly Mary (Gambanyi) (1901-1983)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2007, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gibbs-pearl-mary-gambanyi-12533/text22555>.

¹⁷⁰ "Workers Flocking to the U.W.M.," WW, March 20, 1931, 6.

¹⁷¹ "Sydney News. No 10 District," WW, June 12, 1931, 4.

¹⁷² "1931 Crisis Deepens," WW, January 16, 1931, 2.

¹⁷³ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 49-50.

particularly on the issue of continuing threats to the La Perouse reserve.¹⁷⁴

Another important Aboriginal camp in Sydney during this period was at Salt Pan Creek on the Georges River. Goodall has written about this extraordinary community, established on a block purchased freehold by Ellen and Hugh Anderson in the early 1920s.¹⁷⁵ The camp quickly became a haven for a number of Aboriginal families fleeing the tyranny of the Protection Board. Leon, then a member of the CPA (see above), visited the camp when in Sydney.¹⁷⁶ Camp members were carrying out their own political agitation in the Domain during the time Jack Lang was Premier of NSW (1930-32), where they would certainly have intersected with the unemployed movement.¹⁷⁷

In July 1931, the *Workers' Weekly* reported on a stand taken by Edward Anderson and his (unnamed) brother in the Kogarah local court, after they were “hailed barefoot” before the magistrate on charges of train fare evasion.¹⁷⁸ The Anderson brothers challenged the legitimacy of the court, arguing “this country belongs to us”, so they should be left unmolested. Significantly, this article represents the first attempt made in the CPA press to link together the oppression of Aboriginal people in NSW in the same context as northern Australia. The report moved from the Anderson case to discuss the paltry wages paid to black workers in Darwin: “they must accept these conditions or starve”.¹⁷⁹

There were similar rough camps of unemployed workers stretched across rural NSW, often on river banks long utilised by Aboriginal people. Jack Booth, who was active in the UWM, explained to Goodall that his lifelong solidarity with Aboriginal people began during his time in a makeshift shack on the Darling river in Bourke, seeking work in the early years of the Depression. Aboriginal people were camped there too and Booth says, “this was the first I’d ever really met up with them [and this] altered my whole attitude”.¹⁸⁰ Booth recounted his shock and anger at being arrested for purchasing alcohol for an Aboriginal man.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*, 133-134.

¹⁷⁵ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 160, 169-70, 236; Goodall and Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience*.

¹⁷⁶ Goodall and Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience*, 145

¹⁷⁷ Goodall and Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience*, 149.

¹⁷⁸ “Aborigines Learn Who Owns This Country,” WW, July 10, 1931, 3.

¹⁷⁹ “Aborigines Learn Who Owns This Country”.

¹⁸⁰ Booth, Interview by Goodall, 4-5.

¹⁸¹ Booth, Interview by Goodall, 6.

The Depression era writing of Kylie Tennant, a radical author who was involved in CPA-led campaigns for Aboriginal rights in 1934,¹⁸² and briefly a member of the Communist Party in 1935,¹⁸³ helps paint a picture of the racial politics in these rural unemployed camps.

Tennant's semi-fictional accounts of the lives of "travelling unemployed", first in *Tiburon*¹⁸⁴ and then in *The Battlers*,¹⁸⁵ are based on first-hand experiences traveling from 1931 onwards. Tennant illustrated how racial stratifications and prejudices that formed such a strong component of mainstream ideology in Australia worked to complicate relationships in the camps. In *The Battlers*, for example, a series of camps near the rubbish dump on the bend of a river in a rural town included pensioners, Chinese, travelling white unemployed, and Aboriginal people. Tennant describes how "the dark people" lived in a camp "on the far side" that was rarely visited by whites.¹⁸⁶ In an interview with Goodall, Tennant elaborated on an attitude of racial superiority she believed was strong amongst travelling unemployed in this period: "the Aboriginals... formed a comforting lowest level that buffered the self-respect of the unemployed whites."¹⁸⁷

There was, however, constant interaction between Aboriginal and white unemployed throughout *The Battlers*. For some white characters, the experience of common misery led them to challenge racist attitudes and they were happy to party and eat with Aboriginal people.¹⁸⁸ One radical unemployed agitator, described as a "Red" and known as Apostle, was said to love passing the time "lying all day under a tree talking about old native ways with the black people, and they paid him great deference".¹⁸⁹ Other white characters continued to warn "no good comes of mixing with niggers"¹⁹⁰ and an inter-racial relationship caused white relatives in one "travelling unemployed" family a great deal of anxiety.¹⁹¹

¹⁸² Kylie Tennant, *The Missing Heir: The Autobiography of Kylie Tennant* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 112-113.

¹⁸³ Jane Grant, "Tennant, Kathleen (Kylie) (1912-1988)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2012, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/tennant-kathleen-kylie-15669/text26865>.

¹⁸⁴ Kylie Tennant, *Tiburon* (North Ryde: Sirius, 1989). First published 1935.

¹⁸⁵ Kylie Tennant, *The Battlers* (Harper Collins: Sydney, 2013). First published 1941.

¹⁸⁶ Tennant, *The Battlers*, 83-84.

¹⁸⁷ Kylie Tennant, Interview by Heather Goodall, February 9, 1981, 6-7. Interview Transcript supplied by Heather Goodall.

¹⁸⁸ Tennant, *The Battlers*, 108-111.

¹⁸⁹ Tennant, *The Battlers*, 96.

¹⁹⁰ Tennant, *The Battlers*, 109.

¹⁹¹ Tennant, *The Battlers*, 256.

These scenes demonstrate how the Depression intensified new forms of social interaction, that created the potential for the “feeling that people had to join together,” similarly noted in *Lousy Little Sixpence*. However, actually building bonds of joint struggle required anti-racist political leadership and organisation. Tennant spoke about her own attempts at Coonabarabran in 1932 to provide such leadership, recounting a speech she made at a school awards night in support of unemployed workers and Aboriginal people.¹⁹² She tried to encourage the local Labor branch to open up a Christmas lunch to Aboriginal unemployed workers as well as the whites. Significantly, Aboriginal people themselves requested participation in the lunch on the grounds that “we are workers too”.¹⁹³ This was rejected by the Labor organisers, who insisted Aboriginal people “go to the government station” to be fed.¹⁹⁴ Tennant argued the attitude of the ALP had strong roots in their support for the White Australia policy. “Coloured workers” were seen as a threat to conditions and excluded from social and industrial life, rather than organised as part of the labour movement.¹⁹⁵

In places, however, an organised CPA presence was successfully able to transform the inter-racial camaraderie that existed in some unemployed camps into a clear political stand that rejected the racist politics hegemonic in the labour movement. One explosive example of this was in Bourke in the spring of 1931, where the UWM expressed active support for Aboriginal rights, a stand that may have triggered the development of Moxon’s program.

The Bourke UWM and “insolent Aborigines”

On September 4, 1931, a new CPA-controlled newspaper, the *Red Leader*, enthusiastically reported that the UWM in Bourke had passed a resolution, and “asks the whole movement to join in the demand – ‘That all aboriginals, whether admixture or full blood, be entitled to the dole’”.¹⁹⁶ The paper editorialised:

It is great news that the chauvinist “White Australia” policy cuts no ice with the unemployed at Bourke. They realise that workers, whatever their color [sic], are equal in the fact that they are part of the world’s proletariat, and, as such, propertyless,

¹⁹² Tennant, Interview by Goodall, 2-3.

¹⁹³ Tennant, *The Battlers*, 110.

¹⁹⁴ Tennant, *The Battlers*, 110.

¹⁹⁵ Tennant, Interview by Goodall 15-16.

¹⁹⁶ “With the Workers in the Country – Bourke,” RL, September 4, 1931, 8.

workless, and in many instances starving owing to the world's crisis.¹⁹⁷

A report two weeks prior had noted that the Bourke group had a headquarters located in the town and published their strident demand “that the issue of the ‘dole’ be taken out of the hands of the police and put under the control of the UWM”.¹⁹⁸ Police control was an issue that created massive problems for Aboriginal people and militant unemployed activists alike. Both were often refused the dole as a strategy to move them on and both faced consistent harassment from the police.¹⁹⁹

The Bourke UWM's resolution, calling for equal access to dole and relief work regardless of race, mirrored the position fought for by the Darwin CPA for the previous two-and-a-half years. The political and industrial rights of Aboriginal people had been a far less pressing question for the labour movement in NSW before the Depression, given the much smaller proportion of Aboriginal workers and unemployed as a component of the labour market. New organic connections between the lives of Aboriginal and white unemployed in the Depression crisis, however, meant that the new racist administration of relief payments began to impose itself as an issue the movement could not so easily ignore. It seems that just like the unemployed Aboriginal people at Coonabarabran who had insisted to Kylie Tennant that they were “workers too”, seeking inclusion in the unemployed movement, Aboriginal people in Bourke had taken similar initiative, but found a receptive audience amongst white activists who were either members or supporters of the CPA. Following this stand, the CPA leadership in Sydney may have either felt pressure or seen an opportunity to articulate a more thorough position on how to relate to Aboriginal struggle. In the same week as the publication of the Bourke UWM resolution, Moxon's suggestion for a draft program on “the question of the Aborigines” was on the agenda of the CPA's top leadership body.²⁰⁰

Then, immediately following Moxon's series of pro-Aboriginal articles, he resigned as the Sydney organiser of the CPA and travelled to Bourke to speak to a series of mass meetings. The details of Moxon's turbulent relationship with the CPA leadership at this time will be

¹⁹⁷ “With the Workers in the Country – Bourke”.

¹⁹⁸ “In the Country – Bourke,” RL, August 21, 1931, 8.

¹⁹⁹ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales,” 274-275; Macintyre, *The Reds*, 143-144.

²⁰⁰ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, August 29, 1931, Sydney, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419.

discussed further in Chapter Five. There is no evidence this resignation was related to Moxon's position on Aboriginal rights, though he was heavily criticised for unsanctioned trips outside of Sydney and eventually expelled in 1932 for moving to North Queensland.²⁰¹ The *Workers' Weekly* celebrated the meetings Moxon organised in Bourke in November 1931 however, with one street meeting reportedly attended by more than 300 people, including many rank-and-file Labor members.²⁰² After a number of outdoor meetings in Bourke that successfully defied threats of a right-wing attack, Moxon was arrested and charged for speaking without a permit.²⁰³ From newspaper reports we know that Aboriginal rights was on the agenda at these meetings, though not the content of what was said.²⁰⁴ A simple message of racial equality would have been deeply resented by the establishment in Bourke, who had recently reinvigorated the "Bourke Pastoral and Agricultural Association" under the leadership of Dr Robert M Alcorn.²⁰⁵ Moxon's call for anti-imperialist struggle to restore land stolen by the squatters would have been deemed intolerable.

An account of the court case in the local Bourke paper on October 28 shows Moxon as defiant as ever, refusing to swear on the bible or pay any fines.²⁰⁶ He was sentenced to ten days hard labour in the Bourke prison. When he was released and attempted to hold further meetings, persecution of communists in the town intensified. On November 12, a demonstration of "hundreds" organised into a Citizens Defence League (CDL) and led by Dr Alcorn, marched on the UWM headquarters and gave an ultimatum that Moxon and three other leading communists leave town within three days.²⁰⁷ The CPA press reported that the demonstration was a rally of fascists and the "squattocracy".²⁰⁸ The New Guard, a radical right-wing militia inspired by European fascism,²⁰⁹ claimed some responsibility for the

²⁰¹ Central Control Commission, "Moxon Out of the Communist Party," WW, July 29, 1932, 2.

²⁰² "Bourke Notes," WW, October 23, 1931, 4; Worker Correspondent, "Party Breaks Down Opposition," WW, October 20, 1931, 4.

²⁰³ "Speech in the Street Without Permission," *Western Herald*, November 6, 1931, 3.

²⁰⁴ "Communists – Developments at Bourke – Tense Situation," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 14, 1931, 13.

²⁰⁵ "Bourke Pastoral and Agricultural Association," *Western Herald*, July 24, 1931, 3.

²⁰⁶ "Speech in the Street Without Permission".

²⁰⁷ "Communists at Bourke – Angry Citizens Break up Meeting," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 13, 1931, 9; "Communist Version," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 14, 1931, 13.

²⁰⁸ Bourke Correspondent, "Whisky-Mad Squatters Trample Down 'Democracy' – Armed Fascists Terrorise Bourke Workers," WW, November 20, 1931, 1.

²⁰⁹ Andrew Moore, "The New Guard and the Labour Movement, 1931-35," *Labour History*, 89 (November 2005), 55.

mobilisation, and regional papers reported a growing New Guard presence in Bourke.²¹⁰

Significantly, the primary reason given by Dr Alcorn for driving communists out of town was the impact that Moxon's visit had on the local Aboriginal population. A *Sydney Morning Herald* report on the demonstration to drive the communists out included a subheading "Aborigines Hostile":

Dr. Alcorn, who is the leader of the citizens' movement against the Communists, stated tonight that the Communists were spreading propaganda among the aborigines, many of whom were already hostile and insolent. "There is no doubt the position is serious", declared Dr Alcorn.²¹¹

One Catholic newspaper elaborated on this threat in a similar report:

Spreading propaganda among the aboriginals... is quite in accordance with the policy of the Soviet and the Third International of Moscow, which are constantly occupied in undermining religion and Christian civilisation all over the world, and are making use of the black and yellow hordes in their evil work.²¹²

In the days following the demonstration, the CDL continued to terrorise groups of unemployed workers, launching armed attacks on a major campsite on the Darling River occupied by 80 to 100 residents.²¹³ It was in these riverbank camps that UWM activist Jack Booth told Goodall he first developed friendly relationships with Aboriginal people.²¹⁴ Moxon and three other communists were forced to leave the town, to forestall the potential for more serious violence. The *Red Leader* reported that all businesses on the main street were told "if they did not sign up to the New Guard they would be boycotted" and the unemployed were similarly hectored into publicly renouncing association with the UWM.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ "The New Guard at Bourke," *The Charleville Times*, December 31, 1931, 4; "Bourke," *Narromine News and Trangie Advocate*, November 20, 1931, 7; "Communism: If Government Fails – New Guard Ready," *Glen Innes Examiner*, November 19, 1.

²¹¹ "Communists – Developments at Bourke".

²¹² "The Red Peril," *Southern Cross*, November 20, 1931, 10.

²¹³ Bourke Correspondent, "Whisky Mad Squatters".

²¹⁴ Booth's time in Bourke was after these events, "about 1932 or 1933," Booth, Interview by Goodall, 5.

²¹⁵ "Fascism in West NSW," RL, December 4, 1931, 8.

Conclusion

Moxon's retreat from Bourke marked the end of three months of pro-Aboriginal agitation. The following chapter will provide some critical analysis of the Stalinist limitations of Moxon's writings and political outlook, which contributed to his untimely marginalisation from the revolutionary movement he had been crucial in building.²¹⁶ It is important to recognise however, that very powerful forces were operating to ensure the nascent solidarity emerging between Aboriginal and white unemployed workers was crushed before it could develop seriously. Three thousand copies of the *Red Leader* edition that contained the Bourke anti-racist resolution had been burned on the directive of the NSW Government, part of a censorship drive against the CPA in general.²¹⁷ Vigilante right-wing forces, gathering strength as the Depression intensified,²¹⁸ had mobilised with particular viciousness in Bourke in response to pro-Aboriginal advocacy by the UWM.

Moxon's writings in 1931 were a significant turning point in the history of the relationship between the revolutionary socialist movement and Aboriginal struggle in Australia. He had been inspired by the vision of militant Aboriginal leaders and informed by an organic process of growing inter-racial solidarity in the face of the hardship of the Depression. With this knowledge, he achieved a dynamic application of Marxist theory that had been distilled through generations of working-class, anti-colonial struggle around the world, to the situation in Australia. CPA comrades in Darwin had already carried out anti-racist work that provided an important foundation for Moxon's analysis. His writings, that placed these experiences into an explicitly anti-imperialist framework, bore important fruit in the coming years in campaigns that will be documented from Chapter Six. However, when Moxon was expelled from the CPA in 1932,²¹⁹ the Kooris and Gooris in NSW, whose example fighting in the AAPA had taught Moxon about the potential of struggles for Aboriginal self-determination, also fell out of view in the CPA press for much of the 1930s.

²¹⁶ Penrose, "Herbert Moxon," 107-111.

²¹⁷ "'Red Leader' Banned and Burned: Postal Authorities Destroy 3,000 copies," RL, September 4, 1931, 1.

²¹⁸ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 149-150.

²¹⁹ Penrose, "Herbert Moxon," 107-111.

Chapter Five

Contradictions of the Third Period

From Scottsboro to Sydney

1931-33

Following Herbert Moxon's retreat from Bourke in November 1931, the CPA leadership took no serious initiative around Aboriginal rights until the campaign against a proposed police attack on Yolngu people in Arnhem Land in September, 1933. This was despite the continued growth of solidarity between white and Aboriginal unemployed workers in some Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM) branches across Australia. This chapter will analyse developments in this two-year period, with a focus on the continuing, contradictory impact of the CPA's relationship with the Communist International (Comintern) at this time.

Moxon's own commitment to the Comintern Third Period perspective stifled the translation of his path-breaking 1931 writings into any serious campaigns for Aboriginal rights.¹ From late in 1929, Moxon had helped to create a political culture in the rapidly expanding CPA that stifled debate and relied on routine "purges" of dissident members to maintain the authority of the leadership.² At the time he was writing his program and associated articles, Moxon himself was falling victim to this culture and he was eventually expelled in 1932 without making any effort to campaign amongst the CPA members to defend his position in the party.³ With Moxon gone, there were no leading party activists prepared to carry forward his platform regarding the importance of Aboriginal struggle in general and the potential in south-east Australia in particular. Anti-Labor sectarianism, a central feature of the Third Period perspective, also hindered the development of nascent pro-Aboriginal initiatives in the Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM). Another source of political disorientation came from efforts by the CPA to promote Comintern propaganda about the "liberation" of national

¹ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery," WW, September 24, 1931, 2.

² Barbara Curthoys, "The Comintern, the CPA, and the Impact of Harry Wicks," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 39, no. 1 (April 1993): 24-30.

³ Beris Penrose, "Hebert Moxon, a Victim of the 'Bolshevisation' of the Communist Party," *Labour History* 70 (May 1996): 107-110.

minorities living under the rule of the USSR, at a time when some non-Russian peoples in the USSR were dying from starvation on a colossal scale.⁴

In contrast, the global Comintern campaign to free the “Scottsboro Boys”, nine Black youth sentenced to death on false rape charges in Alabama, USA, had an invigorating impact on the CPA in this period.⁵ Whereas elsewhere in this thesis I have concentrated on the relationship between the CPA and Comintern leadership bodies in Russia, an account of this campaign relies on a more transnational picture of Comintern operations.⁶ Black communists from the USA were at the centre of global organising efforts and Australian communists participated enthusiastically. The example of the International Labor Defence (ILD), the Communist-led organisation running the Scottsboro campaign in the USA, inspired transformations towards a more effective CPA practice. It took two years from when the CPA began writing about the injustice of Scottsboro⁷ to the CPA press drawing any connections with racist state repression in Australia.⁸ When these links were finally drawn, however, they went on to inform the first ever national campaigns by working-class organisations in defence of Aboriginal rights in Australian history, in 1933-34.

Moxon is driven from the CPA

When Moxon reported to the CPA Political Bureau about his draft resolution “on the Aboriginal question” in August 1931,⁹ his days in the party were numbered. Beris Penrose has thoroughly analysed the political assassination of Moxon¹⁰ and a brief outline based largely on this account, and minutes from CPA leadership body meetings, will be provided here as important context for the arguments made in this chapter. Moxon had been one of the

⁴ Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 93-113.

⁵ James Miller, Susan Pennybacker and Eve Rosenhaft, “Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April 2001): 387-388.

⁶ Drachewych provides a good account of the growing body of “transnational” history of the Comintern over the past decade in Oleksa Drachewych, “The Communist Transnational? Transnational studies and the history of the Comintern,” *History Compass* 17 no. 2 (February 2019): 1-12, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/hic3.12521>.

⁷ “Against Legal Lynching of Negro Boys by U.S.A. Imperialism,” WW, July 31, 1931, 3.

⁸ “Stop this Murder,” *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11.

⁹ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, August 29, 1931, Sydney, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419.

¹⁰ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon”.

most enthusiastic Australian supporters of the Third Period authoritarian political culture that ultimately led to his downfall.¹¹ As discussed in Chapter Three, the Third Period precipitated a shift in internal party culture in Communist parties across the world in the late 1920s, as developments in the USSR decisively reshaped the operations of the Comintern.¹²

The leadership that took control of the CPA after the December 1929 conference, with Moxon at the helm, saw themselves as accountable to Comintern bodies based in Moscow far more than to the local membership of the CPA.¹³ Moxon had been a delegate to Moscow in 1928, participating in discussions with the Comintern executive in the build-up to the Comintern Sixth Congress that proclaimed the Third Period.¹⁴ He earnestly believed that global revolution was just around the corner and that the success of that revolution in Australia depended on the Comintern perspective becoming uniform across the CPA.¹⁵ A Central Control Commission (CCC) of leading comrades was established early in 1930 that sent dispatches to Moscow, but was not accountable to any elected bodies of the CPA. The CCC “thoroughly scrutinised all members’ political and personal activities”.¹⁶ Expulsions became an increasingly common feature of party life.¹⁷ Debate that challenged positions of the leadership disappeared from the pages of the CPA press and declined at party meetings.¹⁸ The 1930 national Party Congress was delayed until April 1931,¹⁹ and then no Congress was held again until 1935.²⁰

In early 1930, the Comintern sent an American, Herbert Moore aka Harry Wicks (and hereafter referred to as Wicks) to Australia to oversee organisational change. He strengthened the emerging authoritarian culture.²¹ He also fanned the flames of Third Period ultra-left adventurism, encouraging serious CPA preparation for armed action, including at the anti-

¹¹ Curthoys, “The Comintern, the CPA, and the Impact of Harry Wicks,” 24.

¹² Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1985), 127-142.

¹³ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 98-104.

¹⁴ Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 95-96.

¹⁵ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 96.

¹⁶ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 100.

¹⁷ Curthoys, “The Comintern, the CPA, and the Impact of Harry Wicks,” 28-30.

¹⁸ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 96; Barbara Curthoys, “The Communist Party and the Communist International (1927 – 1929),” *Labour History* 64, no. 4 (May 1993): 66-67.

¹⁹ “10th Party Congress Resolution on C.C. Political Report,” WW, April 10, 1931, 1.

²⁰ “All Eyes on the Party Congress,” WW, November 29, 1935, 4.

²¹ Curthoys, “The Comintern, the CPA, and the Impact of Harry Wicks,” 26.

eviction stand at Bankstown in 1931.²² Wicks was expelled from the US Communist Party for being a police spy in 1937 and may have been “an undercover agent for anti-communist organisations for the whole of his party career”.²³

Before Wicks left Australia in July 1931, he began to ostracise Moxon. Moxon had challenged Wicks’ adventurist streak and had begun to slightly moderate his own anti-Labor position.²⁴ In Melbourne, Moxon allowed the UWM to organise a joint demonstration on March 6 with unemployed activists aligned to the Labor-controlled Trades Hall. For this, he was attacked by Wicks for “right deviation”, stood down from the position of General Secretary,²⁵ and condemned in the *Workers’ Weekly* for tying “the Melbourne unemployed to the social fascist machine”.²⁶ Wicks left Australia in July 1931 at a time when increasingly strident Comintern criticism of preparations for insurrection taking place in Australia were causing real anxiety for the CPA leadership.²⁷ The Comintern Third Period perspective still emphasised an impending global revolution. Penrose argues, however, that within the leadership of the USSR there was a countervailing concern to maintain existing trade relationships, particularly with Germany, where Stalin feared any serious destabilisation. A new realignment in Germany, with warnings of “leftist” danger, rippled through the Comintern affiliates and was used as an epithet to attack errant members, alongside continuing attacks on “rightists” who challenged the “social fascist” line.²⁸ In Australia, Moxon, already on the outer due to his clashes with Wicks, was ironically scapegoated for the adventurist armed actions for which Wicks bore much responsibility.²⁹

Despite losing his position as General Secretary, Moxon was re-elected to the Central Committee (CC) of the CPA and appointed as the Sydney party organiser at the April 1931 Congress.³⁰ Minutes from internal meetings, however, show that he came under consistent

²² Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 104-109.

²³ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 123-124.

²⁴ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 105-107.

²⁵ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 105.

²⁶ C.C. Secretariat, “Moxon and the CP,” WW, April 22, 2.

²⁷ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 107.

²⁸ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 103.

²⁹ Herbert Moxon, Letter to Frank, September 2, 1932, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Communist Party – NSW – Discipline, NAA: A6335, 31: 1.

³⁰ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 105-106.

attack.³¹ In private correspondence on September 2, 1931, Moxon made clear his belief that he would soon be expelled from the party.³² This letter demonstrates an internal tension between Moxon's continuing devotion to the Comintern, even as he bemoaned the suffocating political atmosphere within the CPA: "I, poor fish, have accepted all this in the name of 'unity'. Believe me there are some crimes committed in the name of 'unity'".³³

It is difficult to conclude whether there was any relationship between Moxon's advocacy of Aboriginal rights and his growing isolation, particularly given the lack of open political debate in the CPA at this time. There is no evidence of contention in the documentary record. Indeed, the program was the only thing that counted in his favour during leadership deliberations over his future in the party. In a session of the CC held on January 2, 1932 that voted to expel Moxon from the CC, a number of speakers cited the "outstanding statement on the Aborigines" as the sole example of positive work done by Moxon in recent times.³⁴ General Secretary J.B. Miles said:

Comrade Moxon has been able to take up and issue a statement in connection with a problem that this Party had hitherto failed to take up, so well that the Political Bureau adopted the statement with very slight alterations.³⁵

However, internal debate about Moxon's travel patterns might indicate that he wanted to engage with Aboriginal rights campaigning in a way that put him at odds with the party leadership. Moxon was reprimanded for "treachery and anti-Party conduct" for resigning his post in Sydney just before his trip to Bourke, a trip that seems to have been on his own initiative.³⁶ A CPA member was arrested for "offensive behaviour" following a party meeting in the Adelaide Botanic gardens in November 1931 when he accosted police about brutality against Aboriginal people. The arrested man, Gilbert Roper, quoted Moxon's articles in his

³¹ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the CPA, August 29, 1931, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419.

³² Moxon, Letter to Frank, 1.

³³ Moxon, Letter to Frank, 1.

³⁴ Minutes of the CPA Central Committee Plenum, January 2, 1932, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Communist Party – NSW – Discipline. NAA: A6335, 31: 3, 15, 24.

³⁵ Minutes of the CPA Central Committee Plenum, January 2, 1932, 3.

³⁶ Central Executive Committee of the CPA, Resolution on Moxon, undated document circa October 1931, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Communist Party – NSW – Discipline. NAA: A6335, 31.

defence and told the magistrate, “Moxon had been selected to go among the Aborigines in Central and Northern Australia to spread the doctrines of the Party”.³⁷ The *Workers’ Weekly* reports on the case (noting that Roper was sentenced to pay almost eight pounds or serve a month in prison) did not mention Moxon.³⁸ Yet Roper’s testimony suggests at least some discussion within the CPA about a continuing campaigning role for Moxon.

During the January meeting of the CC referred to above, *Workers’ Weekly* editor Lance Sharkey highlighted Moxon’s desire to travel to “Darwin and then the islands” as another example of his lack of commitment to the CPA.³⁹ It is possible Moxon wanted to take this trip to further his research and agitation around Aboriginal rights and against Australian imperialism. When the League Against Imperialism (LAI) discussed and then carried an abridged version of Moxon’s program at the Sydney District conference in December of 1931, however,⁴⁰ Moxon was sent to support election campaigning on the coalfields in the Hunter rather than contribute.⁴¹

Moxon’s own Stalinism had a direct impact on the failure of his insights to sink deeper roots in the broader party membership. Beris Penrose argued:

Of most interest in the events surrounding Moxon’s removal from the central committee was the extent to which communists had come to believe that democratic debate within the party was destructive.⁴²

Moxon explicitly refused to defend the importance of his opinions and his recent activities by campaigning amongst the party rank and file, telling the CC, “I will defend myself if I am attacked, but I will not raise it anywhere else but on [the CC] and with Moscow”.⁴³ Moxon’s attempts to challenge the campaign against him by communicating directly with the

³⁷ “Reds Among the Blacks – Evidence in Court,” *Adelaide Advertiser*, December 18, 1931, 26.

³⁸ “Arrested for Defending Abos.,” WW, November 27, 1931, 3; “Guilty – Defending Abos.,” WW, December 25, 1931, 3.

³⁹ Minutes of the CPA Central Committee Plenum, January 2, 1932, 9.

⁴⁰ Statement on the Position of Australian Aborigines, League Against Imperialism, Australian Section, Sydney District Conference, December 10, 1931, JNRC, AU NBAC N57-426

⁴¹ Joe Campbell, “Rowley James Says Bankstown Prisoners are ‘Criminals’,” WW, December 11, 1931, 4.

⁴² Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 109.

⁴³ Minutes of the CPA Central Committee Plenum, January 2, 1932, 23.

Comintern in Moscow led to further charges of “treachery”.⁴⁴ After his expulsion from the CC in January 1932, Moxon seems to have briefly drifted between different political initiatives prescribed to him by the leadership in Sydney⁴⁵ and then travelled to North Queensland, without authorisation from the party. This was the rationale provided for his eventual expulsion from the CPA entirely in July 1932.⁴⁶

Moxon’s aversion to trying to convince the CPA rank and file of his political views meant that when he was pushed out, his unique perspective on Aboriginal struggle was lost too. Subsequent developments demonstrate that his insights about the importance of the fight for Aboriginal rights were only absorbed by the CPA at a very superficial level. The pattern of coverage of Aboriginal issues in the CPA press in 1932, and for the first half of 1933, largely reverted back to that of the period in 1930 and 1931 prior to the publication of Moxon’s articles. There were semi-regular reports of the continuing efforts by the Darwin branch to challenge racist police brutality,⁴⁷ a number of reports on the terrible conditions of Aboriginal pastoral workers in north Australia,⁴⁸ and examples of injustice picked up from the mainstream press.⁴⁹

There is, however, clear evidence in the CPA press of the continuing process that had driven the formulation of Moxon’s program in 1931 – growing organic unity between Aboriginal and white unemployed workers struggling against the hardships of the Depression. According to a *Workers’ Weekly* report on a major UWM conference in Darwin in October 1931, a “feature of the conference was the definite linking up of the struggles of the Aboriginal with the white workers,” with a resolution calling for “the complete emancipation [of Aboriginal people] from the present system”.⁵⁰ A conference demonstration took up the particular case of one attendee, Dolphin Cubillo, who had been denied unemployed relief.⁵¹ Dolphin was the

⁴⁴ Penrose, “Herbert Moxon,” 109-110.

⁴⁵ “Where is Moxon Going?,” WW, May 13, 1932, 2.

⁴⁶ Central Control Commission, “Moxon Out of the Communist Party,” WW, July 29, 1932, 2.

⁴⁷ “Old Black Batoned to Death – Police Brutality Against Aborigines in the NT,” RL, March 11, 1932, 6; “Parkhill Evades Charges of Cruelty to Aborigines,” WW, March 11, 1932, 3.

⁴⁸ Worker Correspondent, “Stock Riders Exploited – Conditions in the North,” WW, January 29, 1934, 4; N.T. Worker Correspondent, “White and Black are Exploited on Cattle Runs,” WW, February 12, 1932, 4; Mrs. F.W. “Natives Exploited,” WW, March 3, 1933, 4.

⁴⁹ “Shot Dead – Aboriginal Killer Acquitted,” WW, June 10, 1932, 3; “Last Week,” RL, June 29, 1932, 1; “Aborigines – Slavery Exists in Australia,” WW, March 31, 1933, 4;

⁵⁰ “U.W.M. Grows,” WW, October 30, 1932, 4.

⁵¹ “Darwin U.W.M.,” WW, October 9, 1931, 4; “Aborigines – U.W.M. Will Fight for Justice,” WW, November 6, 1931, 4.

son of Filipino sailmaker Antonio Cubillo (a former IWW member, mentioned in Chapter Three) and Larrakia woman Magdealena (Lily) McKeddie, who led a family very prominent in the history of Darwin.⁵²

In July 1932, the UWM in Dubbo passed a similar resolution to that of Bourke the previous year, calling for “full rations for our aboriginal fellow-workers” and asking “all Unemployed Workers' Movements and working-class organisations” to take up the demand.⁵³ This resolution was reported on in the *Workers' Weekly*, but not given any further encouragement. Since Moxon's ouster, it seems there was no one with influence in the party championing the potential for these struggles over racist dole regulations to be used as a basis for broader Aboriginal rights campaigning. There were similar initiatives in other areas that were given a single report, but no further coverage. Two months prior, the *Red Leader* had reported on a pro-Aboriginal resolution from the Innisfail UWM in North Queensland. This resolution demanded dole payments for Aboriginal comrades and condemned the exploitation and control of movement imposed by the “Aborigines Act”, including at the “notorious mission” on Palm Island.⁵⁴ The presence of Aboriginal people in the UWM at Port Kembla on the NSW South Coast was noted in the *Workers' Weekly*, without any discussion of the significance of this involvement.⁵⁵ Reports from 1932 in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* demonstrate that a UWM branch in Mayfield was consistently taking up issues of Aboriginal rights, demanding an end both to the discrimination against their own Aboriginal unemployed members⁵⁶ and “atrocities” said to be taking place in remote Queensland.⁵⁷ These efforts were not reported in the CPA press.

⁵² Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007), 95-101

⁵³ R.W., “Aborigines and the Dole – Dubbo Unemployed,” WW, July 1, 1932, 4.

⁵⁴ “Unity Against Dole Regulations,” RL, May 31, 1933, 8. For more on how the draconian powers in the *Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* were used in the Depression in Queensland see Raymond Evans and Joanne Scott, “‘Fallen Among Thieves’: Aboriginal Labour and State Control in Inter-War Queensland,” *Labour History* 69 (November 1995): 115-130; Gordon Briscoe, *Counting, Health and Identity: A History of Aboriginal health and demography in Western Australia and Queensland 1900-1940*, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), 307-310.

⁵⁵ “Some Results,” WW, February 3, 1933, 3.

⁵⁶ “Mayfield Unemployed Workers' Movement,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, July 5, 7; “Mayfield Unemployed Workers' Movement,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, July 19, 1932, 3.

⁵⁷ “Mayfield Unemployed Workers' Movement,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, March 22, 1932, 2.

The one area where Moxon's program had an enduring impact was in cementing Aboriginal rights demands in the formal platform of the CPA.⁵⁸ From late in 1931, pro-Aboriginal demands were often listed in CPA election material.⁵⁹ Aboriginal rights slogans were encouraged as potential placards for CPA members preparing for May Day demonstrations in 1932.⁶⁰ Also in LAI material, the demand for self-determination for Aboriginal people was now routinely included alongside calls for freedom for "New Guinea natives" oppressed by Australian imperialism.⁶¹ Occasionally there was a longer reiteration of the resolution adopted at the LAI December 1931 conference,⁶² based on Moxon's program, and in 1932 the *Workers' Weekly* claimed the LAI was raising funds to write a "pamphlet on the Aborigines".⁶³ However, the LAI focused their campaigning efforts in this period on general anti-war rallies⁶⁴ or international campaigns like the imprisonment of Indian trade unionists.⁶⁵ An LAI publication, *World Survey*, published two articles on Aboriginal conditions, both focused exclusively on northern Australia.⁶⁶

An article published in the *Workers' Weekly* in June 1933 about northern cattle stations indicated that the party leadership had abandoned Moxon's insistence on the need for a struggle for self-determination across all states and territories.⁶⁷ This article drew a clear distinction between the CPA's political demands for Aboriginal people depending on "caste" and level of integration into settler society: "we hold that ample land and freedom from interference is a necessary condition for the uncivilised aborigines and political and economic

⁵⁸ "Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia," WW, January 6, 1933, 3.

⁵⁹ Manifesto of No. 6 District, Communist Party of Australia, undated handbill circa December 1931, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10420; "Communist Party Alone for Workers," *Working Woman*, December 1, 1931, 1; "There's a Happy Land! But It is Far, Far Away – Catch Cries of Communism," *Dubbo Dispatch and Wellington Independent*, January 8, 1932, 8.

⁶⁰ "Prepare May Day," WW, April 1, 1932, 2.

⁶¹ Resolution on Australian Imperialism, undated from League Against Imperialism meeting circa February 1932, JNRC, AU NBAC N57-426; The Aborigines, *Anti-Imperialist Youth Bulletin*, August 25, 1932, Australian Youth Section, League Against Imperialism, Sydney, JNRC, AU NBAC N57-1986.

⁶² "From 1,000,000 to 60,000 Aborigines – Defend New Guinea Against Australian Imperialism – League Against Imperialism Conference," WW, May 13, 1932, 3.

⁶³ "From 1,000,000 to 60,000 Aborigines," WW, May 13, 1932, 3.

⁶⁴ "Against Imperialist War Enthusiastic Rally in Sydney," WW, February 19, 1932, 4.

⁶⁵ "From Imperialist Clutches Free Meerut Prisoners," WW, January 27, 1933, 4.

⁶⁶ "Australian Aborigines," *World Survey*, January 1, 1933; "The Australian Aborigines," *World Survey*, October 1, 1933.

⁶⁷ "Australian Aborigines Forced into Chattel Slavery," WW, June 9, 1933, 3.

equality for the half-castes”.⁶⁸ As discussed in Chapter Three, one of the most dynamic aspects of Moxon’s perspective was his argument about the potentially powerful role that “half caste workers” could play in places like NSW, linking the anti-colonial demands of their people with the broader working-class movement.⁶⁹ This emphasis on a common colonial oppression suffered by all Aboriginal people across the continent, and the need for a united struggle, disappeared from all CPA material from 1932-34. In practice, even the demands for simple equality in the south were never seriously prosecuted in this period as a party-wide project.

A real opportunity for anti-racist struggle linked to working-class power was missed in 1932, when the Arbitration Court drastically cut conditions for pastoral workers across Australia.⁷⁰ As part of this decision, Aboriginal pastoral workers were excluded from the Award in NSW for the first time, a move justified by racist arguments about the inferior quality of Aboriginal labour, arguments reiterated by the AWU officials present at the hearing.⁷¹ The CPA noted this critically in a report on the hearings.⁷² In some of the reporting of pastoral workers’ union meetings responding to the cuts, resolutions called for equal pay “regardless of age or colour”.⁷³ However, none of the CPA’s widespread agitation for a militant response to the wage cuts explicitly discussed this new racist division of the NSW pastoral workforce.⁷⁴

Third Period “exposures” and Soviet propaganda

Two final aspects of Third Period Stalinism worked to stifle the impact of Moxon’s analysis. Both relate to the way the CPA press in this period was geared towards “ruthless exposure”⁷⁵ of rival political forces, with quite vitriolic denunciation. This often came at the expense of attention to the needs of the struggle. A major aspect of Moxon’s writings on Aboriginal

⁶⁸ “Australian Aborigines Forced into Chattel Slavery,” WW, June 9, 1933, 3.

⁶⁹ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery,” WW, September 24, 1931, 2.

⁷⁰ Heather Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909-1939,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 1982), 256-258.

⁷¹ Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in NSW,” 257.

⁷² “Graziers’ Log – Before Arbitration Court,” WW, June 24, 1932, 1.

⁷³ “The Shearers are Fighting,” RL, June 22, 1932, 5.

⁷⁴ “Interim Award Huge Wage Slash for Shearers,” WW, July 22, 1932, 1; “Preparing for Struggle,” WW, July 29, 1932, 3; “Pastoral Industry – Insufficient Preparations for Struggle,” WW, August 26, 1932, 3.

⁷⁵ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 122.

oppression was his insistence on the “social fascist” nature of the Labor Party.⁷⁶ This analysis missed the real possibilities of strengthening initiatives amongst rank-and-file Labor members for Aboriginal rights. Secondly, Moxon was concerned to expose the hypocrisy of the Australian bourgeois press and politicians during public debate about the system of forced labour operating in the USSR.⁷⁷ This hypocrisy was very real, but so too were many of the accusations about forced labour.⁷⁸

Chapter Three concurred with Jude Elton’s conclusion that CPA activists in Darwin in 1930 seemed more interested in “exposing” the racism of the ALP union leadership than with building a strategic campaign to defeat the racist exclusion clauses of the union.⁷⁹ There were similar problems with Moxon’s analysis. Continuing attempts at Aboriginal extermination were sheeted home to the “social fascist” Labor governments of Scullin at the Commonwealth⁸⁰ level and Jack Lang in NSW.⁸¹ The orientation of the ALP, to form government and take responsibility for managing the deeply racist operations of Australian capitalism, certainly implicated the party in crimes against Aboriginal people. Labor, however, was also a deeply contradictory organisation. At the same time as its parliamentary leaders were presiding over massive cuts to working class living standards in the Depression, a mass movement for socialism, known as the ‘socialisation units’, was exploding amongst the rank and file in NSW.⁸² The nature of this movement will be discussed further in Chapter Seven, where I will argue that a softening of the Third Period perspective in 1933 allowed the CPA to work closely on Aboriginal rights campaigns with prominent socialists in Labor. In the early 1930s, however, such work was impossible given the extent of anti-Labor vitriol in CPA articles and speeches. At May Day in 1932, where the *Workers’ Weekly* had encouraged placards demanding Aboriginal rights, the CPA also celebrated the exclusion of “social-

⁷⁶ For example, H.J.M. “Hands Off the Aborigines! N.S.W. Blacks Suffer Under ‘Labor’,” WW, September 25, 1931, 2

⁷⁷ “Slavery in Russia,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 5, 1931, 8; M. Lucien Cramer, “Labour Camps – Terrible Russian Conditions – Prisoners’ Stories,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 23, 1931, 9.

⁷⁸ Robert W. Davies, “Forced Labour Under Stalin: The Archive Revelations,” *New Left Review* 214 (November-December 1995).

⁷⁹ Jude Elton, “Comrades of Competition? Union Relations with Aboriginal Workers in the South Australian and Northern Territory Pastoral Industries, 1878-1957,” (PhD diss., University of South Australia, 2007), 260.

⁸⁰ H.J.M. “Slave Labor – Imagined and Real,” WW, September 11, 1931, 1.

⁸¹ H.J.M. “Hands Off the Aborigines! N.S.W. Blacks Suffer Under ‘Labor’”.

⁸² Nick Martin, “‘Bucking the Machine’: Clarrie Martin and the NSW Socialisation Units 1929-35,” *Labour History*, 93 (November 2007), 183-185.

fascist” union leaders or politicians from participating in the demonstration.⁸³

As Kylie Tennant’s experiences with the ALP branch in Coonabarabran indicate,⁸⁴ there was serious racism across the rank and file of the party. There were exceptions to this, however. In Bateman’s Bay on the South Coast, AAPA leader Jane Duren had worked with local ALP members in the late 1920s to successfully challenge the exclusion of Aboriginal students from the local school, a campaign that appealed for working-class solidarity against racism.⁸⁵ Bill Ferguson, a committed ALP member who would go on to found the Aborigines Progressive Association in 1937,⁸⁶ was sacked from his relief job in south-west Sydney, “for addressing a stop-work meeting of his fellow relief workers” in this period.⁸⁷ In Cowra, the local Labor branch in 1932 had protested the inadequate scale of rations available to Aboriginal people.⁸⁸ In Dubbo, some local socialists active in the UWM were Labor members in the socialisation units,⁸⁹ and the Labor branch also took up the issue of discrimination against Aboriginal people in dole rates.⁹⁰ In 1935, after the CPA dropped the “social fascist” line entirely, a number of these Dubbo socialists left the ALP and formed a branch of the Communist Party in Dubbo.⁹¹

Rhetorical propaganda, rather than clear analysis of political reality and the needs of the struggle, was also chronic in the CPA press when it came to discussing the USSR. In the early 1930s the USSR suffered through a terrible famine in which millions of people perished⁹² and the Stalinist regime began to construct a massive apparatus of secret police and prison camps.⁹³ The CPA press furiously denied all this⁹⁴ and printed tales of life free

⁸³ “Successful in Sydney,” WW, May 6, 1932, 4.

⁸⁴ Kylie Tennant, *The Missing Heir: The Autobiography of Kylie Tennant* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 110.

⁸⁵ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 147-148.

⁸⁶ Jack Horner, *Bill Ferguson, Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom: A Biography* (Canberra: J. Horner, 1994), 21, 25, 35.

⁸⁷ Heather Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities in NSW,” 282.

⁸⁸ “Branch Reports – Cowra,” *Labor Daily*, April 25, 1932, 8.

⁸⁹ Jack Booth, Interview by Heather Goodall, May 21, 1981, 51. Interview Transcript supplied by Heather Goodall.

⁹⁰ “Branch Reports – Dubbo,” *Labor Daily*, June 25, 1932, 10.

⁹¹ Booth, Interview by Goodall, 52.

⁹² Smith, *Red Nations*, 98-102.

⁹³ Hallas, *The Comintern*, 127-128.

⁹⁴ For example, “Where is that ‘Food Shortage’ – Tales of the Capitalist Press,” WW, January 22, 1932, 3; R.O., “New Wave of Anti-Soviet Lies,” WW, September 16, 1932, 4.

from want in the “Workers’ Fatherland”.⁹⁵

Celebrating the “liberation” of non-Russian peoples, who had suffered for generations under the imperialist Czarist regime overthrown in 1917, was one particular feature of CPA propaganda.⁹⁶ Supporting the rights of peoples colonised by Russia to full national independence had been an important component of the revolutionary process that began in 1917.⁹⁷ A host of Soviet republics, formed in the borderlands of the former Russian empire, were guaranteed political independence under the constitution of the USSR in 1924.⁹⁸ From 1928, however, dissenters to the centralised Russian regime faced a wave of persecution across these republics.⁹⁹ Moxon did not address conditions for minorities in the USSR in his writings on Aboriginal oppression. However, the editorial in the *Workers’ Weekly* that accompanied his series argued that the policies of “national freedom” in the USSR could be applied in Australia to liberate Aboriginal people, an argument that would become very common in the CPA press in the coming years:

In the U.S.S.R. immense work has already been accomplished in placing the native nomadic tribes on the land, and thus placing their feet on the rungs of the ladder that leads to civilisation.¹⁰⁰

The “nomadic tribes” referred to here, maintained a lifestyle travelling with livestock across traditional routes on the Kazakh Steppe. The beginning of the drive across the USSR for the forced collectivisation of agriculture from 1928 was accompanied in Kazakhstan by a brutal and disastrous campaign of forced “sedenterisation” of nomadic tribes.¹⁰¹ As nomads were corralled into agricultural settlements,¹⁰² their livestock perished, as did more than one

⁹⁵ L. Robbins, “Forced Labor Lie – An Aussie Worker Writes from the U.S.S.R.,” WW, June 5, 1931, 1; “In the Workers’ Fatherland: Every Facility Available for Culture and Recreation,” WW, November 18, 1932, 3.

⁹⁶ “Self-Determination,” WW, January 30, 1931, 3; “Two Worlds: Scottsboro, U.S.A. and Stalingrad, U.S.S.R.,” WW, May 13, 1932, 3.

⁹⁷ Dave Crouch, “The Seeds of National Liberation,” *International Socialism*, 94 (Spring 2002), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2002/isj2-094/crouch.htm>.

⁹⁸ Smith, *Red Nations*, 67-69.

⁹⁹ Smith, *Red Nations*, 93-110.

¹⁰⁰ “The Native Races and Imperialism,” WW, September 18, 1931, 2.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Red Nations*, 97-99.

¹⁰² Alun Thomas, “Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State,” (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2015), 207-209.

million people in a terrible famine.¹⁰³ These kind of details about suffering in the USSR were simply rejected by the CPA.¹⁰⁴

The widespread use of Marxist “stages of development” language in the USSR to justify contemporary policy towards “backward” groups like the Kazakh nomads,¹⁰⁵ encouraged the revival of such language in the CPA press in the coming years in relation to Aboriginal people. This rhetoric often erased the importance of struggle by Aboriginal people themselves. Aboriginal “backwardness” became a problem to be solved.¹⁰⁶ During the campaigning in 1933 and 1934, the CPA published numerous articles containing Soviet propaganda about the supposedly wonderful conditions for “backward races”¹⁰⁷ or “backward peoples” being “taught self-government” in the USSR, as a way of showing the possible “solution” for Aboriginal people in Australia under communist rule.¹⁰⁸ These were reflected in the thought of CPA leader Tom Wright, who would become the party’s premier theoretician on Aboriginal issues. Wright began writing about the importance of the Soviet example for Aboriginal people from 1934.¹⁰⁹ Later in the 1930s, Wright abandoned any conception of the revolutionary agency of Aboriginal people, focusing his writings on an elaborate administrative policy for tutelage of tribal “full bloods” on “inviolable reserves”, while “half-castes” were to be encouraged to abandon Aboriginal identity entirely.¹¹⁰

Moxon’s writings, in contrast, had been focused squarely on the nature of Aboriginal oppression and the dynamics of resistance. The final demand in Moxon’s program, however, for the creation of separate Aboriginal states, “republics fully independent of imperialism”,¹¹¹ was primarily a function of Comintern Third Period politics. Marxist anti-colonial theory had always emphasised the importance of solidarity with oppressed peoples demanding self-determination. In the context of the struggle against the Russian empire, it had been

¹⁰³ This estimate is from French historian Isabelle Ohayon, “The Kazakh Famine: The Beginnings of Sedentarization,” in *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, ed. Claire Andrieu, 28 September, 2013, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/kazakh-famine-beginnings-sedentarization.html>.

¹⁰⁴ “Two Worlds: Scottsboro, U.S.A. and Stalingrad, U.S.S.R.,” WW, May 13, 1932, 3; “Socialist Reconstruction in the U.S.S.R.,” WW, September 2, 1932, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas, “Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State,” 50.

¹⁰⁶ “Events,” WW, February 1935, 2;

¹⁰⁷ “Exterminating the Aborigines,” WW, October 13, 1933, 3.

¹⁰⁸ “Slavery in Australia,” *Australian Labor Defender*, September-October 1934, 10.

¹⁰⁹ “Atrocities Against Aborigines Must Cease,” RL, April 18, 1934, 3.

¹¹⁰ Tom Wright, *New Deal for Aborigines* (Sydney: Modern Publishers, 1939), 1, 24-25, 31-32.

¹¹¹ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines,” WW.

particularly important to support the right for non-Russian peoples in the borderlands to secede entirely from the oppressor nation.¹¹² This was a revolutionary strategy for trying to connect with the aspirations of self-organised struggles by oppressed people themselves. From 1928, however, the Comintern began to insist that numerous communist parties around the world adopt a uniform formula when relating to oppressed peoples living within the borders of their national state. They were instructed to demand a separate republic for that minority, regardless of whether the liberation movements of the oppressed were demanding such a republic.¹¹³ This served the dual function both of promoting the supposed “success” of the Soviet Union in “solving the problem” of national and racial oppression through separate republics, while also testing the loyalty of various parties around the world to the directives of the Comintern.¹¹⁴

In Peru, for example, Marxist theorist José Carlos Mariátegui developed some original insights into the ways that Indigenous struggle based on collectivist principles could inform the broader struggle for socialism.¹¹⁵ He was attacked for not supporting a Comintern strategy that the Peruvian party adopt a policy of a separate “native republic” for Indigenous peoples.¹¹⁶ Most infamously, the Comintern enforced a policy known as the “Black Belt thesis” on the Communist Party in the USA.¹¹⁷ While sometimes condemning anti-Indigenous discrimination, the CPUSA developed no overall policy in this period for

¹¹² V.I. Lenin, “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” First published 1916, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm>.

¹¹³ “Native” or “Black” Republics were proposed by the Comintern for the USA, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil, see Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism 1919-1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 355. A “Black Republic” was also proposed in South Africa earlier by Bukharin and is often discussed by historians in this context, though this proposal differed fundamentally in that the entirety of contemporary South Africa was proposed to be a “Black republic independent of imperialism,” Alison Drew, *Between Empire and Revolution: A Life of Sydney Bunting, 1873-1936* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 149-165.

¹¹⁴ Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 355-356.

¹¹⁵ Jose Carlos Mariategui, “Essay three: The Problem of the Land,” in *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, First published 1928, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/7-interpretive-essays/essay03.htm>.

¹¹⁶ Marc Becker, “Mariategui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” *Science & Society* 70, no. 4 (October 2006): 466-468; Mike Gonzales, “Jose Carlos Mariategui,” *International Socialism* 115 (Summer 2007), <http://isj.org.uk/jose-carlos-mariategui-latin-americas-forgotten-marxist/>.

¹¹⁷ Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 352-365.

Indigenous peoples in the USA,¹¹⁸ who were facing aggressive assimilation and trying to defend the territorial integrity of existing reserves.¹¹⁹ However, areas across the US south, where the descendants of African slaves formed a majority of the population, were earmarked as potential territory for a “Black republic” independent of the USA.¹²⁰ This slogan was baffling for many American comrades, including the majority of the Black membership of the CPUSA, but any dissenters were attacked and so most kept quiet.¹²¹ Numerous scholars have argued that the “Black republic thesis” did help to place Black liberation squarely on the CPUSA agenda, a phenomenon that will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter.¹²² During the day-to-day campaign work of the party, however, advocacy of a “Black republic” was useless and therefore almost non-existent.¹²³

In Australia, Aboriginal people had certainly exercised jurisdiction both prior to and in resistance to colonisation, but no Aboriginal groups raised the demand for an independent republic. This made it fundamentally different to many other demands in Moxon’s program which related communist support for self-determination directly to both Aboriginal experiences of oppression and aspirations for change.¹²⁴ The closest thing to Moxon’s “Aboriginal republics” proposal in Australian politics was a petition campaign in 1925-26 for a “model Aboriginal state” led by Colonel Joseph Charles Genders, humanitarian campaigner and Secretary of the Aborigines Protection League of South Australia.¹²⁵ This differed fundamentally from the CPA program, proposing a state within the Australian constitution overseen by a white administrator, and sought to bolster rather than challenge Australian nationalism.¹²⁶ The “model Aboriginal state” proposal was not in alignment with the

¹¹⁸ Oleksa Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism and the Communist International,” in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, 2nd Ed, ed. Zak Cope and Immanuel Ness (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 4-5, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-91206-6_140-1

¹¹⁹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 169-170.

¹²⁰ A short, popular account of the genesis of the “Black-Belt thesis” and its impact on the political culture and racial politics of the CPUSA is provided by US socialist writer Lee Sustar, “Self-Determination and the Black Belt,” *Socialist Worker*, June 15, 2012, <http://socialistworker.org/2012/06/15/self-determination-and-the-black-belt>.

¹²¹ Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 357-359.

¹²² Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 361-363.

¹²³ Drew Cottle, “The Colour-line and the Third Period: A Comparative Analysis of American and Australian Communism and the Question of Race, 1928–1934,” *American Communist History* 10 no. 2 (August 2011): 122-123.

¹²⁴ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

¹²⁵ John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 81.

¹²⁶ “A Model Aborigines State – Petition,” *Voice of the North*, May 10, 1926, 10.

contemporary Aboriginal rights movement either. John Maynard argues:

[T]he AAPA's fight was not for a separate and segregated Aboriginal state, but for the provision of enough land for each and every Aboriginal family in Australia in their own right and country.¹²⁷

Moxon's application of the "Native Republic" thesis to Aboriginal circumstances was perhaps part of his more general attempt to appeal to the Comintern for support as he was being ostracised by the CPA leadership. An abridged version of Moxon's program was published in the Comintern's international journal *Inprecorr*,¹²⁸ no doubt a boost to his morale and prestige.

Moxon also explicitly propagandised for the USSR in the first article that the *Workers' Weekly* published in his series on Aboriginal rights. Titled, "Slave labour – imagined and real", the article was framed as a response to "slanders" published in the mainstream press about the working conditions in Soviet Union labour camps. It opened with Moxon's characteristic flamboyance:

STAND UP, members of the Australian capitalist class... you hypocrites, who lyingly screech about slave labor in the timber camps of the Workers' Fatherland while you carry on a vigorous policy of driving the Australian Aborigines to work on forced indentures... you who use chains, whips and guns in order to get cheap labor, dare to slander the Soviet Union!¹²⁹

The public discussion of Soviet timber camps referenced here related to a Tariff Board inquiry triggered by Australian timber companies seeking a "dumping duty" on timber sent to Australia by Soviet Russia.¹³⁰ The companies argued that forced prison labour in Russia was allowing for sale at a price that undercut the local industry,¹³¹ a charge denied by G.K. Radygin, a representative of the Soviet government operating a Russo-Export agency in

¹²⁷ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom*, 82-83.

¹²⁸ H.J.M. "Inhuman Exploitation of Aborigines in Australia," *Inprecorr*, 11 No. 54 (October 22, 1931): 986.

¹²⁹ H.J.M., "Slave Labor - Imagined and Real," WW, September 11, 1931, 1

¹³⁰ "Russian Timber – Dumping Duty Urged," *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 15, 1931, 8.

¹³¹ "No Market – Timber from Russia – 'Prison Labor'," *The Sun*, September 3, 1931, 17.

Sydney.¹³² Sources available since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 show the importance of forced labour to the Soviet economy in this period, including the timber industry.¹³³ Moxon, however, failed to recognise that the regime in Moscow was now more interested in the sale of timber to Australia than it was in helping to provide genuine revolutionary guidance to the CPA, with tragic consequences both for himself and the future of the party he had devoted his entire adult life to building.

The Scottsboro Boys campaign and global impact of Black communists from the USA

The final sections of this chapter will examine the impact in Australia of the major international campaign to free the “Scottsboro Boys”. Chapter Three demonstrated how the global activism of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) had a decisive impact on the Aboriginal rights campaigning led by the AAPA in Australia in the 1920s. In the early 1930s Black communists in the USA, pushing Scottsboro campaign initiatives through the Comintern, had a similar global impact, inspiring anti-racist organisation across the world.¹³⁴

So far, this chapter has argued that the CPA’s adherence to the Third Period perspective of the Comintern leadership in Moscow stifled possibilities for the party’s new pro-Aboriginal position to have a broader social impact. However, as Oleksa Drachewych has argued, there are limitations in an approach to Comintern history focused solely on the dynamics between constituent parties and the Comintern centre.¹³⁵ Taking a transnational approach can add depth to our understanding of the impact of the Comintern, highlighting the ways that radical ideas circulated between affiliate parties and individual activists. This approach is very fruitful for analysis of the Scottsboro campaign, described in one detailed essay as, “one of the greatest defining moments of the twentieth century... only the anti-slavery struggle of the nineteenth century had enjoyed such global orchestration and empathy”.¹³⁶ From Canada¹³⁷

¹³² “Russian Goods – Production Costs Reduced,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 22, 1931, 8.

¹³³ Davies, “Forced Labour Under Stalin: The Archive Revelations,” 73-75.

¹³⁴ Frances Peace Sullivan, ““For the liberty of the nine boys in Scottsboro and against Yankee imperialist domination in Latin America”: Cuba’s Scottsboro defence campaign,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 38, no. 2 (2013): 282-284.

¹³⁵ Drachewych, “The Communist Transnational?” 1.

¹³⁶ Miller, Pennybacker and Rosenhaft, “Mother Ada Wright” 388.

¹³⁷ John Manely, “The Canadian Labor Defense League and the Scottsboro Case, 1931-1932: Some Documents,” *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History*, 4 (Autumn 1977): 15-20.

to Cuba¹³⁸ to Britain,¹³⁹ communist initiative was shaped both by mechanical application of Comintern instructions emanating from Moscow, and genuine inspiration from the anti-racist street fighting across the USA, strengthening the successful court advocacy taking place in Alabama for the “Scottsboro Boys”. New ways of organising against racism and state repression on display through the Scottsboro campaign also had a serious impact in Australia,¹⁴⁰ despite the initial failure of the CPA to connect the Scottsboro case to the specificities of Australian racism.¹⁴¹

From 1929, militant Third Period politics had led to a similarly explosive period of recruitment of desperate, unemployed workers in the USA as that experienced by the Australian party.¹⁴² As we saw in Chapters Three and Four, the sharp left turn in Australia from 1929 helped to clarify and consolidate anti-racist positions that had been developing within the CPA. In the USA, this phenomenon was even more marked and proved to be a watershed for the role of Black revolutionaries within the US party.¹⁴³ A number of these activists, including James Ford and Harry Haywood, were at the 1928 Congress in Moscow. The Russian leadership around Stalin was attacking the allegedly “rightist” CPUSA leadership as this time. Appeals by Black communists for the party to take anti-racism far more seriously found support in Moscow as part of this general attack on the CPUSA leadership.¹⁴⁴

Black communists from the USA became the driving force behind a new International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), uniting revolutionary Black activists from across the world.¹⁴⁵ During the Scottsboro Boys campaign, the ITUCNW was led by George

¹³⁸ Sullivan, “For the liberty of the nine boys in Scottsboro and against Yankee imperialist domination,” 1-10.

¹³⁹ Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 16-66.

¹⁴⁰ “Defend the Aborigines!” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 5-6.

¹⁴¹ “Stop Yankee Imperialism’s Murders,” *WW*, April 8, 1932, 1.

¹⁴² Paul D’Amato, “The Communist Party and Black Liberation in the 1930s,” *International Socialist Review* 67, (September 2019), <https://isreview.org/issue/1/communist-party-and-black-liberation-1930s>.

¹⁴³ Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 330-352.

¹⁴⁴ Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 330.

¹⁴⁵ Susan Campbell, “The Negro Worker: A Comintern Publication of 1928-37, An Introduction,” Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/negro-worker/index.htm>.

Padmore, recruited to communism while working in the United States in the 1920s.¹⁴⁶ Padmore eventually broke with the Comintern in 1933. He argued that the Comintern leadership frustrated his efforts to fight the racism and colonialism of the ruling classes in Britain and France, countries Stalin had started to build more cordial relationships with, seeking allies against Hitler.¹⁴⁷ However, for a solid three years in the Depression, Padmore managed to carry forward transformative initiatives with the support of Comintern affiliates across the world.¹⁴⁸ In 1933, Australian customs authorities made a specific effort to stop the ITUCNW paper edited by Padmore, *The Negro Worker*, from entering the country.¹⁴⁹

The Scottsboro Boys campaign was a global initiative with clear roots in new patterns of CPUSA activity in the Depression. Just like in Australia, communists in the US organised an Unemployed Workers' Movement.¹⁵⁰ This activity included a conscious orientation towards the needs of Black unemployed workers. Mass demonstrations of tens of thousands were met with police brutality and sometimes lethal force.¹⁵¹ The main vehicle for organising the Scottsboro campaign was the International Labor Defence (ILD). The ILD had been the most successful campaign group led by the CPUSA through the 1920s.¹⁵² Despite the extreme sectarianism of the Third Period, the ILD still had a "significant minority" of non-communist members in the early 1930s.¹⁵³ The organisation eschewed propagandistic "exposures" and focused on earnest defence of political prisoners. Their method involved organising "mass protest" against prosecutions, supplemented by "the best available legal defence".¹⁵⁴ Until the early 1930s, the ILD's efforts were focused on challenging repression of mostly white protestors and union militants.¹⁵⁵ American historian Charles Martin argues that, with the new CPUSA focus on Black struggle:

¹⁴⁶ Campbell, "The Negro Worker".

¹⁴⁷ C.L.R. James, "Reflections on Pan Africanism," November 20, 1973, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1973/panafricanism.htm>.

¹⁴⁸ Hakim Adi, "Pan-Africanism and Communism," *Social Theory and Movements Research Network*, lecture, Glasgow: Scotland, University of Glasgow, January 18, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/157929814>.

¹⁴⁹ "'Negro Worker' Banned By Customs," WW, March 24, 1933, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Danny Lucia, "The unemployed movements of the 1930s," *International Socialist Review* 71 (September 2009), <https://isreview.org/issue/71/unemployed-movements-1930s>.

¹⁵¹ Charles Martin, "The International Labor Defence and Black America," *Labor History* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1985), 173.

¹⁵² Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 197-204.

¹⁵³ Martin, "The ILD and Black America," 168.

¹⁵⁴ Martin, "The ILD and Black America," 167-68.

¹⁵⁵ George Maurer, "Five ILD Years," *Labor Defender*, 5 no. 6, June 1930.

[A] major change began... the ILD suddenly surfaced as the most outspoken opponent of racism and champion of oppressed blacks... plucking from obscurity the cases of unknown blacks and bringing them forcefully to public attention.¹⁵⁶

The Scottsboro campaign was the most potent example of this phenomenon. The campaign was run in defence of nine young Black unemployed workers, aged between 13 and 21 when they were arrested in March of 1931 and falsely accused of rape.¹⁵⁷ All the defendants, except for 13-year old Roy Wright, were soon convicted and sentenced to death in the electric chair.¹⁵⁸ Black communist organiser Mary Licht was one of a team from the ILD that contacted the families of the youths. Licht has recounted, “I told them that if the International Labor Defence comes, we don’t believe in just having a trial. We believe in masses of people being the cause you are fighting for”.¹⁵⁹ Soon thousands of people were demonstrating across the USA.¹⁶⁰ In Europe, the Negro Commission of the Comintern executive called for action from all Comintern affiliates. A global wave of protest resolutions and militant demonstrations ensued, “which the ILD and many American observers credited with pressuring the Alabama Supreme Court to agree to hear the defendants’ appeal”.¹⁶¹

On July 31, 1931, the *Workers’ Weekly* printed one of the first protest telegrams sent from Australia – to the American Consul in Sydney by the Young Communist League (YCL), who argued the verdicts were an “attempt to create race hatred and antagonism... a method to check the growing unity between the white and coloured workers”.¹⁶² The CPA press had carried some reports of the US party efforts to organise anti-racist campaigns and inter-racial initiatives within unions and the struggles of the unemployed from the late 1920s.¹⁶³ With the Scottsboro case, there were at times weekly updates as various appeals and retrials kept

¹⁵⁶ Martin, “The ILD and Black America,” 173.

¹⁵⁷ Christina Bergmark, “The Scottsboro Boys Case,” *Socialist Worker*, June 22, 2012, <http://socialistworker.org/2012/06/22/the-scottsboro-boys-case>.

¹⁵⁸ Barack Goodman, dir, *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* (2001; WGBH Educational Foundation, Youtube October 21, 2017) streaming video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmQEBIku6lk>.

¹⁵⁹ Goodman, *Scottsboro*.

¹⁶⁰ Martin, “The ILD and Black America,” 172.

¹⁶¹ Miller, Pennybacker and Rosenhaft, “Mother Ada Wright,” 401.

¹⁶² “Against Legal Lynching of Negro Boys by U.S.A. Imperialism,” WW, July 31, 1931, 3.

¹⁶³ “American Minster Drop Race Prejudice to Wage Class Struggle,” WW, November 16, 1928, 4; “Mass Picketing in the U.S. Textile Strike,” WW, July 12, 1929, 4; “40 Years of Lynch War in the USA,” RL, October 16, 1931, 6.

pushing back the date of execution and raising the hopes of acquittal.¹⁶⁴

When the Alabama Supreme Court confirmed the sentences in March 1932 and set a new date for executions in May, Ada Wright, the mother of two of the defendants, set off for Europe on a speaking tour, accompanied by Louis Engdahl, General Secretary of the ILD. This extraordinary six-month tour saw the Americans address an estimated half a million radical workers and other supporters, and Engdahl perished from pneumonia.¹⁶⁵ The CPA proudly promoted developments on the tour, an example of the power of the international movement to which it was affiliated, taking strides towards “breaking down the racial barriers” dividing the global working class.¹⁶⁶ In May 1932, the International Class War Prisoners Association (ICWPA), an Australian equivalent of the ILD that had never matched the dynamism of its American counterpart, organised a demonstration against the impending executions in the Sydney Domain.¹⁶⁷

The ILD comes to Australia

Along with precipitating Australian solidarity with the Scottsboro campaign, the CPUSA’s efforts with the ILD also had an impact on the broader practice of the CPA, which began to take a far more serious approach to organising solidarity for political prisoners.¹⁶⁸ This helped to drive the beginnings of a thaw in Third Period sectarianism, as the party looked to make genuine alliances that could help to actually win cases. The CPA also slowly became aware of the potential for applying campaign tactics used in the Scottsboro case to build solidarity with Aboriginal people suffering state repression.¹⁶⁹

There was genuine co-operation between communist and social-democratic organisations during Ada Wright’s tour of Europe, where recent relationships had been heavily strained by

¹⁶⁴ For example, every edition of the WW in May 1932 carried an update on the case. “Scottsboro Boys,” WW, May 6, 1932, 1; “Scottsboro Protest,” WW, May 13, 1932, 1; “Two Worlds: Scottsboro, U.S.A. and Stalingrad, U.S.S.R.,” WW, May 20, 1932, 3. “Scottsboro Boys,” WW May 27, 1932, 4.

¹⁶⁵ Miller, Pennybacker and Rosenhaft, “Mother Ada Wright,” 404-405.

¹⁶⁶ “Stop Yankee Imperialism’s Murders”.

¹⁶⁷ “Scottsboro Boys,” WW, May 6, 1932, 1.

¹⁶⁸ International Labor Defence National Committee (Australia), letter to The Secretariat, I.L.D., English Section, 21 January 1933, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, International Labor Defence (Australia Section of the IRA). NAA: A8911, 214.

¹⁶⁹ “Aboriginal Slavery,” RL, June 21, 1933, 6.

Third Period sectarianism.¹⁷⁰ In Britain, as in Australia, the Labour Party had implemented a ban on its members working in communist-led organisations such as the ILD,¹⁷¹ but Wright was hosted in the House of Commons by Labour Party MPs.¹⁷²

In Australia, a report on the May 13 protest in Sydney against the Scottsboro executions in 1932 said a “large crowd” had turned out for the rally and listed the NSW Labor Council, the Carpenters’ Union and “several ALP branches” amongst the organisations supporting the campaign.¹⁷³ The following month, Australian activists sought to directly capitalise on the success of their American counterparts when the ICWPA held a national conference and rebranded itself as the Australian Section of the International Labor Defence (ILD).¹⁷⁴ They immediately moved to campaign for more union resolutions in support of Scottsboro.¹⁷⁵ In November 1932, the ACTU Congress sent a resolution of protest against the executions to the US government.¹⁷⁶ This was the first sign of ACTU support for a communist-led campaign since the beginning of the period of CPA isolation following the ACTU Congress in February 1930, where the ACTU disaffiliated from the Pan Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. Farrell argues that, following the 1930 Congress, the ACTU avoided “discussion over issues which were internally divisive” including “racialism”.¹⁷⁷ Communist efforts to press for support for the “Scottsboro Boys” managed to puncture this silence, a testament to the compelling message of anti-racist solidarity gaining serious global momentum following Ada Wright’s tour of Europe.

Creative cultural forms of ILD activism in the USA also had an impact. A “Workers Art Theatre”, organised by CPA members, began performances in Sydney of a play “Lynch Law” about the Scottsboro trials, with a script imported from a communist theatre group in New

¹⁷⁰ Miller, Pennybacker and Rosenhaft, “Mother Ada Wright,” 415-418.

¹⁷¹ “Labor and Union Disruptors,” *Northern Standard*, September 1, 1933, 5.

¹⁷² Miller, Pennybacker and Rosenhaft, “Mother Ada Wright,” 416.

¹⁷³ “Scottsboro Protest”.

¹⁷⁴ Correspondence with the British ILD indicates that the ICWPA and the defunct United Front Against Fascism relaunched as the Australian ILD at a conference on June 25, 1932. International Labor Defence National Committee (Australia), letter to The Secretariat, I.L.D, English Section, January 21, 1933.

¹⁷⁵ “Scottsboro Boys,” WW, July 29, 1932, 3; “The Scottsboro Negro Boys Must Be Set Free,” WW, September 30, 1932, 4.

¹⁷⁶ “Facts About the Scottsboro Case,” WW, November 25, 1932, 4.

¹⁷⁷ Frank Farrell, “International Solidarity?,” in *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1978): 136.

York.¹⁷⁸ The Australian group reported to their English counterparts that the play “was shown in some working class centres, whilst in others police attacks prevented it from being displayed to the workers”.¹⁷⁹ A “functionaries conference” for key ILD activists held on January 7, 1933, made commitments to launch a new Australian publication modelled on the successful American ILD magazine, *The Labor Defender*.¹⁸⁰ In the USA, prominent non-party members such as the independent socialist author, Upton Sinclair, participated in both the editorial committee and as writers.¹⁸¹ The publication was “particularly renowned for its lavish presentation of photos”.¹⁸² An appeal in the *Red Leader* argued that the “photographic exposure” of police brutality in the American magazine had helped encourage mobilisation for ILD campaigns. Donations for a similar Australian publication would ensure that “the police and the New Guard will learn to fear the camera in the hands of the workers”.¹⁸³

This first edition of *Australian Labor Defender* was printed in time for the second national conference of the ILD, held in Sydney in August 1933. News of the new publication was reported in the *Workers’ Weekly*, alongside an account of increased membership numbers, as “a visible token of the growth of the ILD” over the past 12 months.¹⁸⁴ The front cover of the first Australian edition featured a detailed anti-war graphic lifted directly from the December 1931 edition of the US *Labor Defender*.¹⁸⁵ A large ominous figure in a gasmask, a helmet marked with a dollar sign and riding a tank, was reproduced with one alteration – the US dollar symbol was swapped for the Australian currency of the pound.¹⁸⁶

The new ILD in Australia had grown in a political environment where open repression of radicals was a consistent feature of life in working-class communities. In May 1932, amendments passed through the Australian senate strengthening the “unlawful association” provisions of the *Crimes Act*, encouraging repression of organisations and activists affiliated

¹⁷⁸ “Workers’ Art Theatre does ‘Color Problem’,” WW, October 7, 1932, 3.

¹⁷⁹ International Labor Defence National Committee (Australia), letter to The Secretariat, I.L.D., English Section,” 21 January 1933.

¹⁸⁰ “I.L.D. Functionaries Conference – Paper To Be Started,” WW, January 13, 1933, 6.

¹⁸¹ “Labor Defender: Journal of the International Labor Defence,” Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/labordefender/index.htm>.

¹⁸² “Labor Defender”.

¹⁸³ “The Australian Labor Defender,” RL, January 25, 1933, 4.

¹⁸⁴ “I.L.D. National Congress,” WW, August 11, 1933, 3.

¹⁸⁵ *Labor Defender*, December 1931, Front Cover.

¹⁸⁶ *Australian Labor Defender*, August 1933, Front Cover.

with the CPA.¹⁸⁷ The Australian ILD reported to its British counterpart that in 1932, “340 workers in this State alone (NSW), meted out sentences aggregating to 65 years of incarceration in the capitalist dungeons of the State”.¹⁸⁸ While both the ALP national executive and NSW state executive¹⁸⁹ still forbade the participation of Labor members in the ILD, the organisation was able to build quite consistent solidarity with specific struggles against repression that stretched out into the broader labour movement.¹⁹⁰ This was aided by the fact that the police were also raiding the homes of militant Labor Party activists, including the president of the Glebe branch in October 1932.¹⁹¹

In this atmosphere of poverty and repression, the success of the international campaign for the unemployed “Scottsboro boys” in winning appeals against the impending executions, was a consistent reference point used by the ILD in Australia to explain the potential power of workers’ protest. In October 1932, successful campaigns to free activists imprisoned for anti-eviction confrontations in Newtown and Newcastle were compared to the fight for the Scottsboro boys, said to be “a typical illustration of the value of mass action”.¹⁹² Direct comparisons to Scottsboro were also drawn during a successful defence campaign for Frank Devanny, a CPA leader listed as the publisher of the *Workers’ Weekly*, who was arrested for “soliciting subscriptions for an unlawful association,” and then acquitted by the High Court in December 1932.¹⁹³

It is remarkable, however, that with so many direct parallels drawn between the Scottsboro case and Australian examples, for the first two years of the campaign, no links were made

¹⁸⁷ “Illegality Bill Passes the Senate,” WW, May 20, 1932, 1; Roger Douglas, “Keeping the Revolution at Bay: The Unlawful Associations Provisions of the Commonwealth *Crimes Act*,” *Adelaide Law Review* 22, no. 2 (2001): 261.

¹⁸⁸ International Labor Defence National Committee (Australia), letter to The Secretariat, I.L.D., English Section, 21 January, 1933.

¹⁸⁹ Frank Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour: The Left in Australia, 1919-1939* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981), 204.

¹⁹⁰ Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, *Radical Sydney: Places, portraits and unruly episodes* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 204-208.

¹⁹¹ “A.L.P. Worker’s Home Raided by Police,” WW, October 28, 1932, 4. Far-right organisations also targeted prominent Labor members at this time. For example, NSW Trades and Labour Council Secretary (and former CPA leader) Jock Garden was bashed in his home by fascist members of the New Guard in May 1932. Bede Nairn, “Garden, John Smith (Jock) (1882–1968),” in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1981, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/garden-john-smith-jock-62>

¹⁹² “Bankstown Anti-Eviction Fight,” RL, October 26, 1932, 8.

¹⁹³ “New Scottsboro Trial,” RL, December 21, 1932, 7; P.T. Thorne, “Three Years of Defence Struggles,” *Australian Labor Defender*, June-July 1935, 9.

between the injustice in Scottsboro and state repression against Aboriginal people in Australia. The CPA emphasised the anti-racist nature of the Scottsboro struggle from the first *Workers' Weekly* reports on the campaign in July 1931¹⁹⁴ and consistently championed its important role in “breaking down racial barriers” imposed on the working class in the USA.¹⁹⁵ The ILD in Australia was ostensibly committed to struggles against racism and colonial oppression.¹⁹⁶ However, the first mention of a potential ILD fight for Aboriginal rights in the CPA press did not come until June 1933, in a short *Red Leader* report noting that a delegation of humanitarians was petitioning the Minister for the Interior about the “brutal suppression and economic slavery” suffered by Aboriginal people on pastoral stations.¹⁹⁷

This *Red Leader* article drew parallels between Aboriginal oppression and the oppression suffered by “national minorities” in countries across the world. It concluded with a call to “build the International Labor Defence” to “defend aborigines and foreign-born workers”.¹⁹⁸ Perhaps the presence of Darwin CPA leader Lawrence Mahoney in Sydney at this time prompted discussion in the CPA about the potential for ILD campaigns for Aboriginal rights. Mahoney was on an extended stay in Sydney in the first half of 1933 and spoke publicly about conditions in the Northern Territory.¹⁹⁹ Mahoney had first-hand experience campaigning in Darwin for the release of Aboriginal prisoners through the early 1930s.²⁰⁰ The CPA branch in Darwin established a newspaper for the first time in February 1933, the *Northern Voice*, issued in the name of the UWM.²⁰¹ Early editions noted the importance of ILD campaign tactics in winning the release of political prisoners.²⁰² There was reporting on protests against “slave labour” in both the Darwin compound²⁰³ and across the NT.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁴ “Soviets Progress while Capitalists Decay,” WW, July 31, 1931, 3; “Against Legal Lynching of Negro Boys by U.S.A. Imperialism,” WW, July 31, 1931, 3.

¹⁹⁵ “Stop Yankee Imperialism’s Murders,” WW, April 8, 1932, 1.

¹⁹⁶ Undated circular sent to ILD branches in Australia after the founding conference in 1932. Status for the I.L.D. (Australian Section of the IRA), Commonwealth Investigation Branch, International Labor Defence (Australia Section of the IRA). NAA: A8911, 214.

¹⁹⁷ “Aboriginal Slavery,” RL, June 21, 1933, 6.

¹⁹⁸ “Aboriginal Slavery”.

¹⁹⁹ “J Mahoney lectures on Imperialism in the Northern Territory,” RL, February 15, 1933, 8.

²⁰⁰ One successful campaign to free an Aboriginal prisoner known as Sugarbag took place in 1932, but was not reported in the CPA press until the height of the national campaign to free NT Aboriginal prisoners in 1934, discussed in Chapter Seven. “Aborigines and Workers Have Same Enemy,” RL, June 27, 1934, 6.

²⁰¹ *Northern Voice*, February 1, 1933.

²⁰² “Editorial,” *Northern Voice*, March 29, 1933, 1.

²⁰³ “A note,” *Northern Voice*, May 24, 1933, 1.

²⁰⁴ “An Empire Based on ‘Freedom’,” *Northern Voice*, June 7, 1933, 1.

The first edition of the *Australian Labor Defender*, published in August 1933, provides further evidence of a newfound positive commitment to fight for Aboriginal rights through the ILD. This journal carried a detailed article, “Slavery and Murder in the Northern Territory”, on the brutality inflicted on Aboriginal people by police and pastoralists.²⁰⁵ This was the most sophisticated article on Aboriginal conditions published by the CPA since the series written by Moxon. Furthermore, “Slavery and Murder” was the only article highlighted in a notice promoting the magazine in the *Red Leader*²⁰⁶ and was also referenced in the *Workers’ Weekly* notice.²⁰⁷ A feature summarising the current situation in the Scottsboro campaign was printed immediately adjacent to the “Slavery and Murder” article. This suggests explicit parallels between the Scottsboro trial and treatment of Aboriginal people in the NT may have begun within the ILD. The Scottsboro article stressed the international significance of the Scottsboro fight, which had delayed the planned executions for two years, bringing together “bitterly exploited negroes and white workers” in struggle.²⁰⁸

The “Slavery and Murder” article was accompanied by a high-quality photo of “natives in chains” being guarded by an armed white policeman.²⁰⁹ Evocative prose described the slave-like conditions for Black workers on stations in the NT, the intensity of police violence used to “force them into Darwin, where they are kept in the compound and used as cheap labour” and the arbitrary and cruel nature of court proceedings against Aboriginal prisoners.²¹⁰ The article condemned the NAWU for refusing to fight for the rights of Black workers, “instead, it fosters racial hatred with its White Australia policy, and advocates the hounding of them off the job and the replacing of them by whites”. Editorial comment said the Darwin-based

²⁰⁵ “Slavery and Murder in the Northern Territory,” *Australian Labor Defender*, August 1933, 8.

²⁰⁶ “A special feature is an informative statement on the treatment of the aborigines by the Australian ruling class”. “The Australian Labor Defender,” August 16, 1933, 2.

²⁰⁷ “‘Labor Defender’: First Issue off the Press,” *WW*, August 11, 1933, 2.

²⁰⁸ A.G. Bosse, “Scottsboro Frame Up Crumbles,” *Australian Labor Defender*, August 1933, 10.

²⁰⁹ Jane Lydon has written a critical analysis of the use of photos of Aboriginal prisoners in chains in humanitarian campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lydon recognises the significance of the “unmediated testimony” provided by such photographs, of the brutality suffered by Aboriginal people in frontier areas, to a metropolitan settler audience far removed from these realities. However, she has also problematised the images as often reinforcing the idea that Aboriginal people were helpless victims. Both the issue of representations of Aboriginal agency through the CPA’s campaigning in 1933-34 and the relationship between the CPA and the “humanitarian” movement, will be examined in the coming chapters. Jane Lydon, “Behold the Tears’: Photography as Colonial Witness,” *History of Photography Journal* 34, no. 3 (July 2010): 234-50.

²¹⁰ “Slavery and Murder in the Northern Territory,” 8.

author could not be named, as “any resident known to have exposed the conditions of the aborigines would be in daily danger of his life”.²¹¹

In the wake of the ILD national conference in August 1933, the Australian section received correspondence from the International Red Aid (IRA) executive in Moscow, the body tasked with overseeing the prison solidarity work of Comintern affiliates. This undated letter, probably received by the Australian comrades late in 1933, criticised the Australians for failing to campaign for Aboriginal rights:

So far as we are aware the Australian Section has never undertaken any work in connection with the struggle against the brutal policy of the Australian capitalists in relation to the aborigines. The policy of extermination and slavery has even called forth protests from petty-bourgeois “humanitarian” organisations... energetic steps must be taken to expose the existing conditions and arouse the mass support of the Australian workers and intellectuals against the brutal treatment of the aborigines by the Australian bourgeoisie.²¹²

This is the only communication on record, to my knowledge, from the Comintern or an affiliated body that made any mention of Aboriginal people or struggle. This letter may have helped to orient the Australian ILD for the central role it would take on in campaigning to free Aboriginal prisoners arrested during frontier conflicts in 1934.

However, by the time the Australian ILD received this correspondence, the Australian group already had some experience mobilising for Aboriginal rights, as the organisation helped coordinate resolutions of protest against a planned massacre in Arnhem Land that is the subject of Chapter Six. This campaign was very much driven by local initiative, particularly the commitment of the new Darwin-based editor of the *Northern Voice*, Charles Priest, to champion Aboriginal rights. The bulk of campaigning activity took place not through the ILD but another increasingly successful united front initiative of the CPA, the “Councils Against

²¹¹ “Slavery and Murder in the Northern Territory,” 9.

²¹² Executive Committee of the International Red Aid, Letter to the Australian Section, International Labor Defence, Undated copy of letter, written in response to reception of a report on the August 1933 Australian ILD Conference, Attorney-General’s Department, [Communism] : Reports from the Investigation Branch of the Attorney-General re subversive organisations and their propaganda material. NAA: A467, SF42/1.

War”. The ILD did provide important support, however, and the second edition of the *Australian Labor Defender*, published in September at the height of the campaign, contained the first article published by the CPA that drew explicit links between the Scottsboro campaign and the fight against Aboriginal oppression.²¹³ The article argued that the Scottsboro example showed “the organised working class” were the only social force with both the interests and the potential power to provide an effective check on racist state brutality:

The only way of stopping these massacres of North Australian natives, which will become more frequent as the Government’s plans for the “development” of the North progress, is by the same action as that which has held the nine innocent Scottsboro boys from the electric chair for over two years.²¹⁴

Conclusion

The early 1930s represented the zenith of CPA subordination to the Comintern executive.²¹⁵ Many of the dictates coming from Moscow, particularly the anti-Labor Third Period policy and hostility to the democratic development of affiliate parties, had a crippling impact on the ability of the CPA to wage successful social struggle.²¹⁶ Both of these factors certainly stifled effective application of Moxon’s pro-Aboriginal analysis. Despite similar patterns of subordination to Moscow in communist parties across the world, however, many activists within these parties continued to lead inspiring campaigns informed by the revolutionary anti-racist, anti-imperialist principles crystallised in early Comintern congresses. Comintern structures still provided avenues for the global circulation of news of these struggles.²¹⁷ In this way, the initiative of Black communists operating in Depression conditions in the USA, most significantly through the Scottsboro campaign, helped to inspire Australian communists to take a more serious and effective approach to campaigning for political prisoners. By August 1933, the CPA was beginning to think about the potential application of these tactics to Aboriginal solidarity campaigns.

²¹³ “Stop this Murder,” *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11.

²¹⁴ “Stop this Murder”.

²¹⁵ Hallas, *The Comintern*, 126-160.

²¹⁶ Farrell, *International Socialism*, 178-188.

²¹⁷ Campbell, “The Negro Worker”.

One of the most tragic contradictions of the Third Period in the Australian context was the way that CPA leader Herbert Moxon, alone amongst the party leadership in assimilating the lessons of the self-organised struggle of the AAPA, was forced out of the party by a toxic internal culture he had helped to create.²¹⁸ The final three chapters of this thesis will examine the first ever labour movement campaigns for Aboriginal rights in Australian history, campaigns all led by the CPA. With Moxon gone, however, there was no recognition of the importance of engaging with Aboriginal struggle in south-east Australia through any of these struggles, meaning opportunities for a challenge to the anti-Aboriginal racism that ran deep across the entire Australian continent were lost.

²¹⁸ Penrose, "Herbert Moxon," 98-109.

Chapter Six

‘Stop the War on Aborigines’

1933

In September 1933, thousands of trade unionists and unemployed activists across Australia came together and made resolutions of protest¹ against plans by the Northern Territory police, with the support of the conservative federal government, for a “punitive expedition” against Yolngu people in East Arnhem Land.² This labour movement mobilisation was led by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). Church and humanitarian leaders also sent numerous protest letters to Prime Minister Joseph Lyons and his Interior Minister, John Perkins. By the end of September, the government had retreated from the planned attack,³ and repudiated the legitimacy of exemplary violence as an acceptable “administrative method” in the governance of Aboriginal people in Australia.⁴ This effectively ended the long period of frontier warfare that had raged across Australia since the arrival of the British in 1788.

In historiography, there are only fleeting references to this historic campaign. When it is discussed, credit for leadership is often ascribed to middle and upper-class intellectuals such as clergymen or Adolphus Peter (A.P.) Elkin, the chair of Anthropology at Sydney University.⁵ This chapter makes a new argument, demonstrating the significant role of the

¹ There are 60 letters containing resolutions of protest or concerns about the proposed punitive expedition held in the National Archives, Department of the Interior, Caledon Bay Expedition 1933 – Protests, NAA: A1, 1933/7632. Approximately half of the letters are from labour movement organisations. This chapter will provide examples of mass meetings held to make these protests.

² “Aborigines – Punitive Expedition Planned – Bloodshed Inevitable,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 4, 1933, 11.

³ “Fed. Govt. Climbs Down On Punitive Expedition,” *Labor Daily*, September 30, 1933, 7.

⁴ Charles Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice - Volume 1* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1970), 297.

⁵ Brief accounts of the campaign are in Andrew McMillan, *An Intruders Guide to East Arnhem Land* (Darwin: Niblock Publishing, 2007), 114-117; Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Island Killings 1932-1933* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 41-43; Mickey Dewar, *The Black War in Arnhem Land* (Darwin: North Australia Research Unit, 1995), 61-62; Rowley, *Destruction*, 290-291; Most substantially, Henry Reynolds provides a six page account that gives some acknowledgement of the participation of the labour movement, but not the CPA, Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 205-210.

CPA and the crucial importance of working-class mobilisation in forcing the police retreat. Bound up in this is an argument about the significance of anti-colonial Marxism in animating the campaign. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the police attack was being planned in retaliation for the fatal spearing of NT Police Constable Albert McColl by Yolngu leader Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda, on August 1, 1933. The CPA press celebrated this spearing as an inspiring blow for justice.⁶ Many working-class organisations influenced by the CPA took an explicit position of solidarity with the armed resistance of the Yolngu. Since 1931, the CPA had theorised massacres of Aboriginal people as a function of Australian imperialism and called for working-class solidarity with Aboriginal resistance.⁷ The campaign in September 1933 saw the first attempt to actively apply these principles through a party-wide campaign. This, in turn, was responsible for the first serious entry of trade unions into the field of Aboriginal policy debate, beyond narrow questions of wages and conditions, in Australian history,⁸ with profound consequences.

Radical workers in Darwin, particularly CPA member Charles Priest, played a very significant role. The organic ways that capitalism had brought white workers and the unemployed into contact with Aboriginal people still living on their lands in “frontier” regions in the NT provided an important basis for the emergence of solidarity. Priest and his comrades published the first defiant call to action against the police expedition,⁹ encouraging many of the protests that followed, both from labour movement organisations and those in the “imperial humanitarian” tradition such as missionaries, clergymen and anthropologists.¹⁰ This chapter explores the mechanics of this campaign, demonstrating how communist initiative managed to bring broad ranks of the labour movement, including numerous Australian Labor Party (ALP) branches, into action. The relationship between radical worker activists and imperial humanitarians will also be analysed in detail. The threat of escalating protest action

⁶ “A study in psychology,” *Northern Voice*, August 30, 1933, 2.

⁷ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery,” WW, September 24, 1931, 2.

⁸ This assessment is based on Andrew Markus’ survey of trade union positions on questions of Aboriginal rights in early Australian history in Andrew Markus, “Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement,” in *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 138-157.

⁹ “The Unfortunate Aborigines,” *Northern Voice*, August 16, 1933, 3-4.

¹⁰ In characterising this political tendency as “imperial humanitarianism,” I follow historian Alison Holland, who emphasised the commitment of these humanitarians to Empire. Further analysis will be provided later in the chapter. See Alison Holland, *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade for Aboriginal Rights*, (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2015), Kindle edition, 244.

by radical workers, who argued it was legitimate for Aboriginal people to kill police, was crucial for forcing the government to abandon any police operation in Arnhem Land. This is what eventually forced Lyons and Perkins to collaborate with missionaries on an unarmed “peace party”, that appealed to Yolngu to surrender and face court.

Spears and shot guns in East Arnhem Land

In the 2004 film *Dhakiyarr vs The King*, Dhakiyarr’s son, Wuyal Wirrpanda, defended his father’s spearing of Constable McColl. Many members of Dhakiyarr’s family had been killed in previous massacres and Wirrpanda argued that police were still “fighting a war with Black people” in 1933. He described what was going through the warrior’s mind at the time he decided to kill McColl:

Who's this fellow walking on my land? What is this white man doing with my women? Who is this man who is going to try and now get this land for himself?... And the old man decided to put the woomera on the end of the spear. When he threw the spear, he speared him in the chest.¹¹

Massacres began in Arnhem Land in the late nineteenth century as Australian pastoral capitalists and mineral prospectors started to push into Yolngu homelands.¹² Yolngu resistance and inhospitable country largely forced the retreat of pastoralists by WWI.¹³ Arnhem Land was gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve in 1931, managed by the Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia (MMS) and the Church Missionary Society of Australia (CMS), which established a number of missions, including on Groote Eylandt close to Dhakiyarr’s country.¹⁴ For hundreds of years prior to the coming of Australian settlers, Yolngu had traded with Macassans and other ships sailing from Asia, to harvest the delicacy trepang (sea cucumber).¹⁵ While Macassans were excluded from Australian waters under the White Australia policy, European and Japanese work crews were issued special permits to harvest by the NT Administration. A series of armed clashes between Yolngu and these

¹¹ Tom Murray and Allan Collins, dir, *Dhakiyarr vs the King* (2004; San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), Streaming video, 57 min, Kanopy.

¹² Dewar, *Black War*, 8; McMillan, *Intruder’s Guide*, 68.

¹³ Dewar, *Black War*, 9.

¹⁴ McMillan, *Intruder’s Guide*, 82.

¹⁵ Dewar, *Black War*, 6.

crews in the early 1930s was described as a “Black War” in the Australian press.¹⁶ Historian and former NT Patrol Officer and Administrator, Ted Egan, argued these attacks arose from conflicts over payment of wages and sexual abuse, and were also part of a cycle of violence with police, who continued to conduct patrols in the 1920s and into the 1930s to shoot Yolngu people.¹⁷

NT police seized on the killing of McColl, immediately taking the initiative to prepare a war party. Mounted Constable Morey was a major protagonist. He travelled straight to Darwin and began conferencing with A.V. Stretton, Darwin’s Superintendent of Police, and Colonel R.H. Weddell, a military man serving his ninth year as Administrator of the NT.¹⁸ In turn, Weddell and Stretton began liaising with the Interior Ministry in Canberra about the preparations for armed action at Caledon Bay.¹⁹

A telegram sent by Weddell to Canberra on August 27 outlines the plan clearly:

CONSIDER IT ESSENTIAL STRONG PARTY OF TWELVE WHITES TWELVE ABORIGINALS AND ONE COOK BE DISPATCHED... ABOUT WHITES, WILL BE CIVILIANS EXPERIENCED BUSHMEN SWORN IN AS SPECIAL CONSTABLES... STRONG DEMONSTRATIVE FORCE IMPERATIVE AS NATIVES NUMEROUS, HOSTILE AND CUNNING, MANY MURDERS BY THEM DURING LAST SIXTEEN YEARS REMAINING UNPUNISHED. THESE ABORIGINALS ENTIRELY UNIMPRESSED BY THE GOVERNMENT’S EFFORTS; THEIR THREATS TO ATTACK ANY POLICE PARTY HAVING BEEN EFFECTED. CONSIDER MISSION IMMINENT DANGER IF IMMEDIATE ACTION NOT TAKEN. PROPOSE ARMING PARTY WITH TWENTY RIFLES AND 2000 ROUNDS OF AMMUNITION, TWELVE REVOLVERS AND 1000 ROUNDS OF AMMUNITION AND FOUR SHOT GUNS AND 300 CARTRIDGES. PLEASE OBTAIN AND FORWARD BY MARELLA [a ship] WITHOUT FAIL TWELVE .450 REVOLVERS AND 1000 ROUNDS OF

¹⁶ Dewar, *Black War*, ix.

¹⁷ Egan, *Justice*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Egan, *Justice*, 37

¹⁹ A summary of correspondence between the NT Administration and the Department of the Interior in Canberra is provided in, Department of the Interior. Murder of Japanese by Aboriginals and Caledon Bay. NAA: A431, 1947/1434.

REVOLVER AMMUNITION, TWELVE BANDOLIERS ALSO TWO PAIRS OF
BEST FIELD GLASSES.²⁰

Weddell explicitly saw the conflict as a race war, drawing on the history of Yolngu trade with Asia:

CALEDON BAY ABORIGINALS OF JAPANESE AND MACASSAR STRAIN OF
SUPERIOR MENTALITY CAPABLE OF FORMULATING PLANS OF ATTACK
BY MEANS OF STALKING PARTIES VERY NUMEROUS AND AGGRESSIVELY
HOSTILE... IN VIEW OF PAST EXPERIENCE CONSIDER CASUALTIES
AMONGST THESE ABORIGINALS INEVITABLE²¹

In his own correspondence with the Interior Ministry, Constable Morey was graphic in his calls for retaliatory violence:

It will be vitally necessary for the Police Party to be able to bear losses and casualties and yet be numerically adequate to carry on the operation to its finalisation... Whose blood will stain Arnhem Land, whether black or white, or both, only the future will tell.²²

This aggressive stance enjoyed strong support in Canberra. Key bureaucrats from the Department of the Interior, Secretary Herbert Brown and Assistant Secretary, Joseph Carrodus, replied to all correspondence on behalf of Perkins, the Interior Minister in the conservative Lyons Government. Carrodus wrote to Brown that “we must do something in view of the killing of a police constable, otherwise the lives of all whites in the North East will not be safe”.²³ They organised to ship the requested guns, ammunition and other supplies from Defence Department stores to Darwin.²⁴

²⁰ Copy of Telegram Received From Administrator, Darwin, August 27, 1933, NAA: A431, 1947/1434.

²¹ “Copy of Telegram Received From Administrator, Darwin,” August 27, 1933.

²² Constable E.H. Morey, Letter to the Interior Minister, October 5 1933, NAA: A431, 1947/1434.

²³ Joseph A. Carrodus, Note to Herbert C. Brown, 28 August, 1933, NAA: A431, 47/1434.

²⁴ “Department of the Interior – Memorandum,” September 8, 1933, NAA: A431, 47/1434.

There was also initial enthusiasm for reprisal attacks from Minister Perkins, who indicated to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) that he would back Weddell's proposal in an upcoming Cabinet meeting.²⁵ The SMH reported:

The Minister for Territories CWC Marr said that in similar circumstances he would have no hesitation in sending an expedition against one of the New Guinea tribes... Cabinet members with experience of native administration favoured the punitive expedition.²⁶

While eager to assist with Weddell's preparations, however, Carrodus and Brown were also clear that no forces be dispatched until explicit approval was granted by Minister Perkins.²⁷ Their enthusiasm for war sat in tension with a recognition that any reprisal attacks on Yolngu people would be politically sensitive. As noted in Chapter Three, in 1928, following the brutal massacre of Walpiri, Anmatyere and other Aboriginal people at Coniston in Central Australia, there was an unprecedented outcry from missionaries and humanitarian organisations.²⁸ There was now increased attention on scandals involving brutality against Aboriginal people on the Australian frontier, including from the prestigious Anti-Slavery Society in London, which established a special subcommittee to monitor developments.²⁹

The first media report on the impending massacre, on August 13, argued there was a "strong feeling locally [Darwin] that the Arnheim Land aborigines must be taught a severe lesson" and that "several experienced bushman express themselves ready to enrol in a patrol party."³⁰ In their accounts of the Caledon Bay crises, Henry Reynolds, Charley Rowley and Egan all cite letters and public statements to demonstrate that "northern opinion" was fiercely behind the need for exemplary violence.³¹ From amongst the ranks of the radical workers' movement

²⁵ "Aborigines – Punitive Expedition Planned – Bloodshed Inevitable," *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 4, 1933, 11.

²⁶ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 204.

²⁷ Telegram: Department of Interior to Darwin Administrator, August 14, 1933, NAA: A431, 47/1434.

²⁸ Rowley, *Destruction*, 288.

²⁹ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 199.

³⁰ For example, "Arnheim Land – Murderous Blacks – Feeling in the North," *The Sunday Mail*, August 13, 1933, 1; "Murderous Blacks – Death of Police Constable – 'Must be taught a severe lesson'," *Tweed Daily*, August 14, 1933, 3.

³¹ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 202. See also Rowley, *Destruction*, 292; Egan, *Justice*, 37.

in Darwin, however, the main membership base of the local CPA branch, there were activists who were pleased to hear that a police officer had been killed.

Black resistance and the Darwin Reds

On August 16 1933, the *Northern Voice*, a roughly produced Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM) newsletter in Darwin, expressed admiration for the Yolngu at Caledon Bay and argued the killing of McColl was justified:

The aborigines round that part of the coast are some of the very few remaining who have not yet been reduced to the state of servility so prevalent elsewhere in the Territory... When the police went round to arrest them they realised that if they did not get shot or arrested, they would have to fight... the aborigines should not be blamed for what they did... people are entitled to protect themselves from injustice and oppression.³²

Since beginning publication, the *Northern Voice* carried consistent stories of the “injustice and oppression” perpetrated by police in the NT. UWM demonstrations were still being broken up by police and participants jailed.³³ Both Aboriginal people brought in from the bush and the white unemployed workers arrested jumping trains were put in chain gangs.³⁴ Police raided workers' camps at night to try and catch men “cohabiting with Aboriginal women”.³⁵ Eighteen months prior, police had fired live ammunition into an old hospital in Pine Creek being squatted by unemployed workers.³⁶

On their hunt for intermittent work, some workers in Darwin participating in the UWM had worked alongside, and made friends, with Aboriginal people in remote areas, including around Caledon Bay. Bill Harney, who would go on to write poems for the Darwin CPA

³² “The Unfortunate Aborigines,” *Northern Voice*, August 16, 1933, 3-4.

³³ See for example: “Editorial,” *Northern Voice*, March 29, 1933, 1; “Basher Comes a Cropper” and “Open Confession,” *Northern Voice*, April 19, 1933, 1.

³⁴ “Revival of the Chain Gangs,” *Northern Voice*, July 11, 1933, 2.

³⁵ “Katherine’s peeping tom,” *Northern Voice*, July 19, 1933, 2.

³⁶ “Fight for Shelter: N.T. Workless Hold Hospital Against Police Bullets,” *RL*, January 15, 8.

bulletin *The Proletarian*,³⁷ had extensive experience “trepaning” off the coast of East Arnhem Land and had married a Yolngu woman at the Groote Eylandt mission in 1927.³⁸ Joe McGinness, who had his own Aboriginal kinship networks across the Top End and was involved in communist-led demonstrations, took irregular opportunities for work offered by Fred Gray, an Englishman living in Darwin who conducted expeditions to harvest trepang in the same area.³⁹

Gray had been working with a crew, including McGinness, close to where the Japanese had been killed by Yolngu at Caledon Bay in September 1932 – the attack McColl was investigating when he was speared by Dhakiyarr.⁴⁰ Gray developed friendships with local people and became a central figure negotiating the eventual surrender of Dhakiyarr and others.⁴¹ Gray was also known for his sympathies with the workers’ movement. The *Northern Voice* wrote in support of Gray against police denying permits to particular, politicised unemployed workers he had recruited for his trepaning expeditions.⁴² When Gray towed the boat of the slain Japanese back to Darwin in October 1932, the boat’s owner accused him of organising the killings and demanded an inquiry into his operations in Arnhem Land:

My boats were looted, my men murdered, and I have to fight a 500-pound salvage claim. Gray and his companions certainly stood to win over the actions of the Caledon Bay natives. He [Gray] is now reported to be living with them on very friendly terms. Labour agitation is certainly not a native custom; it is very definitely a Darwin one.⁴³

It is unclear whether any of these Darwin personalities, with direct connections in Caledon Bay, were involved in campaigning against the raid. But these organic connections between the remote bush and the radical town-based movement undoubtedly helped foster a sense of solidarity. Throughout August, the *Northern Voice* praised the killing of McColl by

³⁷ Moorandanni, “Duty,” *The Proletarian*, September 16, 1934, 4. Charles Priest explained that Harney wrote this under a pseudonym in Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections* (Benalla: Self-published 1986), 8.

³⁸ Jennifer Kennedy, “Harney, William Edward (Bill) (1895–1962),” in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1996, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/harney-william-edward-bill-10428/text18485>.

³⁹ Joe McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1991), 21–23.

⁴⁰ Dewar, *Black War*, 43.

⁴¹ Dewar, *Black War*, 65–66.

⁴² “A vindictive administration,” *Northern Voice*, October 11, 1933, 2.

⁴³ Egan, *Justice*, 18.

“aboriginals who had sufficient courage to pit their spears against the 303s of the police, rather than submit to the white man’s domination”.⁴⁴ The Yolngu at Caledon Bay had struck a blow against the NT Administration that was also repressing workers and the unemployed in Darwin. They were comrades who required urgent support.

Chapters Two and Three noted the success of CPA initiatives in the 1920s that tapped into an anti-war sentiment that existed across very broad layers in the labour movement, where the deep scars of WWI remained fresh. Now the *Northern Voice* drew on radical anti-war traditions to appeal for action to defend the Yolngu. During WWI, the Industrial Workers of the World and other socialists had run large scale campaigns urging workers not to enlist.⁴⁵ On August 16, the *Voice* argued that any punitive expedition would result in a massacre like that seen at Coniston and should be similarly resisted:

We call upon all workers and all people who believe in fair play not only to refuse to enlist should volunteers be called for, but to actively endeavour to pursue others to refuse and to put every possible obstacle in the way of the authorities in order that we may not have another butchering expedition like the one conducted by the “hero” Murray [at Coniston].⁴⁶

The article announced the formation of a committee to “conduct a campaign against the proposed expedition” and urged all readers to “give it their whole-hearted support”.⁴⁷

These articles were almost certainly written by Charles Priest. Priest had joined the CPA two years previously, while hungry, homeless, and unemployed in Adelaide. His trajectory towards revolutionary politics in the throes of intense hardship provides us with a dynamic example of what was quite a typical phenomenon, already discussed in Chapter Four. A migrant from Britain as a young man in the early 1920s, Priest had travelled across Australia

⁴⁴ “A study in psychology,” *Northern Voice*, August 30, 1933, 2.

⁴⁵ Verity Burgmann, “Syndicalist and Socialist Anti-Militarism 1911-18: How the Radical Left Flank Helped Defeat Conscription,” in *Fighting Against War: Peace Activism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Phillip Deery and Julie Kimber (Melbourne: Leftbank Press, 2015), 63-68.

⁴⁶ “The Unfortunate Aborigines.”

⁴⁷ “The Unfortunate Aborigines.”

doing many different kinds of jobs throughout the 20s,⁴⁸ and then as a “bagman”⁴⁹, in search of rations or relief work during the depths of the Depression: “I needed no propaganda to convince me that capitalism was rotten: the pangs of hunger and cold had done a good job on me as far as that was concerned.”⁵⁰ Once in the CPA, he studied Marxist theory closely, citing Marx’s work and *Dialectical Materialism* by Bolshevik theoretician Nikolai Bukharin (who featured in the Comintern debate on Australian imperialism in Chapter Three), as a major influence on his thought.⁵¹ Priest was similar to other Darwin unemployed workers described above in that he had experience travelling in the bush seeking work which brought him into close contact with Aboriginal people. A 12-month period spent working on Melville Island, off the coast of Darwin in 1929, fostered his deep sense of pro-Aboriginal solidarity.⁵²

Late in 1932 Priest travelled from Darwin to Sydney specifically to develop skills in preparing and distributing revolutionary press. He lived in a squat in central Sydney run by CPA members, and volunteered every day in the *Workers’ Weekly* office.⁵³ *The Northern Standard* reported on his return in July 1933:

Three formerly well-known members of the Darwin indigent unemployed returned to Darwin by train on Saturday, July 8th, having been sentenced to one month’s imprisonment at Katherine for jumping the rattler... they were Paddy Lynch, Charles Priest and D. Nightingale.⁵⁴

According to Priest’s biography they were out of prison two weeks later and had joined their comrades in residence at Immigrant House, the communist-run “commune” for unemployed workers, which was also the organising centre for CPA activism.⁵⁵ He was promptly voted in as the new editor of *Northern Voice*:

⁴⁸ Charles Priest, *Nothing to Lose* (Benella: Self-published, 1986).

⁴⁹ Priest’s experiences as a “bagmen” are chronicled in Charles Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections: Improving my Education* (Benella: Self-published, 1986).

⁵⁰ Charles Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections: Improving my Education* (Benella, Self-published, 1986), 11.

⁵¹ Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections*, 15.

⁵² Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 2; Charles Priest, *Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 21-71.

⁵³ Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections*, 37-38.

⁵⁴ “Round About,” *The Northern Standard*, July 11, 1933, 2.

⁵⁵ Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections*, 49.

We had only been absent for seven months but, in that time, had learnt enough to cause the administrator of the Northern Territory more troubles than he could have ever imagined even in his wildest dreams.⁵⁶

The ensuing few years were indeed ones of constant confrontation with the Administration. As editor of the party press, Priest pushed the CPA to take a more active focus on Aboriginal struggle:

I welcomed the opportunity (to edit *Northern Voice*) for two reasons. Firstly, because I was a dedicated communist and believe that I could put out party propaganda better than anyone else in Darwin and, secondly, because I was anxious to help the aborigines.⁵⁷

While there was no active CPA campaigning for Aboriginal rights in Sydney in 1932 or early 1933, there continued to be articles in the CPA-controlled press discussing frontier violence as a war of extermination being waged by Australian imperialism that would have influenced Priest's thinking.⁵⁸ Priest perhaps participated in League Against Imperialism (LAI) discussions in Sydney on the NT situation.⁵⁹ When he arrived back in Darwin, Priest immediately found the NT Administration mobilising for a significant offensive in the war against Aboriginal people. On Priest's initiative, for the first time in the party's history, the CPA shifted from rhetorical calls for action towards concerted campaigning to stop the war. The traditions of anti-colonial Marxism, which emphasised the importance of workers in imperialist countries supporting the armed resistance of colonised people, finally came to life in the context of Aboriginal struggle in Australia through the efforts of Priest and his comrades in Darwin.

Anatomy of a campaign

On August 25, the *Workers' Weekly* published the first article outside of Darwin that protested against the planned attack on the Yolngu. This cited correspondence from a

⁵⁶ Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections*, 49.

⁵⁷ Priest, *Still Further*, 2.

⁵⁸ For example, "The Australian Aborigines," *World Survey*, January 1, 1933, 22.

⁵⁹ "J Mahoney lectures on Imperialism in the Northern Territory," RL, February 15, 1933, 8.

“special committee set up in Darwin to protect the interests of the natives”, and requested funds be sent to the LAI to assist the work.⁶⁰ Priest has written that there was “a great deal of effort” by “a few fair-minded citizens” in Darwin to stop the raid,⁶¹ but it is unclear whether support existed outside the ranks of the CPA. Police intimidation may have stifled the emergence of a more large-scale, public campaign in Darwin. As noted in Chapter Four, the first edition of the *Australian Labor Defender* published an article on Aboriginal oppression in August 1933 and withheld the author’s name, arguing “any resident known to have exposed the conditions of the aborigines would be in daily danger of his life”.⁶² In Priest’s summation, however, the most important action taken by the Darwin committee was its appeals to supporters in capital cities to take up the fight. In his autobiography, Priest credits this initiative with, “creating such an uproar in the southern states that the proposed punitive expedition had to be abandoned”.⁶³ Priest’s role has been completely missed by historians and it is worth assessing seriously.

On August 16, the *Northern Voice* carried the first call to action against the expedition published anywhere in Australia.⁶⁴ Records of correspondence in an Interior Ministry file demonstrate that the LAI in Sydney had already been contacted by telegram from Darwin about the police operation two days previous to this, almost certainly by Priest.⁶⁵ There are no records of how widely Priest circulated his appeals for action. However, an account in his autobiography of another round of agitation-by-letter later in 1933, in response to police brutality against Aboriginal people at Borroloola, provides some indication of who might have been on his mailing list in August 1933:

I posted about 50 to prominent citizens in the southern states, these included bishops, editors of leading newspapers, prominent politicians, and well-known academic figures whom I knew to be of a liberal turn of mind.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ “Punitive Expedition Against Aborigines,” WW, August 25, 1933, 3.

⁶¹ Priest, *Still Further*, 9.

⁶² “Slavery and Murder,” *Australian Labor Defender*.

⁶³ Priest, *Still Further*, 1.

⁶⁴ “The Unfortunate Aborigines,” *Northern Voice*, August 16, 1933, 3-4.

⁶⁵ League Against Imperialism (Australian Section), Letter to Prime Minister Lyons, August 17, 1933, Department of the Interior, Caledon Bay Expedition 1933 – Protests, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁶⁶ Priest, *Still Further*, 4.

This list is a reasonable survey of the social forces which made up a particular bloc of opinion, characterised as “imperial humanitarianism” by historian Alison Holland. Holland cites the overarching ideological commitment of these forces to Australia’s role in the British Empire and a belief this carried with it paternalistic responsibilities for humane treatment and uplift of “subject races”.⁶⁷ Clergymen and academics held leadership roles in a growing number of organisations concerned with lobbying for the reform of Aboriginal policy, such as the Victorian Aboriginal Group (VAG) in Melbourne.⁶⁸ The most prominent of these organisations was the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR), based in Sydney.⁶⁹ The APNR was led by William Morley, a Congregational minister with more than two decades of experience in the London Missionary Society and A.P. Elkin, an Anglican clergyman and Chair of Anthropology at the University of Sydney.⁷⁰ Generally hostile to communists, Elkin recognised the important role of Priest’s campaigning.⁷¹

Over a few crucial days from September 4 1933, what Henry Reynolds describes as an “unprecedented and unexpected torrent of protest from all over the country”⁷² provided a strong check on the seemingly inevitable momentum building for a punitive expedition. This torrent would grow over the coming month to such a degree that a police expedition of any type was completely abandoned. Historians have emphasised the efforts of missionaries and imperial humanitarians in this campaign.⁷³ Undoubtedly, they had a serious impact. From September 5, representatives of the Lyons government, including both Lyons and Perkins themselves, had both face to face and telephone conferences with church leaders and Elkin to hear their concerns.⁷⁴ As discussed above, “imperial humanitarian” organisations in London had developed networks to monitor developments in Australia and registered opposition to the proposed punitive expedition at the Australian High Commission, something Lyons was forced to respond to directly.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Holland, *Just Relations*, 244.

⁶⁸ Bain Attwood, “Victorian Aboriginal Group,” *eMelbourne: the city past and present*, 2018, <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01548b.htm>.

⁶⁹ Rowley, *Destruction*, 289-294.

⁷⁰ Tigger Wise, *The Self-Made Anthropologist: A Life of A.P. Elkin* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 80-83.

⁷¹ Priest, *Still Further*, 10.

⁷² Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 204.

⁷³ This is the emphasis in existing history that outlines the planning for, and abandonment of the punitive expedition such as Rowley, *Destruction*, 290-291.

⁷⁴ Egan, *Justice*, 41-43.

⁷⁵ Egan, *Justice*, 42.

Agitation by Priest and the Darwin committee, however, may well have been responsible for alerting these networks to the seriousness of what was proposed by Weddell and pushing them to wire urgent resolutions of protest. An edition of *Northern Voice* dated September 27 explained:

An astounding letter which was received from a reliable source and was duplicated by the UWM and sent to public bodies all over the Commonwealth no doubt played a big part in the agitation which is going on... The fact was not mentioned before owing to a suspicion (now thoroughly verified) that mail of this organisation [the UWM] was being interfered with.⁷⁶

What was the “astounding letter” referred to here, and where did it come from? One speculative answer is that someone within the NT Administration “leaked” a copy of some of the correspondence between the NT Administration and the Department of the Interior during August to Priest’s committee, who sent it far and wide. As cited above, Weddell’s letters and telegrams outlined explicit, detailed plans for exemplary violence with “inevitable” Aboriginal casualties. A number of reports in major papers, some that adopted an editorial line against the “punitive expedition”, included close detail from Weddell’s correspondence of August 27, including the number of people and type of weaponry requested for the expedition.⁷⁷ The first evidence I can find of official confirmation of the more explicit details of Weddell’s request is in the interview Minister Perkins granted to the SMH on September 3, just before he went into a Cabinet meeting to argue Weddell’s requests be granted.⁷⁸ On precisely the same day, Perkins’ office began to receive some of the trickles in the coming flood of protest telegrams and letters, forcing the Lyons’ Cabinet to delay their expected decision to approve the punitive expedition – and to begin to deny that exemplary violence had ever been considered by the government at all.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ “That Punitive Expedition,” *Northern Voice*, September 27, 1933, 4.

⁷⁷ For example, “Native Killers – Punitive Measures Not Decided,” *The Sun*, September 2, 1933, 3; “Government Prepares Punitive Expedition Against the Blacks,” *The Herald*, September 2, 1933, 1.

⁷⁸ “Aborigines – Punitive Expedition Planned – Bloodshed Inevitable,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 4, 1933, 11.

⁷⁹ “Arnhem Land Expedition – Assurance by Mr Lyons – Punitive Force Not Considered,” *The Argus*, September 6, 1933, 7.

Whether or not Priest and the Darwin committee had a direct hand in encouraging the “imperial humanitarian” forces into action in the opening days of September, their appeals to the CPA for campaigning support proved to be decisive in the campaign developments to come. A Department of the Interior file in the National Archives holds copies of correspondence from approximately 60 different organisations across Australia objecting to the planned expedition⁸⁰ and there are examples of further protests in the CPA press.⁸¹ Reynolds provides a good summary of the character of the different organisations represented in the file: “Telegrams poured into Canberra from the churches, missionary organisations, feminist groups, unions, Australian Labor Party branches and pacifists”.⁸²

Reynolds does not mention CPA involvement in the campaign. Not a single resolution in the National Archives file was passed in the name of the Communist Party, so this is an understandable oversight for anyone not looking to CPA sources or without knowledge of the CPA network of influence and campaign practice in this particular period. However, a careful study of the organisations that took initiatives on this question and the particular terms in which they objected to the expedition, demonstrates that the role of communists was decisive.

Before looking at the mechanics of the campaign, it is worth exploring the fundamental differences between the nature of opposition to frontier violence provided by communists, as compared with the imperial humanitarian organisations. The first stark difference lies in the political basis of opposition to massacres. Imperial humanitarians sought to refine the methods of Australian colonialism, improving the treatment of “subject races”, both Aboriginal people and the peoples of New Guinea and surrounding islands.⁸³ The superiority of settler society and the right of the Australian state to dominate Indigenous people was never in question.⁸⁴ Instead, both church and humanitarian groups sought to ensure this treatment was in line with responsibilities agreed to under the League of Nations mandate

⁸⁰ Department of the Interior, Caledon Bay Expedition 1933 – Protests, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁸¹ “Against War on Aborigines,” WW, September 15, 1933, 2.

⁸² Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 209.

⁸³ Rowley *Destruction*, 294.

⁸⁴ The Congregational Union of Victoria for example, argued that “the prestige of the government and the claim for the moral and intellectual superiority of the white race” would be “properly upheld” by adopting methods of apprehending the “murderers” of McColl by means other than a “punitive expedition”. Congregational Union of Victoria, Letter to Minister Perkins, September 11, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

and principles of “British justice”⁸⁵ or “Christian standards”.⁸⁶ In their letters to Perkins, opposition to the impending massacre was often framed in terms that expressed sympathy with the “difficult” position of the government.⁸⁷ In the more detailed submissions made by the APNR, the planned slaughter was not only portrayed as unjust, but also as counter-productive to the longer term goal of establishing a stable pattern of relations in Arnhem Land, with Aboriginal people accepting the legitimacy of colonial law.⁸⁸ One consistent point made by church leaders was that any massacre could provoke the Yolngu further, increasing the threat posed to missionaries on the frontier.⁸⁹

The commentary of many church leaders through the crisis drew on their experience of missionary work, heavily integrated into the apparatus of the colonial state, as the source of their authority on the matters at hand.⁹⁰ The APNR aspired to this level of integration⁹¹ and in the coming years, Elkin’s Anthropology Department at Sydney University became the official training ground for field officers tasked with overseeing the Commonwealth Protection regime in both northern Australia and New Guinea.⁹²

The CPA, in contrast, opposed the punitive expedition on an explicitly anti-imperialist basis. The party wanted an end to the Protection regime and asserted the rights of Aboriginal people to self-determination and territorial independence.⁹³ Churches and humanitarian groups rejected the massacre planned by the NT Administration while at the same time emphasising

⁸⁵ Association for the Protection of Native Races, Letter to The Right Honourable J.A. Lyons, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth, September 5, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁸⁶ Copy of Telegram Addressed to the Prime Minister, Canberra from Josiah Park, Secretary, the Tasmanian State Council of Churches, Hobart, September 8, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁸⁷ For example, Aborigines Friends Society, Telegram to Minister Perkins, September 5, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; Elkin explained that the APNR understood the “difficulties caused by the natives” and offered to assist the Government in organising a conference that would, “help you in your endeavour to solve the problem,” A.P. Elkin, “Letter to Minister Perkins,” October 3, 1933, Personal Archives of Professor A P Elkin, USYD, P130, Series 12, Item 144.

⁸⁸ Adolphus P. Elkin, Letter to Minister Perkins, 6 September 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁸⁹ Telegram from General Secretary, Methodist Missionary Society to Prime Minister Lyons, September 4, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632 and Letter from the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania, Victorian Branch, to Prime Minister Lyons, September 5, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁹⁰ See for example letter from J Burton, National Missionary Council of Australia to Minister Perkins, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁹¹ Adolphus P. Elkin, Letter to Minister Perkins, October 3, 1933.

⁹² Rowley, *Destruction*, 329.

⁹³ A succinct anti-imperialist case against the punitive expedition was put on the front page of the new Melbourne CPA paper at the height of the crisis, “Who is to Blame for NT Murders?,” *Workers’ Voice*, September 8, 1, 4.

the need to find some mechanism to arrest the Yolngu who had killed McColl and the Japanese fisherman, and put them on trial for murder.⁹⁴ Communists and the organisations they influenced, such as the Councils Against War (CAWs), argued the killings were justified and called for a strict policy of non-interference by police or any other colonial forces in Arnhem Land.⁹⁵

The second difference between these two wings of the campaign was the methods used to protest. Imperial humanitarian correspondence in the National Archives file is almost exclusively written either by individuals on behalf of organisations, or after a meeting of the board or executive committee.⁹⁶ Letters from communist-influenced organisations were often written following resolutions taken by mass meetings, both in workplaces and community halls.⁹⁷ The labour movement gave the campaign against the punitive expedition a popular quality, calling working-class people together to take collective action for Aboriginal rights. This posed a particular challenge to the Lyons government. Ignoring humanitarian opinion would have been a source of embarrassment for the government, potentially playing out on the international diplomatic stage due to the watchful eye of London-based organisations. But the labour movement was not just making appeals to the conscience of Lyons or Perkins – it was promising escalating, disruptive social action, raising the spectre of industrial action.⁹⁸ Commonwealth Investigation Branch reports from this period demonstrate a particular anxiety about Communist calls for industrial action in support of anti-war activism.⁹⁹ This

⁹⁴ Association for the Protection of Native Races, Letter to The Right Honourable J.A. Lyons, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth, September 5, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; NSW Council of Churches, Letter to Minister Perkins, September 11, 1933 NAA: A1, 1933/7632; Copy of Lettergram from Council of Churches in South Australia to Prime Minister Lyons, September 4, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁹⁵ For example, Victorian Council Against War, Letter to The Hon. The Minister for the Interior, 19 September, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; Northcote Unemployed Association, To Perkins, Minister for Interior, September 12, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁹⁶ For example, A.P. Elkin, Letter to Right Hon. J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; John. N. Burton (Chairman), Statement by the National Missionary Society of Australia, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁹⁷ For example, Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union of Australia (Victorian Branch), Letter to Hon. J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁹⁸ The *Workers' Weekly* threatened that “workers’ organisations will fight this meditated wholesale slaughter of the Aborigines,” “WAR! Against Aborigines,” WW, September 8, 1933, 1. The Victorian Council of War was one of a number of organisations that pledged “active measures” to stop the expedition. Victorian Council Against War, Telegram to Minister of the Interior, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

⁹⁹ For example, while Commonwealth Investigation Branch Director H.R. Jones believed that a CAW call for strikes to coincide with an anti-war day of action in mid-1934 were “only being flirted with” by the Australian Railways Union, there was an insistence on the need to monitor such threats closely.

provides important context for explaining why Perkins eventually ended up co-operating with the missionaries – the alternative risked a more widespread popular radicalisation over the question of Aboriginal rights.

Approximately half of the letters of protest in the Interior Ministry file came from organisations that could broadly be described as being part of the labour movement; trade unions, unemployed and “doleworker” councils, campaign committees and Labor Party branches.¹⁰⁰ In the overwhelming majority of cases, there is direct evidence that these organisations were either led by communists, or connected to “united front” initiatives taken by the CPA. An examination of the CPA archive gives us a much clearer idea of how many of these resolutions came about, and the social forces they represented.

One of the earliest protests received by the Department of the Interior came in a letter from the LAI dated August 17, citing a telegram it had received from Darwin on August 14 outlining plans for the punitive expedition. The LAI registered an “emphatic protest” at the proposal, arguing, “this is the latest in a long series of atrocities perpetrated on these unfortunate people and we feel that this state of affairs should no longer be tolerated”.¹⁰¹ The only other organisation to protest at this early stage was the Australian Aboriginal Amelioration Association in Perth, a humanitarian group, which had telegraphed the Minister on August 15, “respectfully urging... precautions [are] taken against the possibility of a repetition of shootings accompanying similar expeditions in the past”.¹⁰² The fact that the Secretary of this group, Norman Morley, shared a surname with his father William Morley from the APNR, confused Henry Reynolds, who attributed both the first letter and the driving initiative in the “campaign of protest” to the APNR.¹⁰³ There is, however, no correspondence on file from the APNR on this issue until a lettergram on September 4.¹⁰⁴

H.R. Jones (CIB Director), “Memorandum for the Solicitor General,” July 16, 1934, Attorney-General’s Department, [Communism]: Communism and anti-war movement - [correspondence, reports on communist activities], NAA: A467, SF42/321

¹⁰⁰ Department of the Interior, Caledon Bay Expedition 1933 – Protests, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁰¹ League Against Imperialism (Australian Section), Letter to Prime Minister Lyons, 17 August, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁰² Australian Aborigines’ Amelioration Association, Letter to Prime Minister Lyons, 15 August, 1933. NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁰³ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 205.

¹⁰⁴ W Morley (APNR Secretary), Lettergram to the Honourable J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior, September 4, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

Ten days earlier, the *Workers' Weekly* had explicitly supported armed Yolngu resistance in Arnhem Land “against this band of invading killers” and called for protest:

A committee has been set up in Darwin to fight against the sending of a punitive expedition and it appeals to all workers, anti-imperialists and those opposed to the consistent killing of the Australian native to protest to the Federal government, and to build the struggle for the self-determination of this exploited and suppressed race.¹⁰⁵

The CPA campaign stepped up a gear on September 2. The Political Committee of the CPA had “Punitive Expedition on Aborigines” on its agenda and minuted this resolution:

LAI and ILD [International Labor Defence] to make tremendous drive in relation to this question. Anti-war movement can take up question of punitive expedition, which amounts to war on the natives.¹⁰⁶

Almost immediately, workers' organisations where the CPA had leadership or influence began to hold meetings of protest and passed resolutions that were forwarded to the Department of the Interior. On September 6, the Punchbowl Unemployed and Distress Association wrote that a members meeting the previous night had “given the issue serious consideration” and condemned the planned expedition, insisting the “natives... were defending what was rightfully theirs” by spearing intruders like McColl.¹⁰⁷ On September 5, the ILD held an executive committee meeting and protested to Minister Perkins, noting that “the fight against oppression of national minorities is of vital concern to the ILD”.¹⁰⁸

As discussed in Chapter Five, the ILD had enjoyed some recent success breaking out of the Third Period isolation of the CPA. The new, sophisticated monthly journal *Australian Labor*

¹⁰⁵ “Punitive Expedition Against Aborigines.”

¹⁰⁶ It is possible that the Political Committee had already discussed the importance of campaigning against the punitive expedition in meetings in August, but meeting minutes for the months of June and August 1933 are missing from the relevant file. Minutes of the CPA Political Committee, September 2, 1933, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419, 495-94-106.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from the Punchbowl Unemployed and Distress Association to Minister Perkins, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁰⁸ Letter from the International Labor Defence to Minister Perkins, September 5, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

Defender carried the most detailed analysis in the country about political developments in the campaign against the “punitive expedition”.¹⁰⁹ In September of 1933, however, it was through various Councils Against War that the campaign against the punitive expedition found the most purchase.

“We consider the expedition to be an act of war”

The LAI, while still formally promoted as an important anti-imperialist campaigning organisation by the CPA press, had fallen out of favour with the CPA leadership. Key figures in the LAI recognised it had “failed as a mass organisation” due to the sectarian attitude that had dominated since the organisation formed in 1930.¹¹⁰ By August 1933, global developments and the growth of new possibilities for mobilisation locally led to the emergence of a new form of anti-war organisation – the Councils Against War (CAWs), which were succeeding in bringing far more significant numbers of workers into CPA-led anti-war campaigning.¹¹¹ Stuart Macintyre argues that this work in the CAWs was the most fruitful expression of the CPA’s shift away from Third Period anti-Labor sectarianism in 1933.¹¹² In the months just prior to the spearing of McColl, and throughout the period of the ensuing crisis, communists were finding real resonance for their new anti-war initiatives within the ranks of the ALP.

Hitler swept to power in Germany in January 1933 and within six months had outlawed the Communist Party, the German Social Democratic party and the trade unions.¹¹³ This sent shockwaves of fear through the global workers’ movement and caused a crisis within the European parties affiliated to the Comintern.¹¹⁴ By the end of 1934, an entirely new perspective on how communists should relate to the broader workers’ movement was being pushed from Moscow. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin appealed to the British and French regimes to form a military alliance against Nazi Germany. The USSR entered the League of Nations,

¹⁰⁹ “Stop This Murder!” *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11.

¹¹⁰ James N. Rawling, undated, handwritten note, League Against Imperialism, JNRC, AU NBAC N57-426.

¹¹¹ Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 180.

¹¹² Macintyre, *The Reds*, 179-180.

¹¹³ Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 141-142.

¹¹⁴ Chris Harman, *A People’s History of the World* (London: Verso, 2008), 489-495.

which Lenin had denounced as a “thieves’ kitchen” of global imperialist powers.¹¹⁵

Communist parties were ordered to tone down revolutionary rhetoric and concentrate on trying to form alliances with any “democratic” forces in their own countries, both mainstream social democratic parties and “progressive” sections of the capitalist class, who were willing to stand against Nazi Germany.¹¹⁶ This “People’s Front” perspective was formally declared at the Comintern Congress in 1935.¹¹⁷

In 1933, this realignment had not yet formally occurred and at times there was still a marked anti-Labor sectarianism in the CPA press, including continued if less frequent use of the “social fascist” epithet.¹¹⁸ The actual practice of the CPA in mid-1933, however, had definitely taken on a more collaborative character. Very real fears of fascism and attempts by the Lyons government to criminalise radical labour movement activity, combined with widespread discussion of the possibility of a new world war, pushed both CPA members and more radical sections of the ALP to find ways of working together. In this context, the CPA initiated Councils Against War, with extensive efforts to include Labor Party activists and branches.¹¹⁹ In August and September 1933, CPA activists were engaged in serious mobilisation towards a national conference of the newly established CAWs, planned for September 30 in Glebe.¹²⁰ The same September 2 meeting of the CPA Political Committee in Sydney, cited above, extensively discussed plans for this conference.¹²¹

An intelligence file from 1933-34 on the Victorian Council Against War (VCAW) contains internal documents that provide useful insight into how the organisation gathered support in the period leading up to the campaign against the punitive expedition. There is a “circular” from the VCAW central office, providing aspiring VCAW activists with instructions on how to hold rallies to establish a local branch. This emphasised the need to make systematic and friendly approaches to all potentially supportive organisations and “prominent Citizens” and

¹¹⁵ Hallas, *The Comintern*, 146-148.

¹¹⁶ Hallas, *The Comintern*, 147-148.

¹¹⁷ Hallas, *The Comintern*, 145.

¹¹⁸ For example, Lance Sharkey, “How Do We Estimate the Class Nature of a Political Party,” *WW*, July 7, 1933, 2; “More Unions Reject ALP Scheme,” *WW*, November 3, 1933, 5.

¹¹⁹ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 180-181.

¹²⁰ W.H. Nugent, “Forward to the National Conference Against Imperialist War,” *WW*, August 11, 1933, 4; “Rally to the Struggle Against WAR,” *WW*, September 15, 1933, 1.

¹²¹ Minutes of the CPA Political Committee, September 2, 1933, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419, 495-94-106.

invite the Mayor to preside over a local public meeting. The document stressed: “Do not allow anything of a Party or sectarian nature to enter movement [emphasis in original]”.¹²²

This approach proved successful in building broad support. On August 1, as part of an international day of action against war, the VCAW co-ordinated eighteen suburban meetings across Melbourne.¹²³ In Collingwood, for example, Councillor McHugh, the ALP-aligned Mayor, chaired the meeting in the local Town Hall attended by “about 100” people. Tom Tunnecliffe, leader of the Victorian Labor Party and local member for Collingwood, moved the resolution, protesting “the signs of preparation for world-wide warfare and pledg(ing) itself to do all in its power to impress upon governments the necessity for the abolition of warfare”.¹²⁴

When the CPA leadership pushed a call to action against the punitive expedition through national CAW structures in early September, the VCAW was quickly able to mobilise support. On September 6, the executive of the VCAW telegraphed an urgent “vigorous protest against the proposed punitive expedition” to the Department of the Interior, promising to “actively oppose such measures”.¹²⁵ On the same night, a mass meeting of the Amalgamated Postal Workers Union branch in Victoria sent a similar resolution of protest after “very serious consideration... although the natives have been guilty in killing other people, they have acted within their own code of laws”.¹²⁶ This was perhaps the first resolution supporting Aboriginal resistance taken by a mass trade union meeting in Australian history. More unions soon followed and this culminated in a similar resolution from the Victorian Trades Hall at their next executive meeting.¹²⁷ Perhaps most significant for the pressure that continued to build on the Lyons government, the VCAW initiated a

¹²² N.E. Seelingson (Hon Sec) and J.M. Alexander (Hon Pres), VCAW Advice on Setting up Anti-War Councils, undated circular, Department of Defence, Victorian Council Against War 1934, NAA: B1535, 812/1/53.

¹²³ “Cause of War,” *Central Queensland Herald*, September 14, 1933, 54.

¹²⁴ “Anti-War Campaign – Meeting at Collingwood,” *The Age*, August 2, 1933, 12.

¹²⁵ Victorian Council Against War, Telegram to Minister of the Interior, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632. At this time the Trades Hall had a representative on the VCAW executive and was still debating the terms of full affiliation. “Anti-War Council: Attitude of Trades Hall Executive,” *Recorder*, September 26, 1933, 3.

¹²⁶ Amalgamated Postal Workers’ Union of Australia (Victorian Branch), Letter to Hon. J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior, September 6, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹²⁷ Victorian Trades Hall Council, Letter to The Rt. Hon. J. Lyons, Prime Minister of Australia, September 12, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

public protest meeting, inviting the National Missionary Council to collaborate.¹²⁸

After the federal cabinet met on September 5 to discuss Weddell's proposal for the punitive expedition, messaging from government representatives changed drastically. All talk of the need for exemplary violence, a position clearly articulated by Minister Perkins up until September 4,¹²⁹ disappeared from ministerial statements. Indeed, both Lyons and Perkins now denied that a punitive expedition had ever been contemplated. Lyons told press correspondents in Canberra that "the Ministry had received many telegrams protesting against such action [a punitive expedition]" but insisted that: "The intentions of the Ministry have apparently been misunderstood. The Ministry has not considered at any time the despatch of a punitive expedition." He went on to say, however, that a police mission to Caledon Bay would still be necessary to "arrest the murderers" and that the Groote Island Mission was "in danger of attack by the aborigines".¹³⁰

When the LAI sent a letter of protest against the punitive expedition on August 17, the letter of reply from Secretary Carrodus had simply stated, "your representations made in connection with the matter have been noted".¹³¹ As the pressure mounted following the September 5 cabinet meeting, Perkins was personally signing responses, assuring people there was no violence planned.¹³² Perkins' response to the Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union correspondence concluded:

Your motion was quite uncalled for, as there is just as much kindly feeling towards humanity in the government, as there is in the Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union of Australia.¹³³

Following the government's shift in rhetoric, a number of major newspapers printed articles

¹²⁸ N.E. Seelingson (VCAW Hon Sec), "To The Editor of the Age," *The Age*, September 7, 9.

¹²⁹ "Aborigines – Punitive Expedition Planned – Bloodshed Inevitable," *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 4, 1933, 11.

¹³⁰ "Murders by Blacks – Arnhem Land Expedition – Assurance by Mr. Lyons," *The Argus*, September 6, 1933, 7.

¹³¹ Secretary, Letter to the National President, League Against Imperialism, undated copy of letter in reply to August 17 correspondence, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹³² For example, Minister John A. Perkins, Letter to Mr. V.M. Leal, Convenor of the Life and Work Committee of the Presbyterian Church of S.A., September 13, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹³³ Minister John A. Perkins, Letter to the Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union of Australia, September 8, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

claiming that the threat of slaughter was now over.¹³⁴ Similarly, some imperial humanitarian organisations appeared satisfied that there was no need for further protest. The VAG for example, wrote a conciliatory letter to the Department of the Interior on September 8 that did not mention the “punitive expedition” and instead expressed “regret” at “the inhumane and irresponsible tone of much of the newspaper propaganda against the natives of Arnhem Land”.¹³⁵

In this context, accelerated communist agitation became crucial for heading off the continuing threat of violence. Despite the rhetorical disavowal of retributory violence by the Lyons’ government, the Interior Ministry and NT Administration continued to make active preparations for a police party to be dispatched from Darwin into Arnhem Land, to ostensibly defend the Groote Island Mission and “apprehend the murderers”.¹³⁶ The guns and ammunition requested by Weddell were shipped to Darwin from Defence Department stores in Sydney.¹³⁷ The communist press was quick to point out that the proposed police expedition was prepared for combat and would use any excuse to perpetrate a massacre.¹³⁸ Indeed, in internal correspondence police themselves continued to discuss the mission to capture Yolngu as a combat operation, insisting that bloodshed was “inevitable”.¹³⁹ The CPA urged a continuation of protests, demanding no police party whatsoever be sent to Arnhem Land. The *Workers’ Voice* in Victoria mocked the government’s new line:

Yielding to widespread protests, the Lyons Government has abandoned its original proposal to send a punitive expedition against the natives of Arnheim Land... Instead, it will send an armed police party to the Woodah mission area to disperse the natives peacefully.¹⁴⁰

In Victoria, the plans for a protest meeting by the VCAW helped ensure that the broader

¹³⁴ “Aborigines – Not a Punitive Party,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 6, 1933, 13; “No Bloodshed – Prime Minister Gives Assurances,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, September 6, 1933, 7.

¹³⁵ Victorian Aboriginal Group, Letter to Minister Perkins, September 8, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹³⁶ Department of the Interior, Memorandum, unsigned copy dated September 8, 1933, NAA: A431, 1947/1434.

¹³⁷ C.H.U. Todd (Works Director, Department of Interior), Memorandum: The Secretary, Department of Interior, September 5, 1933, NAA: A431, 1947/1434; Egan, *Justice*, 42.

¹³⁸ “Stop this Murder,” *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11.

¹³⁹ Mounted Constable E.H. Morey, Letter to the Minister of the Interior, quoted in Egan, *Justice*, 53.

¹⁴⁰ “Who is to Blame for NT Murders,” *Workers’ Voice*, September 8, 1933, 1.

labour movement remained on a protest footing and also assisted to pull some of the liberal organisations into the continuing campaign. Helen Baillie, a prominent member of the VAG (which, as noted above, had been conciliatory towards Minister Perkins the previous week), represented the group on the platform of the protest meeting organised by the VCAW.¹⁴¹ The meeting, chaired by CPA leader Percy Laidler, was attended by approximately 500 people.¹⁴² This meeting provided a direct response to Perkins' claim that there was no need to protest because the proposed police expedition was not a "punitive" one. A clear case was made against *any* police expedition into Arnhem Land to arrest Yolngu. The meeting resolution, "passed unanimously," read:

This meeting of Citizens strongly protests against the sending of any armed expedition that may be used against the blacks of the Northern Territory, and demands for them complete freedom to control their own affairs without any outside interference, and without encroachment, commercial or governmental, on their reserves. We regard the expedition as being an act of war against a defenceless people, and as such to be abhorred by all opponents of war.¹⁴³

Coverage in *The Argus* quoted a speech to the VCAW meeting by Frank Brennan, who served as Attorney-General in the Labor Scullin Government until being deposed in December 1931.¹⁴⁴ Brennan took a militant anti-imperialist position, siding with predicted armed Yolngu resistance against the proposed police expedition:

Any killing by blacks of members of an armed expedition which might be sent against them... would be justifiable homicide, because the tribes would know the expedition would be armed, that it would try to take some of their number as hostages, and was out to teach them a lesson. It was natural for them to defend themselves against such

¹⁴¹ "Groote Island Mission - The Proposed Expedition - Meeting of Protest," *The Age*, September 14, 1933, 10.

¹⁴² H.E. Thonemann, Letter to The Hon. Minister for Interior re 'Council Against War' public meeting, September 15, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁴³ "Groote Island Mission - The Proposed Expedition - Meeting of Protest," *The Age*, September 14, 1933, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Kevin Ryan, "Brennan, Francis (Frank) (1873-1950)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1979, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brennan-francis-frank-5347>.

an expedition.¹⁴⁵

An account of the meeting from a private citizen extremely concerned about the seditious nature of the speeches, was sent to Perkins:

The meeting was really to further their own interests in their fight against capital, rather than to assist the blacks in any way.... one speaker made such utterances that I personally fancy comes very near inciting the public against Constitutional Government.¹⁴⁶

As the campaign continued to intensify, the CPA was deepening its critique of Aboriginal oppression. The *Workers' Voice* September 8 edition contained a notice for an upcoming seminar on "Australian capitalism and the Aboriginal question".¹⁴⁷ The September *Australian Labor Defender* included a feature article arguing that the exemplary violence against Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land was designed to give confidence to commercial investment in northern Australia, at a time when there was a renewed push to "develop the north". The article raised explicit criticism of the imperial humanitarian political tendency discussed in this chapter, citing the Scottsboro case to emphasise the potential power of working-class action to fight back against racism:

We organise the workers to fight for exploited natives. We point out the futility of relying on liberal organisations, which raise a feeble protest during an outrage, and then finish up by making a similar statement to that made by the Rev. W. Burton, of the Methodist Missionary Society, in the "Sun", September 12. After finding that the protests had been without avail, and that the expedition was to leave Darwin on September 13, he said: "We are indignant, but if the Government desires to save face, we cannot do anything." This gentleman does not realise what can be done by the organised working class. He has evidently not heard of how the organised workers prevented the Government of Alabama, U.S.A., from murdering the nine Scottsboro negro boys.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ "Meeting's Protest – Mr. Brennan on Rights of Blacks," *The Argus*, September 14, 1933, 10.

¹⁴⁶ H.E. Thonemann, Letter to The Hon. Minister for Interior re 'Council Against War' public meeting, September 15, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁴⁷ "What's On?" *Workers' Voice*, September 8, 1933, 4.

¹⁴⁸ "Stop this Murder," *Australian Labor Defender*, September 193, 11.

Shortly after the Melbourne public meeting, Constable Morey deployed from Darwin to Groote Island. Not, as had been initially planned, with a large patrol ready for battle, but with a single other officer for company and a plan to collect another at Roper Bar.¹⁴⁹ After he arrived, Morey got to work erecting “barricades of barbed wire” around the mission to “prevent a rush by hostile natives”.¹⁵⁰ For much of September, the Department of the Interior continued to entertain the possibility of reinforcing Morey with larger numbers of police for an operation to “apprehend” Yolngu around Caledon Bay. Meanwhile, Lyons met with Rev. Warren, head of the CMS, and began discussions about a proposal by the missionaries to send an unarmed “peace party” into the region to gather intelligence about the killings and try to negotiate a surrender of the Yolngu responsible.¹⁵¹

The continuing campaign played an important role in eventually defeating any plan for a large mobilisation of police into Arnhem Land. Momentum generated by CPA activists saw a rush of resolutions from across the labour movement in the second half of September. A resolution from the Geelong UWM on September 15, which insisted McColl and the Japanese had been killed “in absolute good faith, protecting the moral code of the race”, was just one of numerous from mass meetings of unemployed.¹⁵² A mass meeting of waterside workers in Sydney demanded the government stop the “war on Aborigines”.¹⁵³ The Coal Lumpers Union successfully moved a resolution against the punitive expedition at a meeting of all affiliates of the NSW Labor Council (the peak body for all unions in NSW) that explicitly supported armed Yolngu resistance, demanding “aboriginals be endowed with full powers” to enforce the boundaries of “any aboriginal sanctuary”.¹⁵⁴

The influence of the communist-led campaign on shifting opinion within the broader labour movement can be demonstrated by looking at the different positions adopted by sections of the ALP to the punitive expedition.¹⁵⁵ At the federal level, the parliamentary Labor Party had

¹⁴⁹ Egan, *Justice*, 45.

¹⁵⁰ Egan, *Justice*, 53.

¹⁵¹ Egan, *Justice*, 42-43.

¹⁵² T.N. Richie (Hon. Sec. Geelong Unemployed Movement), Letter to The Honourable The Minister for the Interior, September 15, 1933. NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁵³ “Against War on Aborigines,” WW, September 15, 1933, 2.

¹⁵⁴ “Punitive Action Opposed – Native Sanctuary Plan,” *Labor Daily*, September 16, 5.

¹⁵⁵ For example, Lakemba ALP Electoral Council, Letter to J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior, undated letter circa September 20, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

said nothing against the punitive expedition. Indeed, the only comments made by an ALP politician in Parliament came from NT member Harold Nelson, in November, who warned of the continuing risk of attacks on pastoralists and spoke authoritatively about the supposed racial superiority of “Caledon Bay blacks” over other Aboriginal people due to “Japanese and Malay blood”.¹⁵⁶ The *Labor Daily*, a significant newspaper in Sydney controlled by the ALP (NSW), carried an equivocal editorial line early in the crisis:

Cabinet is definitely in a dilemma over the expedition... anxious to prevent any possibility of being accused of causing bloodshed and at the same time daring not run the risk of having attacks on mission stations being laid at the door of its inactivity.¹⁵⁷

The following day, a lengthy *Labor Daily* editorial castigated the Lyons government for a “crude and callow” display of authority, and also criticised the hypocrisy of missionaries who spoke out in defence of Aboriginal people while remaining silent on the suffering of white unemployed. In contrast to the CPA position of building solidarity between both oppressed groups, however, the *Labor Daily* belittled Aboriginal people and the importance of the campaign: “At least [the punitive expedition] would carry with it the mercy of sudden death so different from the lingering agony of slow starvation”.¹⁵⁸

However, as has been shown above, through the anti-war movement, communists had managed to engage both rank-and-file Labor members and some prominent party leaders in the campaign. There was often a direct correlation between Labor Party branches that wrote resolutions of protest, and the participation of those branches in the CAW movement.¹⁵⁹

Labor Party members were often more moderate in their tone, falling back on the rhetoric of imperial humanitarianism. The Clovelly Labor branch, for example, appealed to notions of

¹⁵⁶ “Labor Member for N.T. Speaks Out,” *Labor Call*, November 9, 1933, 13.

¹⁵⁷ “No Decision by Fed. Cabinet – Punitive Campaign Discussed,” *Labor Daily*, September 5, 1933, 5.

¹⁵⁸ “A Punitive Government,” *Labor Daily*, September 6, 1933, 4.

¹⁵⁹ For example, both the Lakemba and Clovelly ALP (NSW) branches in Sydney were active in the CAW and also wrote resolutions of protest. Lakemba ALP Electoral Council, Letter to J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior, undated letter circa September 20, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; W.H. Mayheuer (Hon. Sec. Clovelly Branch ALP), Letter to the Minister for the Interior, September 12, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632; “The Campaign for National Congress Against Imperialist War and Intervention,” *WW*, June 30, 1933, 4.

“British justice” and cited APNR opposition to the punitive raid as an important authority.¹⁶⁰

Correspondence with the Interior Ministry lets us piece together a vivid picture of united front activity taken by “dole worker” activists in Rockdale, a southern suburb of Sydney, to build the campaign against the punitive expedition. In their resolutions, there is a combination of appeals to “British justice”, with a militant position against the deployment of any police party to Arnhem Land, suggesting collaboration between workers who were either members of, or sympathetic to both Labor and the CPA.¹⁶¹ By mid-1933, the CPA had shifted their approach away from trying to impose a universal model of a communist-led UWM on all unemployed activists, towards more local flexibility that took seriously the task of building unity with Labor members.¹⁶² Both communists and Labor activists were participating in a number of “Unemployed and Relief Workers’ Councils” in Sydney at this time.¹⁶³ On September 20, a “gang of dole workers on Bestic St”, members of the “No 6 District Council of Unemployed and Relief Workers”, held a meeting on the job and passed a resolution to forward to Minister Perkins:

We the unemployed and dole relief workers of Bestic Street (Brighton-Le-Sands) emphatically protest against, and demand the immediate withdrawal of the “punitive expedition” being sent by your government into the interior of the Northern Territory for the express purpose of virtually murdering the Aboriginal British subject.¹⁶⁴

Three days later, a mass meeting of the broader “No 6 District Council”, said to “represent 2000 unemployed and relief workers extending over an area from Cook’s River to George’s River”, passed a resolution of “emphatic protest”, expanding on the sentiments above:

[We] regard the act of your government in sending armed forces to exterminate natives who have been taught to recognise the protection of the British Flag, as

¹⁶⁰ W.H. Mayheuer, (Hon. Sec. Clovelly Branch ALP), Letter to the Minister for the Interior, September 12, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632

¹⁶¹ No: 6 District Council of Unemployed & Relief Workers, Letter to the Right; Hon; Perkins. Minister for the Interior, September 23, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁶² S. O’Shea, “Unemployed Reorganised,” WW, August 25, 1933.

¹⁶³ “The Dole Workers Struggle for Better Conditions,” WW, July 14, 1933, 4.

¹⁶⁴ Edward Gay (Secretary Job Committee, Gang of Dole Workers), The Right Hon. Perkins. Minister for the Interior, September 20, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

nothing short of sacrilege [sic], and a disgrace to the Australian administration.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

This archived resolution from a meeting in solidarity with Yolngu people during a smoko break on a relief work project in suburban Sydney, that would have barely paid the workers enough money to eat, provides a powerful historical picture to illustrate the central theme of this chapter. Most historiography has emphasised the efforts of imperial humanitarians in ending the period of open warfare against Aboriginal people on the frontier. However, the newfound sense of solidarity with Aboriginal resistance amongst fighting organisations in the Australian working class, was a social force that also decisively influenced developments. While there were strong, existing anti-war traditions within the workers' movement in Australia, the theoretical breakthrough of the CPA in 1931 that recognised an imperialist war was being waged against Aboriginal people on this continent,¹⁶⁶ was a vital precondition for the emergence of the 1933 campaign. The second precondition was the development of a more effective united front perspective by the CPA, one which sought to actively collaborate with the Labor Party, even if it meant some compromise, rather than the consistent sectarian slander that had hampered CPA operations since 1930.

On September 30, the *Labor Daily* carried a headline "Fed. Govt. Climbs Down On Punitive Expedition," and stated triumphantly, "The wave of public resentment against the Federal Government's plans to send a heavily armed expedition to Arnheim Land... has borne fruit. The Government has been forced by sheer weight of public opinion to climb down."¹⁶⁷ A broad range of organisations had responded with outrage to the initial, explicit plans by authorities for a "punitive expedition". However, it had undoubtedly been the CPA's agitation that maintained momentum behind a demand that no armed party whatsoever be deployed in response to McColl's killing. This demand had now been met. The government's new strategy of a missionary-led "peace party" to entice Yolngu to Darwin created a whole new set of problems for the government, which would see a far more substantial campaign break out the following year against the treatment of Dhakiyarr and other prisoners. But as

¹⁶⁵ No: 6 District Council of Unemployed & Relief Workers, Letter to the Right; Hon; Perkins. Minister for the Interior, September 23, 1933, NAA: A1, 1933/7632.

¹⁶⁶ "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery".

¹⁶⁷ "Fed. Govt. Climbs Down on Punitive Expedition," *Labor Daily*, September 30, 1933, 7.

Henry Reynolds has argued, the fact that “the punitive expedition did not ride into Yolngu country” in September of 1933 was a significant turning point in the history of colonisation and resistance in Australia.¹⁶⁸ The period of open frontier warfare that had continued across the continent since the coming of the British had finally ended.

¹⁶⁸ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 215.

Chapter Seven

‘Free North Australian Aborigines’

1933-34

In 1934, there was a second wave of CPA campaigning in solidarity with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory that was both longer and more intense than the struggle against the punitive expedition. This time, campaigning was focused on the injustice of court proceedings for Aboriginal prisoners. In April 1934, when Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda and other Yolngu implicated in the killing of Japanese trepangers were brought to Darwin by missionaries to face trial, the CPA started to agitate for their immediate release.¹ This began the most intensive, sustained and successful period of Aboriginal rights campaigning undertaken by the CPA nationally in the 1930s. Following a brutal police operation to arrest another eight Aboriginal men from the Fitzmaurice River region in the north-west of the NT, and the imposition of death sentences upon them in May 1934, the International Labor Defence (ILD) held a public demonstration in Sydney calling for their release² and initiated an unprecedented drive through the labour movement for protest resolutions.³ This helped to pressure the Lyons government to commute the death sentences on June 27.⁴

The CPA's analysis of Aboriginal oppression became increasingly sophisticated through this period and the party press carried insightful, original ideas about the role of both missionaries and the court system in enforcing colonial rule and securing the interests of Australian capitalism.⁵ The continuing global fight to free the "Scottsboro Boys" inspired communist agitation for Aboriginal prisoners and the CPA press included novel adaptations of American

¹ "Juries Abolished for Aborigines," WW, April 13, 1934, 1.

² "International Solidarity Day," WW, June 8, 1934, 6.

³ More than 100 of the resolutions from this campaign are in a file in the National Archives of Australia, Department of the Interior. Sentence imposed on Fitzmaurice River Aborigines for murder of two white men - Koch and Arinsky. Protest re, Department of the Interior File, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

⁴ "Natives Reprieved," *The Age*, June 27, 1934, 11.

⁵ The most detailed analysis was in *Australian Labor Defender* for example. See Colleen Keane, "Developing the North – Aborigines Butchered," *Australian Labor Defender*, February 1934, 9-10; "Defend the Aborigines," *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 5; Kylie Tennant, "Aborigines Persecuted," *Australian Labor Defender*, July 1934, 6, 9.

analysis about the racist operations of the courts for Australian conditions. However, one key insight from the USA – the importance of working in active collaboration with oppressed people themselves – was never applied by the ILD’s strongest branches in south-east Australia. Important opportunities were missed to work in solidarity with Aboriginal people in the south-east where active self-organised struggle had resumed, partly inspired by the CPA’s own campaigning efforts.

A brief reprieve

By early October 1933, it was clear that no police party would be deployed to Caledon Bay or surrounds. Minister Perkins announced that he would allow for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to organise an unarmed expedition, a “peace party” led by missionaries and without any police, to negotiate the surrender of Yolngu responsible for killing both McColl and the Japanese.⁶ Over the summer of 1933-34, CMS officials took a number of trips into Arnhem Land and successfully contacted the relevant Yolngu. The NT Administration continued to push for a combat operation to arrest the now identified killers. Weddell wrote again to Canberra in December to advocate for “a party to apprehend the murderers, it appears to me that bloodshed is inevitable” and requested that “HMAS Moresby be stationed in North Australian waters” or perhaps “some amphibious machines of the RAAF be requisitioned” for the operation”.⁷ By this stage, however, the Department of the Interior had fully committed to the peace party strategy.⁸

Once it was clear there would be no police operation, the CPA stopped agitation on the Caledon Bay crisis. The September 1933 edition of *Australian Labor Defender* included an announcement that the ILD would “hold a workers’ inquiry into the position of the Aborigines” in November and called for readers to forward sworn testimony.⁹ There is no evidence this initiative was pursued at all. Over the summer, however, Aboriginal rights issues received consistent coverage across the growing number of press organs CPA leaders had at their disposal. In October 1933, for example, the CPA paper targeted at socialist women, *Working Woman*, reflected on the recent campaign and argued that the expansionist

⁶ Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Island Killings 1932-1933* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 43

⁷ Egan, *Justice*, 59.

⁸ Egan, *Justice*, 59.

⁹ “Stop this Murder,” *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11.

needs of the Australian pastoral and mining industries was the force driving frontier warfare. The article promised a “series on Aboriginal history”.¹⁰ Every edition from November 1933 through to February 1934 carried a feature article on Aboriginal oppression in north Australia, examining police violence, working conditions and the forced removal of children into compounds.¹¹ The independent prominent leftist Michael Sawtell authored one of these articles, a sign of the growing efforts made by the CPA to collaborate with broader left forces.¹² Sawtell’s contribution to the 1934 campaigning will be analysed further in the final section of this chapter.

Coverage of Aboriginal rights in the *Northern Voice*, still edited by Charles Priest in late 1933, remained consistent and a number of articles from the summer paint a picture of the multiracial community that existed around the UWM in Darwin at this time. The newsletter promoted dances held at Immigrant House, the UWM headquarters, where the main musical attraction was “the Cubillo band”,¹³ made up of members of the prominent Aboriginal-Filipino Cubillo family discussed in Chapters Three and Five. Cartoons advertising the dances featured different skin shades to emphasise their multiracial character¹⁴ and Charles Priest’s autobiography fondly remembered the camaraderie of the dances, where “a few white townspeople would attend but we usually had a big rollup of coloured people”.¹⁵

The *Northern Voice* continued agitation against police brutality, including in the infamous “Borrooloola case” from September 1933, while the campaign against the “punitive expedition” was still taking place.¹⁶ This case was presided over by Judge Thomas Wells, who had been appointed to the Darwin court on August 28, 1933.¹⁷ He quickly became hated by town radicals as a fearsome defender of property and privilege.¹⁸ Wells presided over the

¹⁰ “Why the Attacks on Aborigines?” *Working Woman*, October 1933, 6.

¹¹ Michael Sawtell, “What Lies Behind the Proposed War on Helpless Aborigines of Arnheim Land,” *Working Woman*, November 1933, 7. Sawtell’s article promised a further report in the December edition of *Working Woman*, but this edition is missing from the archival holdings in the Victorian State Library; Overlander, “Aborigines Scare is Ridiculous,” *Working Woman*, January 1934, 7; “Life in Aboriginal Compound – Children Torn from Mothers,” *Working Woman*, February 1934, 2.

¹² Sawtell, “What Lies Behind the Proposed War?” 7.

¹³ “A Dance on Thursday,” *Northern Voice*, November 22, 1933, 1.

¹⁴ “A Dance Tomorrow Night,” *Northern Voice*, November 29, 1933, 2.

¹⁵ Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections*, (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 22

¹⁶ “The Aborigines,” *Northern Voice*, September 13, 1933, 3; “Letters from Correspondents,” *Northern Voice*, November 29, 1933, 3.

¹⁷ Egan, *Justice*, 74.

¹⁸ “Aborigines Meet British Justice,” RL, June 13, 1934, 10.

trial of Mounted Constable Gordon Stott in November 1933, accused of bashing an Aboriginal man, Tommy Dodd, whom Stott had arrested for cattle stealing on a property near Borroloola. Local pastoralists had been leaning on the police to drive Aboriginal people off their stations and Stott was the man for the job.¹⁹

The charges against Stott were the result of a whistle-blowing effort by a smaller station owner, Dave Cahill, sympathetic to local people.²⁰ In *Two Laws*, a film made with the Borroloola community in the late 1970s, including Tommy Dodd who was still alive at the time, the narrator explained Cahill “got help from unions and churches”.²¹ This community memory probably recalls the advocacy of both the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR) and Priest and his comrades. The APNR had consistently lobbied about the case and briefed counsel to appear at the trial to represent Aboriginal interests.²² Wells ordered the lawyer out of court, acquitted Stott, accused all Aboriginal witnesses of lying and strongly condemned the APNR for interference with the justice process.²³ He then dismissed another charge against Stott – this time for bashing to death an Aboriginal woman named Dolly in early 1933, while she was being transported in chains as a witness.²⁴ Priest attended the hearings, wrote a lengthy summary of the facts and sent them to his contacts across the country,²⁵ including to the CPA leadership who published details in the *Workers’ Weekly*.²⁶ In early 1934, Wells was adamant he would resist any attempt by “southern ratbags”²⁷ to influence court proceedings, setting up a clash that would see sparks fly throughout the year.

Agitation for justice in the Borroloola case late in 1933 was Priest’s last Aboriginal rights initiative for six months. The *Northern Voice* ceased publication in December 1933.²⁸ Priest

¹⁹ Jason De Santolo, “Strategic Pathways Through Country and Culture” (Masters thesis, University of Newcastle, 2006), 63-74.

²⁰ “Treatment of Aborigines,” *Northern Standard*, September 1, 1933, 3; “Alleged Brutal Treatment of Abos,” *Northern Standard*, October 13, 3; “Borroloola Assault Case,” *Northern Standard*, November 10, 1933, 6.

²¹ The Borroloola Community, Alessandro Cavadini, Carolyn Strachan, dirs., *Two Laws: An Aboriginal Struggle for Land and Law* (1981; Chicago: Facets DVD, 2007), DVD, 2 hours 10 mins.

²² “Treatment of Aborigines,” *Northern Standard*, September 1, 1933, 3.

²³ “Ordered Out,” *The Sun*, November 8, 1933, 17.

²⁴ “M.C. Stott Reinstated,” *Northern Standard*, April 17, 1934, 11.

²⁵ Priest, *Still Further*, 3-4.

²⁶ “Brutal Murder of Aborigine: Policeman Accused,” *WW*, November 17, 1933, 1, 4.

²⁷ Egan, *Justice All Their Own*, 74.

²⁸ Priest, *Still Further*, 3-4.

was caught up fighting for his rights to join the NAWU early in 1934.²⁹ He worked at Adelaide River outside of Darwin following this³⁰ and then there was an internal dispute which caused the UWM to fold coming into the winter.³¹ He reappeared on the Darwin political scene in June 1934 when the CPA Darwin branch launched a new publication *The Proletarian*, edited by Priest.³² By this time, the CPA was already mobilising across Australia demanding freedom for Aboriginal prisoners held in Darwin.

The church, the courts and the communists

On their summer trips into Arnhem Land, with the help of Fred Gray, the CMS managed to convince both Wonggu, head of the clan at Caledon Bay, and Dhakiyarr, who led the families on Woodah Island, that those responsible for the killings should come to Darwin. Dhakiyarr spoke openly to the missionaries about also killing two white men at Woodah Island earlier in 1933, unemployed “drifters” called Fagan and Traynor, who had raped Djaparri, Dhakiyarr’s wife, and other women. In March 1934 a number of Yolngu, including Dhakiyarr, boarded a boat skippered by Gray and headed to Darwin, having been told they would meet with the “Big Fella boss” of the whites to try and sort out the situation.³³

News broke at the start of April 1934 that this boat would soon arrive in Darwin.³⁴ This was a trigger for the CPA to move once again onto a campaign footing. On April 13, the *Workers’ Weekly* carried a front-page article announcing that the ILD would “organise a mass protest movement” to defend the Yolngu.³⁵ A similar article the following week emphasised the example of “the Scottboro case in the U.S.A., where the workers have held nine negro boys from the electric chair for over three years”.³⁶ This article reported that the Yolngu were immediately arrested when their boat landed in Darwin, provoking extreme distress and

²⁹ “N.A.W.U.,” *Northern Standard*, January 16, 1934, 2; “N.A.W.U.,” *Northern Standard*, January 26, 1934, 2; “N.A.W.U. Special General Meeting,” *Northern Standard*, February 9, 1934, 17.

³⁰ Priest, *Still Further*, 16-17.

³¹ John McMahon, “W.I.R. Scatters,” *Northern Standard*, April 27, 1934, 9; “W.I.R. Matters,” *Northern Standard*, May 1, 1934, 7.

³² “Round About,” *Northern Standard*, June 29, 1934, 11.

³³ Egan, *Justice*, 68.

³⁴ “On Way to Darwin – Caledon Bay Aborigines,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 4, 1934, 13.

³⁵ “Juries Abolished for Aborigines,” *WW*, April 13, 1934, 1.

³⁶ “Terrified Natives Lured to Darwin,” *WW*, April 20, 1934, 2.

fighting with police.³⁷ Fred Gray later testified they had been bashed.³⁸ On April 18, the *Red Leader* reported on a resolution from the “Youth Conference Against War” meeting in Melbourne, denouncing the arrests:

We demand the unconditional liberation of the five aborigines now facing trial in Darwin and of all other aborigines convicted for resisting the brutal treatment of their race. We view with intense feeling the decoying of the five Caledon Bay natives to Darwin under the cloak of an alleged peace mission arranged by missionaries. We demand the right of the aborigines to full and independent national feeling.³⁹

Through April and May, mainstream newspapers printed contributions from public figures in the imperial humanitarian tradition, such as the APNR or church leaders, calling for reform of the northern justice system.⁴⁰ There was a major focus on the question of how court trials of “tribal” Aboriginal people were being conducted and might play out in the case of Dhakiyarr and other Yolngu.⁴¹ The CPA press sought to carve out a distinctly communist perspective in this major national debate, with consistent coverage of the situation in Darwin⁴² and more in-depth analysis in party-controlled journals such as the *Australian Labor Defender*.⁴³

Senior CPA leader Tom Wright made a strident case for large-scale working-class mobilisation to free the prisoners. Wright’s article began by arguing the “history of Australian capitalism is a long record of vicious atrocities against the Native population” and

³⁷ “Blacks Cry with Terror,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 11, 1934, 1.

³⁸ Tom Murray, prod, “Tuckier (Dhakiyarr) v the King and Territory,” *Hindsight*, ABC Radio National, Sydney: July 7 2013, Radio Documentary, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/tuckier-vs.-the-king-and-territory/4760592>.

³⁹ “Youth Conference Protests Against Brutal Treatment of Aborigines,” RL, April 18, 1934, 3.

⁴⁰ For example, AP Elkin, “Black Men & White Law – Changed Court Methods Are Needed,” *The Herald*, May 11, 1934, 6; “Trial of Aborigines – Council of Churches View,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2, 1934, 17.

⁴¹ Charles Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice - Volume 1* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1970), 290-292.

⁴² “Atrocities Against Aborigines Must Cease,” RL, April 18, 1934, 3; “Youth Conference Protests Against Brutal Treatment of Aborigines,” RL, April 18, 1934, 6; “The Week,” RL, April 18, 1934, 9; “Aborigines – Trapped by Treachery,” WW, May 4, 1934, 6; “Official Shuffling and Apologies,” WW, May 4, 1934, 6; “Aborigines,” WW, May 11, 1934, 6; “Aborigines Vanish – Soon Realised Duty to Comrades,” WW, May 18, 1934, 1; “Aborigines – Will No Longer Trust Missionaries,” WW, May 18, 1934, 5.

⁴³ “Defend the Aborigines,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 5-6.

concluded:

The Australian aborigine who dares to resist this criminal treatment is hunted as an outlaw. Those who escape massacre are hauled in chains before the capitalist ‘courts of justice’ and sentenced to death. In this ‘civilising’ process, the missionaries have played a particularly guilty and hypocritical role. The crimes against the aborigines call for vengeance against the capitalist rulers. It is an urgent duty of the Australian working class to wage a struggle to end this ruthless criminal persecution.⁴⁴

These two aspects of Aboriginal oppression highlighted by Wright – the role of missionaries and the role of the courts – were developed in depth by CPA writers in the coming months. A *Workers’ Weekly* article on May 11 article covered both the recent massacre of 19 “New Guinea natives” and the arrest of the Yolngu. It argued Australian authorities were willing to resort to open slaughter to secure their interests, however “imperialism prefers, when possible, to cover its oppression with a legal cloak and saintly hypocrisy”.⁴⁵ CPA analysis of the missionary role and the courts will be considered in turn.

When news of the Yolngu arrests was first announced, Reverend Hubert Warren, a senior CMS official who led the peace party, was being treated to a public celebration in the Melbourne Town Hall alongside Minister Perkins, after a similar “hero’s welcome” in Sydney.⁴⁶ Perkins responded to pointed questions from the press about the arrests with guarantees about the supposed happiness and comfort of the prisoners.⁴⁷ Warren said he was confident “the friendly relations established with the Caledon Bay aborigines by the CMS... would endure”.⁴⁸

In reality, the arrest and abuse of the Yolngu was felt as a deep betrayal that reverberates to this day. In *Dhakiyarr vs the King*, Dhakiyarr’s son said missionaries had never explained the warrior would be arrested or detained:

I’m still asking why the Commonwealth and the missionaries worked together...

⁴⁴ Tom Wright, “Atrocities Against Aborigines Must Cease,” RL, April 18, 1934, 3.

⁴⁵ “Aborigines,” WW, May 11, 1934, 6.

⁴⁶ Egan, *Justice*, 73

⁴⁷ “Prisoners Well Treated,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2, 1934, 17.

⁴⁸ “Prisoners Well Treated”.

[Dhakiyarr spoke] no English, and they treated him there like a dog.... I say to the missionaries, you should have told us straight. You were working ahead of the government... we did not know what was coming behind the missionaries. My blame goes back to the missionaries and the police.⁴⁹

The CPA argued strongly at the time that the Yolngu had been betrayed. An April 20 article, “Terrified Natives Lured to Darwin” said the CMS had “enticed the Natives to Darwin under false pretences”.⁵⁰ A similar article on May 4, “Aborigines – Trapped By Treachery” branded missionaries involved in the peace party “saintly Shysters” and “typical advance agents of capitalist civilisation”.⁵¹ A report on the welcome for the Rev Warren discussed above said: “the Minister for the Interior praised the Rev. Warren... the tricking of the aborigines into the torture of Darwin jail is a ‘wonderful tribute to missionary methods’”.⁵² A 2000 word feature in the *Australian Labor Defender* argued that deployment of the missionaries had been a conscious strategy to ensure Australian imperialism accomplished the goal of bringing the Yolngu under control in the face of militant resistance.⁵³

Throughout this coverage, the CPA was agitating for a defence campaign to free the Yolngu, explicitly modelled on the Scottsboro experience. Active campaigning on the Scottsboro case itself had continued in Australia throughout the summer of 1933-34 as two of the defendants faced a retrial.⁵⁴ The influence of this US-led campaign on the political imagination of the Australian party was given graphic expression on the front cover of the May 1934 edition of the *Australian Labor Defender*. The Australian journal adapted a front cover from the US *Labor Defender*, printed in June 1932. The US version featured a photo of two figures in a protest, one white and one black, and two placards, one calling for freedom for the “NINE NEGRO SCOTTSBORO BOYS” and the other calling for Black and white unity in the fight to free white socialist Thomas Mooney.⁵⁵ The Australian version was a colour illustration of the same scene. The white protestor looked almost identical, but the Black protestor had been

⁴⁹ Tom Murray and Allan Collins, dir, *Dhakiyarr vs the King* (2004; San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), Streaming video, 57 min, Kanopy.

⁵⁰ “Terrified Natives Lured to Darwin,” WW, April 20, 1934, 2.

⁵¹ “Aborigines Trapped by Treachery,” WW, May 4, 1934, 6.

⁵² “Aborigines,” WW, May 11, 1934, 6.

⁵³ “Defend the Aborigines,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 5.

⁵⁴ “Sentenced to Death – American Lynch Justice,” WW, December 15, 1933, 1; “Third Scottsboro Trial,” RL, November 29, 1933, 5.

⁵⁵ Front cover illustration, *Labor Defender*, June 1932.

drawn with Aboriginal, rather than African American features. One placard read “RELEASE NORTH AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES” while the other denounced fascism.⁵⁶ A feature article inside analysed developments that led to the arrest of the Yolngu and argued for the mobilisation of working-class power to win their release, citing the success of the Scottsboro campaign.⁵⁷

In the Scottsboro case, the ILD in the US had made the exclusion of Black people from southern juries a point of agitation outside the court-room and a successful ground for appeal inside.⁵⁸ Now, with the impending trial of the Yolngu, the CPA announced: “The ILD will organise a mass protest movement putting forward the slogan of trial by a jury on which aboriginals sit”.⁵⁹ Minister Perkins had recently introduced a new ordinance allowing for a sitting NT Judge to dispense with a jury in all cases except “an offence punishable by death”, such as murder.⁶⁰ Elkin and the APNR praised the move as a step forward for Aboriginal prisoners, arguing that white citizens in Darwin were so hostile to Aboriginal people, that there could never be a fair trial by jury.⁶¹ In contrast, the CPA condemned the ordinance and argued that rather than restrict decision making to racist judges, Aboriginal people should be allowed on juries to judge their peers.⁶²

In practice, this ordinance had no bearing on any of the cases taken up by the CPA in 1934 because the prisoners in question were charged with the murder. This fact was lost on the CPA, however, which continued to argue the ordinance was part of “plans being made by the government for legally murdering these Aborigines”.⁶³ The *Australian Labor Defender* argued: “instead of allowing the government to abolish the right of trial by jury, we demand that aborigines who can understand their language must be placed on the jury”.⁶⁴ These immediate demands for reform of the trial process that the Yolngu would soon face, sat in

⁵⁶ Front cover illustration, *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934.

⁵⁷ “Defend the Aborigines,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 5-6.

⁵⁸ Andy Lanset, prod., “Scottsboro: A Civil Rights Milestone,” NYPR Archives and Preservation, New York: February 2, 2013, Radio Documentary, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/250323-scottsboro-civil-rights-milestone/>.

⁵⁹ “Juries Abolished for Aborigines,” WW, April 13, 1934, 1.

⁶⁰ Adolphus P. Elkin, “Aboriginal Evidence and Justice in North Australia,” *Oceania* 17 no. 3 (March 1947): 194.

⁶¹ Elkin, “Aboriginal Evidence,” 195.

⁶² “Juries Abolished for Aborigines,” WW, April 13, 1934, 1; “Defend the Aborigines,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 6.

⁶³ “Defend the Aborigines,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 6.

⁶⁴ “Defend the Aborigines,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 6.

creative tension with broader demands coming from CPA-led organisations that rejected the authority of the courts entirely and demanded the immediate release of Aboriginal prisoners.⁶⁵ The courts were argued to be part of the same imperialist apparatus responsible for frontier massacres – both served the goal of subjugation and dispossession.⁶⁶ The campaign to “Free North Australian Aborigines” was presented as an anti-imperialist campaign, an important battle in a broader fight to win self-determination for Aboriginal people. Most often, it was anti-war organisations who emphasised this point in their resolutions.⁶⁷ Both the *Workers’ Weekly* and the *Australian Labor Defender* reinforced the point (originally made by Karl Marx in relation to Ireland as discussed in Chapter One), that working-class struggles for Aboriginal self-determination played a crucial role in challenging the “white chauvinism” that kept white Australian workers ideologically tethered to the ruling class.⁶⁸

Silent on the south – missed opportunities

One aspect of the Scottsboro campaign in the USA was never translated into meaningful theory or practice by the party leadership in Australia. A central rationale for the militant anti-racism on display in the USA was a conscious effort by communists there to unite with Black people in struggle and recruit Black members into the party.⁶⁹ The CPA press often made a point about the success of the US campaign in breaking down racial barriers and the important growth of a Black communist cadre.⁷⁰ As discussed in previous chapters, in Darwin the CPA was at the heart of a multi-racial Unemployed Workers’ Movement,⁷¹ even if party membership remained overwhelmingly white.⁷² There is also some evidence of active

⁶⁵ J. O’Kelly, “War on the Aborigines,” *War! What For?*, June 1934, 88-90.

⁶⁶ “Defend the Aborigines,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 6; “Aborigines,” *WW*, May 11, 1934, 6; J. O’Kelly, “War on the Aborigines,” *War! What For?*, June 1934, 88-90.

⁶⁷ For example, “Youth Conference Protests Against Brutal Treatment of Aborigines,” *RL*, April 18, 1934, 3.

⁶⁸ “White Australia and Whiter Australia,” *WW*, April 27, 1934, 4; “Struggle Against Chauvanism,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 10.

⁶⁹ Charles H. Martin, “The International Labor Defence and Black America,” *Labor History* 26 no. 2 (Spring 1985), 169-171.

⁷⁰ “Against Legal Lynching of Negro Boys by U.S.A. Imperialism,” *WW*, July 31, 1931, 3; “Color Bar Smashed,” *WW*, November 18, 1932, 3.

⁷¹ “U.W.M. Grows,” *WW*, October 30, 1931, 4.

⁷² A list of people on the Executive Committee of the Darwin CPA in the early 1930s was recorded by NT Administrator Weddell in an internal report cited by Julia Martinez. This list includes a few names of activists from prominent “coloured” families in Darwin including J. Cardona and F. Calma, most probably Fortunato Calma, born in the Philippines. See Julia Martinez, “Plural Australia:

CPA engagement with the small, but increasingly well-organised Aboriginal community in Melbourne that will be discussed below. In the central organs of the CPA press, however, there was no effort to relate to the struggles of Aboriginal people in south-east Australia through the campaigning in 1933 or 1934. In Sydney, there is clear evidence of Aboriginal engagement with the 1934 campaign to free Aboriginal prisoners being held in Darwin that was never emphasised or encouraged.⁷³ This failure by the CPA to relate to Aboriginal people in the south-east stifled the development of radical working-class consciousness about continuing colonial oppression in Australia, confining analysis of this oppression to the northern frontier in precisely the way that Moxon had criticised in 1931.⁷⁴ This also contributed to a streak of paternalism predominating in some CPA material, where a radical challenge to Aboriginal oppression was not imagined as a process of self-emancipation across the continent supported by the non-Indigenous working-class, but something bestowed on a far-away “backward” people.⁷⁵ At times in 1934, the CPA press reiterated the bifurcation discussed in Chapter Five, demanding full equality for Aboriginal people “living in civilised centres”, while demands for land and self-determination were restricted to those still living off their lands in northern Australia.⁷⁶ However, even the limited demands for equality in south-east Australia were never seriously raised as part of the broader campaign drive in 1933-34.

There is certainly evidence of continuing contact between both the UWM and CPA cadre in the south-east, even if it is fragmentary and fleeting. For example, during discussion about the major national Council Against War (CAW) conference to be held late in September 1933, the CPA Political Bureau raised the possibility of an Aboriginal speaker addressing the conference and spoke about inviting an ex-soldier to speak in uniform. This could be further evidence of contact with former AAPA members. John Maynard has written about the

Aboriginal and Asian Labour in Tropical White Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940,” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2000), 119. Calma’s nationality was recorded in a notice regarding his application for naturalisation in 1943, three years before his death in Darwin. “Notices,” *The Advertiser*, August 12, 1943; “In Memoriam,” *Northern Standard*, October 13, 1950, 13.

⁷³ For example, La Perouse community leader Tom Foster addressed a major public meeting in August 1934, “Recall of Judge is Demanded – Strong Plea For Aborigines,” *Labor Daily*, August 7, 1934, 5.

⁷⁴ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery,” *WW*, September 24, 1931, 2.

⁷⁵ “Aborigines – Trapped by Treachery,” *WW*, May 4, 1934, 6; “Official Shuffling and Apologies,” *WW*, May 4, 1934, 6.

⁷⁶ “Mr. Nelson Objects – Colored Workers At Darwin,” *WW*, July 20, 1934, 2.

prominent role returned Aboriginal servicemen played in NSW, speaking out for the rights of their people in the 1920s and 30s, after returning home from war to intensifying racism.⁷⁷ Late in 1933, the *Red Leader* apologised for not printing a number of letters, written by readers about “why they had joined the movement”. A letter signed “Aborigine (Sydney)” was amongst those promised for future publication, but it never appeared.⁷⁸ Throughout 1933-34, there was further political action by the unemployed movement at Happy Valley and La Perouse, where we know Aboriginal people were politically engaged.⁷⁹ Indeed, at a major CPA-initiated public meeting demanding freedom for Aboriginal prisoners on 6 August 1934, La Perouse community leader, Tom Foster, was advertised as a speaker with the title “Aborigine”.⁸⁰ His contribution was never emphasised or reported on by the CPA, though we know from a *Labor Daily* report on the meeting he appealed for funds for the ILD.⁸¹

In Dubbo in early 1934, Aboriginal activist, Ted Taylor, had some success campaigning for the Labor Party to support the demands of his people. Chapter Four discussed the growth of political solidarity in Dubbo between unemployed white workers and Aboriginal people in the Depression, expressed both through the UWM⁸² and the local ALP (NSW) branch.⁸³ This branch was loyal to the left-wing socialisation units and contained a number of socialists actively engaged with CPA campaigns, who founded a Dubbo CPA branch in 1935.⁸⁴ One of these was Jack Booth, who recounted to Heather Goodall that Ted Taylor and fellow Aboriginal activist, Tom Peckham, often discussed their demands for abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) and for self-determination in this period including around the campfire in relief work camps.⁸⁵ In December 1933 and January 1934, Taylor

⁷⁷ John Maynard, “The rise of the modern Aboriginal political movement, 1924–39,” in *Serving Our Country: Indigenous Australians, War, Defence and Citizenship*, ed. Joan Beaumont and Allison Cadzow (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018), 79-93.

⁷⁸ “To Correspondents,” RL, December 13, 10.

⁷⁹ “August 1st Activities,” WW, July 14, 1933, 1; Egon Kisch, a visiting anti-fascist activist from Europe whose Australian speaking tour from November 1934 was organised by the CPA, was introduced to Aboriginal people at La Perouse. Egon Kisch, *Australian Landfall* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1969), 180-181.

⁸⁰ “Aboriginal Defence,” WW, August 3, 1934, 5.

⁸¹ “Recall of Judge is Demanded – Strong Plea For Aborigines,” *Labor Daily*, August 7, 1934, 5.

⁸² R.W., “Aborigines and the Dole – Dubbo Unemployed,” WW, July 1, 1932, 4.

⁸³ “Branch Reports – Dubbo,” *Labor Daily*, June 25, 1932, 10.

⁸⁴ Heather Goodall, “Interview with Jack Booth,” May 21, 1981, 25-26, 51.

⁸⁵ Goodall, “Interview with Jack Booth,” 41-42. Tom Peckham was the father of the more well-known Aboriginal leader Ray Peckham, who joined the CPA in the 1950s and was very active in both the

addressed the Dubbo ALP (NSW) branch about hardships on the local mission.⁸⁶ Taylor's initiative bore immediate fruit when Dubbo branch leader, T.V. Ryan, "successfully moved for the abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board, and for the granting of full citizens' rights to aborigines" at a Country Labor conference later in January.⁸⁷

This remarkably unequivocal policy was then moved by Ryan and carried as ALP (NSW) policy at the state-wide conference held at Trades Hall in April 1934.⁸⁸ These developments have not been noted by any previous history of NSW Aboriginal politics and would be a very interesting focus for future investigation. Inclusion of demands to abolish the NSW APB in the mass meetings and demonstrations initiated by the CPA in 1934 would have added a powerful political dynamic, potentially involving more Aboriginal people in joint campaigning and forcing more immediate consideration by workers in NSW of the racism of the society they moved through every day.

In Melbourne, Heather Goodall argues that there were "some close personal connections" between Aboriginal activists and members of the CPA in this period,⁸⁹ and there is definitely clear evidence of collaboration. Prominent Aboriginal activist Margaret Tucker, removed from Cummeragunja as a child, wrote in her autobiography about staying with CPA member George Franks and his wife in Melbourne in the early 1930s.⁹⁰ In a hand-written draft of her autobiography, Tucker said that communists in Melbourne, "took me in long before I met my Aboriginal friends in Fitzroy".⁹¹ In *Lousy Little Sixpence*, Tucker discussed making contributions to CPA meetings and also filming a newsreel in 1935, calling for Aboriginal

Aboriginal rights and union movements. Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 277.

⁸⁶ "Dubbo ALP – Lack of Enthusiasm – Alleged Bad Treatment of Aborigines," *National Advocate*, December 5, 1933, 3; "Dubbo ALP Branch – Aborigines and Food Relief – Motion of Unfair Treatment," *National Advocate*, January 10, 1934, 3; "Branch Reports – Dubbo," *Labor Daily*, January 11, 1934, 8.

⁸⁷ "Labor's Policy is Re-affirmed by Country Parley," *Labor Daily*, January 29, 1934, 5.

⁸⁸ "N.S.W. Labor Party's Annual Conference: Comprehensive Federal Election Programme is Endorsed," *Australian Worker*, April 4, 1934, 18; "Labor Seeks Tariff 'Codes' – State Body Sets New Policy," *Daily Telegraph*, April 2, 1934, 7.

⁸⁹ Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909-1939," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 1982), 287-288.

⁹⁰ Jennifer Jones, "The Black Communist: the contested memory of Margaret Tucker," *Hecate* 26 no. 2 (2000): 136-137.

⁹¹ Jennifer Jones argues that these passages were altered for publication by a close anti-Communist associate, to mask the contribution of Communists to Tucker's political development. Jones, "The Black Communist," 136-139.

equality, on the initiative of the CPA.⁹²

The pro-Aboriginal mobilisation across the labour movement from August 1933 had an influence on encouraging renewed self-organisation by Aboriginal activists. William Cooper, leader of the Australian Aborigines League (AAL) established in 1934, publicly initiated his famous petition demanding Aboriginal representation in Federal Parliament in September 1933, at the height of the campaign against the “punitive expedition”. Cooper had moved from Cummeragunja to Melbourne earlier in 1933 due to his ineligibility to receive the Aged Pension while residing on a NSW APB reserve.⁹³ The *Labor Daily* reported that “sympathy towards the Australian aborigines” displayed through the recent campaign had encouraged Cooper to initiate the petition drive.⁹⁴ Later, Cooper argued that the movement in support of Dhakiyarr marked the time when “the sun of the Aborigines cause” started to rise, spurring on his campaigning.⁹⁵

Throughout 1934, Aboriginal activists in Melbourne worked closely with the labour movement. The newspaper *Labor Call*, organ of the Victorian ALP, advertised a public meeting to discuss conditions faced by Aboriginal people on Victorian reserves in January 1934.⁹⁶ In June 1934, the *Labor Call* also reported that Aboriginal speakers addressed an anti-war women’s conference that resolved to protest recent NT death sentences, demanding “that the aborigines be free to live within their own territory without interference”.⁹⁷ This conference was hosted by the Victorian CAW.⁹⁸ Three months later, both the *Labor Call* and the CPA’s *Working Woman* printed a long article by Melbourne-based Aboriginal leader Anna Morgan, detailing abuse suffered by Kooris under the Protection Board.⁹⁹ The article has a clear anti-colonial analysis, locating contemporary oppression in an ongoing process of

⁹² Alec Morgan, dir, *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1982; San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), Streaming video, 54 min, Kanopy.

⁹³ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 186.

⁹⁴ “Move to Elect Abo. As M.H.R. – Whites’ Harshness in N.T.,” *Labor Daily*, September 16, 1933, 9.

⁹⁵ William Cooper, “To the Minister for the Interior, Thomas Patterson, 31 October 1936,” in *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines’ League*, ed. Andrew Markus and Bain Attwood (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), 54.

⁹⁶ “Topical,” *Labor Call*, January 11, 1934, 9.

⁹⁷ “Women’s Anti-War Conference,” *Labor Call*, June 14, 1934, 10.

⁹⁸ “Pledge to Build Anti-War Movement,” *Working Woman*, July 1934, 4.

⁹⁹ Anna Morgan, “Under the Black Flag – An Aborigine Speaks Out,” *Labor Call*, September 20, 1934, 3; Anna Morgan, “Aboriginal Woman Write of Injustice Under the ‘Black Flag’,” *Working Woman*, October 1934, 10.

dispossession. Morgan's statement "at last we raise a feeble protest and dare to ask for better conditions and the abolition of the 'Black Flag' [of the Protection Board]", indicates a new movement for change.¹⁰⁰ In November 1934, William Cooper addressed an ALP women's conference discussing the conditions of his people during a session that passed resolutions in support of the NT prisoners.¹⁰¹

Workers' Voice, the CPA newspaper printed by the Melbourne branch, featured two front page articles on the campaign against the "punitive expedition" during its first month of publication in September 1933.¹⁰² Unfortunately, the archived collection in the Victorian State Library is missing editions from the final months of 1933 and all of 1934. This makes it difficult to assess the level of enthusiasm in the Melbourne CPA branch leadership for engagement with local Aboriginal activists at this time. Later in the 1930s, there is evidence of a clear divergence in perspective relating to Aboriginal struggles in south-eastern Australia between the Sydney and Melbourne branch. Melbourne's *Workers' Voice* carried extensive coverage of local Aboriginal struggles in 1938¹⁰³ and 1939, including reports of widespread trade union support for the Cummeragunja strike in 1939.¹⁰⁴ Despite the fact that the struggle of Cummeragunja residents was against the NSW Aborigines Protection Board, the central CPA organ the *Workers' Weekly*, based in Sydney, did not cover the dispute with the same enthusiasm. Tom Wright in fact intervened from Sydney to try and curb widespread Melbourne CPA participation in the Cummeragunja campaign,¹⁰⁵ arguing that "half-castes" should not be considered Aboriginal. Wright argued that in so-called "detribalised" areas,

¹⁰⁰ Morgan, "Under the Black Flag".

¹⁰¹ "Labor Women in Conference," *Labor Call*, November 29, 1934, 11.

¹⁰² *Workers' Voice*, September 1, 1933; "Who is to Blame for N.T. Murders," *Workers' Voice*, September 8, 1933, 1; "Federal Government Persists in Massacre Plan," *Workers' Voice*, September 15, 1933, 1.

¹⁰³ For example, "Mass Meeting to Support Aborigines Demands for Full Citizens' Rights," *Workers' Voice*, May 4, 1938, 4; "Aborigines' Victory at Framlingham," *Workers' Voice*, May 25, 1934, 3; "Government Seizes Aborigines' Wages," *Workers' Voice*, July 1937, 3.

¹⁰⁴ "Big Meeting to Expose Aborigines Scandal," *Workers' Voice*, February 8, 1939, 1; "Applauds Stand by Aborigines: Visitor Shocked," *Workers' Voice*, February 18, 1939, 4; "Aborigines Fight – Ask Help of Key Unions in Struggle," *Workers' Voice*, March 8, 1939, 1; "Aboriginal Refugees Starving," *Workers' Voice*, May 3, 1939, 4.

¹⁰⁵ There were also very serious and complex divisions in broader Aboriginal rights movement over the Cummeragunja strike. Bill Ferguson was hostile to the strike and so were many of his supporters based in Sydney. See Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in NSW," 400-407; Jack Horner, *Bill Ferguson: Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom* (Canberra: J. Horner, 1994), 111-112. The role of the CPA in the strike would be a very fruitful area for future research.

demands should only be for strict equality,¹⁰⁶ against the aspirations of Cummeragunja strikers for self-determination.¹⁰⁷

Wright's biographer, Audrey Johnson, argued that Wright's ideas on caste were heavily influenced by the anthropologist Olive Pink, whom he did not meet until 1938.¹⁰⁸ However, source material discussed above suggests there was already some divergence in approach between Sydney and Melbourne CPA branches to the struggles of local Aboriginal people in 1934. The failure of the central CPA leadership to raise the issue of Aboriginal oppression in south-east Australia meant that although the CPA as a whole ran important campaigns in 1933-34 that challenged the anti-Aboriginal racism of the Australian mainstream, they also reinforced one aspect of this racism that Moxon had criticised in 1931 when he argued:

It is not sufficient to say 'Poor abos' or imagine that they are a 'low' people living in central Australia, right here in New South Wales... and all states... there are the problems of the aborigines to be taken up and fought for by the Australian workers.¹⁰⁹

Campaigning for the "Fitzmaurice River Natives"

The CPA campaign went up a gear at the end of May 1934. There was a demonstration in the Domain in Sydney¹¹⁰ and a large drive for protest resolutions¹¹¹ after Judge Wells ordered a mass execution of Aboriginal prisoners on May 29.¹¹² The eight men became known in the press as the "Fitzmaurice River Natives",¹¹³ from country approximately 400 kilometres south-west of Darwin where Murrinh-patha was the predominant language.¹¹⁴ Anthropologist

¹⁰⁶ Tom Wright, Letter to the Editor: 'The Advocate', 25 October 1939, Audrey Johnson Papers, Research Notes on Tom Wright and Aborigines, AU NBAC N162-379.; "NSW Labor Leader on Aborigines," *The Guardian*, September 2, 1939, 2. During 1939 the newspaper produced by the Melbourne CPA branch had been renamed *The Guardian*.

¹⁰⁷ "Huge Public Meeting Promises to Support Aborigines," *The Guardian*, August 23, 1939, 1, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Audrey Johnson, "Tom Wright and Olive Pink," *The Olive Pink Society Bulletin*, 6, no. 2 (December 1994), 4.

¹⁰⁹ H.J.M., "Massacre! Rape! Slavery! The 'White Man's Burden' in White Australia," RL, September 11, 3.

¹¹⁰ "International Solidarity Day," WW, June 8, 1934, 6.

¹¹¹ "Save Aborigines from Judicial Murder," RL, June 27, 1.

¹¹² "The Eight Aborigines," WW, June 15, 1934, 1.

¹¹³ "Special Native Court Urged," *The Herald*, June 13, 1934, 10.

¹¹⁴ Andrew McWilliam, "Absence and plenitude, appropriating the Fitzmaurice River frontier" in *Dislocating the Frontier - Essaying the Mystique of the Outback*, ed. Deborah Bird Rose and Richard Davis (Canberra: ANU Press, 2005), 184-185.

Andrew McWilliam compiled the names of the men from court reports and additional research: Tiger (alias Tappin, brother of the even more notorious Namarluk), Barney (Waddawurry), Chugulla, Chalmar, Fryingpan (otherwise Chiniman), Alligator (or Woombin, or Coonbook), Maru (otherwise Leon) and Harry (or Walung).¹¹⁵ The men had been convicted of the murder of two white prospectors, Alfred Koch and Stephen Arinski, who had gone missing in 1932 after setting out to try their luck on the river. Their remains were never found.¹¹⁶ The capture of the Aboriginal men by a police party led by Mounted Constable Langton had been celebrated in the national press over the previous summer and was certainly an extraordinary operation.¹¹⁷ Langton's party were on patrol for four months from October 1933, before successfully reaching Darwin with eight accused and five witnesses, all chained together.¹¹⁸ To gather intelligence and find suspects, Langton reportedly launched a dozen dawn raids on Aboriginal camps: "On one occasion he had two entire tribes in handcuffs and did not let them free until he quitted their territory".¹¹⁹

The only substantial historical account of the alleged murders and Langton's operation was written in popular books by best-selling author, Ion Idriess.¹²⁰ Idriess was a fierce Australian nationalist who joined Mounted Police patrols in the Kimberly and NT in the early 1930s and wrote romanticised accounts of frontier conflict, insisting on their historical accuracy.¹²¹ Idriess claimed that the killing of Koch and Arinski was an act of resistance warfare led by the warrior "Tiger".¹²² While descendants of these warriors today are proud of the armed resistance mounted by their ancestors into the 1930s, they deny that Koch and Arinski were murdered, saying they mostly likely perished in the harsh country.¹²³

¹¹⁵ McWilliam, "Absence and plenitude", 185.

¹¹⁶ Ivory, "Kunmanggur," 180.

¹¹⁷ "Bringing in 8 Tribesmen for Murder – Another Triumph for N.T. Police," *The Herald*, December 19, 1933, 17; "Constable Pursues Native Murderers for Three Months – Brings Back Eight to Darwin," *The Herald*, January 15, 1934, 5; "Arrest of Aborigines – Constable's Hardships on Trail," *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 17, 1934, 6.

¹¹⁸ "Territory Murders – Constable Solves Mystery – Returns with Eight Prisoners," *Kalgoorlie Miner*, January 16, 1934, 5.

¹¹⁹ "Territory Murders – Constable Solves Mystery – Returns with Eight Prisoners".

¹²⁰ Ion Idriess, *Namarluk: King of the Wilds* (Sydney: ETT Imprint, 2016), First published 1941; Ion Idriess, *Man Tracks* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1949), First published 1935; Contemporary reviews of *Man Tracks* described Idriess as the most widely read author in Australia, R.N.C. "Ion Idriess Writes a Book of Thrills," *Sunday Mail*, April 7, 1935, 6.

¹²¹ "Stirring – In Desert Wastes – On Patrol," *The Sun*, January 31, 1935, 23.

¹²² Idriess, *Namarluk*, 17-20, 50, 65-67.

¹²³ Bill Ivory, "Kunmanggur, Legend and Leadership: A Study of Indigenous Leadership and Succession Focussing on the Northwest Region of the Northern Territory of Australia" (PhD diss., Charles Darwin University, 2009), 179-181.

Tiger had extensive experience working on stations and he gave evidence in English in his own defence, arguing that he had co-operated completely with Langton's investigation.¹²⁴ He explained he had, in fact, approached the manager of Bradshaw station with some items he had found left behind in a camp belonging to the missing men long before Langdon's patrol. Tiger wanted the manager called as a witness, something that never took place. He said the story from supposed witnesses to the murder were "lies" told because they were "frightened by the police". The *Northern Standard* editorialised that Tiger had withstood cross-examination while the witnesses against him often gave contradictory evidence and "went off the rails" when questioned. Despite this, all eight of the accused were found guilty.¹²⁵

The Attorney-General, on instructions from Cabinet, had already intervened in numerous recent trials to commute mandatory death sentences imposed by the Darwin court, in favour of life imprisonment.¹²⁶ Judge Wells rejected an application to utilise a power recently granted by Minister Perkins, allowing for discretion to not impose the death penalty for capital offences.¹²⁷ Wells said that "retributive justice was all the savage could understand" and sentenced all eight men to hang.¹²⁸ The *Workers' Weekly* condemned Wells' judgement as, "one of the most cold blooded actions of Australian imperialism in recent years" and called for urgent action:

The Australian workers can and must stop the murder of the eight aboriginals by mass protests and demonstrations! Remember that imperialism has the blood of hundreds of thousands of native Australians on its filthy claws, and that the time has come when the proletariat must break short this long list of the victims of imperialism. Send protest deputations, letters and telegrams to Mr Perkins, Minister for the Interior!¹²⁹

The Victorian CAW passed a resolution of protest on the very day Wells sentenced the

¹²⁴ Ivory, "Kunmanggur," 172; "The Fitzmaurice River Murders," *Northern Standard*, June 1, 1934, 10.

¹²⁵ "The Fitzmaurice River Murder Case," *Northern Standard*, May 29, 1934, 3.

¹²⁶ Rowley, *Destruction*, 291; Elkin, "Aboriginal Evidence," 200.

¹²⁷ "The Fitzmaurice River Murders," *Northern Standard*, June 1, 1934, 10.

¹²⁸ "Natives on Trial," *The Age*, May 31, 1934, 12.

¹²⁹ "Aborigines Sentenced to Death – Natives Being Exterminated," WW, June 8, 1934, 6.

prisoners to hang, May 30 1934.¹³⁰ Their telegram to Perkins survives in an Interior Ministry file in the National Archives full of protest resolutions against Wells' sentences¹³¹ and is the earliest on record:

We demand that the sentence should not be carried out, that the prisoners be released at once, and that efforts should be made to keep the white prospectors out of that territory. We condemn the uncivilised whites who have so often provoked strife, in attempting to foist upon the aborigines the white man's ethics of human life. We condemn the Government for framing a law that permits aborigines to be sentenced to death.¹³²

A letter of protest signed by ILD national officials was also sent to Perkins almost immediately after the sentence¹³³ and on June 3, the ILD took their demands to the streets in Sydney. There had already been plans for a major ILD demonstration to mark "International Solidarity Day"¹³⁴ highlighting a range of cases being championed by the ILD across the world, including the Scottsboro case. The situation facing Aboriginal prisoners in Northern Australia now became the main focus.¹³⁵ A resolution put to the crowd and reportedly "carried unanimously", demanded Minister Perkins grant a retrial for the "Fitzmaurice River natives" and asserted their right "to select their own counsel for defence".¹³⁶

The scale of coverage in the CPA press, and the protest resolutions that survive in the Department of the Interior file, show that CPA campaigning was more sustained and expansive than their efforts against the "punitive expedition" in September 1933. Andrew Markus analysed this file and estimated:

Of 147 letters received 35 letters were sent by individuals and 112 by organisations.

¹³⁰ Victorian Council Against War, Letter to the Minister for the Interior, 30 May 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹³¹ Department of the Interior. Sentence imposed on Fitzmaurice River Aborigines for murder of two white men - Koch and Arinsky. Protest re, Department of the Interior File, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹³² Victorian Council Against War, Letter to the Minister for the Interior," 30 May 1934.

¹³³ F.G. Bateman, ILD National Secretary, Telegram to Minister for Interior, undated circa June 1, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹³⁴ "W.I.R. Launches Appeal," WW, May 18, 1934, 6.

¹³⁵ "International Solidarity Day," WW, June 8, 1934, 6.

¹³⁶ "International Solidarity Day".

Of the letters from organisations 25 were from church bodies; 13 from organisations especially concerned with the welfare of Aborigines... 10 from ALP branches; 9 from trade union branches; 45 *from communist front organisations or organisations in which communists were prominent*, such as the International Labor Defence, the Council Against War and the Workers' International Relief, with branches of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and other unemployed most prominent, accounting for 34 of the 45 letters [my emphasis].¹³⁷

This collection is not a complete record of the campaign. The *Red Leader* claimed “hundreds”¹³⁸ of protest resolutions were passed by “working-class and other sympathetic organisations” and there are specific examples of resolutions published in the *Workers' Weekly* that are not in this file.¹³⁹

As with the 1933 campaign, there was a clear political division between the demands coming from radical workers, and those from imperial humanitarian organisations, whose more modest reform proposals were also often followed by ALP branches. Whereas the latter group focused primarily on a call for commutation of the death sentences¹⁴⁰ and sometimes for further reforms to the legal system,¹⁴¹ many workers' organisations openly rejected the legitimacy of the trial that had been presided over by Wells and called for immediate freedom,¹⁴² or for the annulment of Wells' sentences and retrial under more favourable judicial conditions.¹⁴³

A number of the imperial humanitarian letters sent to Perkins in June, requesting commutation of the death sentences, expressed an explicit support for Perkins' current

¹³⁷ Andrew Markus, “Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement,” in *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 145. My emphasis.

¹³⁸ “Demand New Trial For Aborigines!,” RL, July 4, 1934, 11.

¹³⁹ “Against Sentences on Aborigines,” WW, July 6, 1934, 2.

¹⁴⁰ For example, Council of Churches in NSW, Letter to the Interior Minister, June 6, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229 and St Kilda Branch of the ALP, Letter to the Interior Minister, June 16, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁴¹ Victorian Aboriginal Group, Letter to the Interior Minister, June 11, 1934. NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁴² For example, “we request the eight natives be unconditionally released and allowed to return, unmolested, to their people,” Abermain branch of Workers' International Relief, Letter to the Interior Minister, 23 June, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Women's Section of the Stockton Unemployed and Relief Workers, Letter to Interior Minister, 20 June, 1934. NAA: A1 1936/1229.

approach and demonstrated an expectation that commutation of the death sentences would take place as a matter of course, due to recent precedents.¹⁴⁴ On June 13, Elkin probed the Minister on progress in the Fitzmaurice River matter, citing a belief the Minister had an “ardent desire to make the inter-racial conditions in the North more equitable and just”,¹⁴⁵ a position shared by organisations like the Aborigines Friends Association¹⁴⁶ and the Council of Churches in NSW, which said that “in [Perkins’] hands, a change for the better has occurred”.¹⁴⁷ But to the consternation of many, an announcement to this effect was not forthcoming for four weeks, suggesting a political impasse within the government over the question.

It was not until June 28, 1934, that Perkins’ office finally began communicating that a decision had been taken to commute the death sentences.¹⁴⁸ The ILD argued that the “Fitzmaurice River natives” had been “saved from the gallows” by a “wave of mass protest”, but condemned life imprisonment as “another way” of achieving the same goal as hanging, and pressed supporters to continue protests.¹⁴⁹ While many imperial humanitarians sent letters of thanks to Minister Perkins,¹⁵⁰ organisations influenced by communists convened specifically to make it clear they would continue to fight for justice.¹⁵¹ Some pressed for immediate freedom.¹⁵² More typical were resolutions influenced by the ILD campaign for a new trial. For example, the St George District Unemployed Association wrote:

Your reply 29th June... does not meet with our satisfaction. What we asked was that these human beings be given another trial under a different judge, and that they be allowed to appoint and select their own means of defence. We think that the attitude

¹⁴⁴ For example, the NSW Council of Churches wrote to the Interior Minister on June 6, “we can appeal to you with confidence that in the present case the death sentence, at any rate, will not be carried out”. NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁴⁵ Adolphus P Elkin to Minister Perkins, June 13, 1934, Personal archives of Professor A P Elkin, USYD, P130, Series 12, Item 145.

¹⁴⁶ Aborigines’ Friends Association, Letter to Minister for the Interior, June 11, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁴⁷ NSW Council of Churches, Letter to Minister for the Interior, June 6, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁴⁸ For example, H.C. Brown, Secretary Interior Ministry, Letter to Rev. W. Cooper, President, Council of Churches NSW, June 28, 1934. NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁴⁹ Kylie Tennant, “Aborigines Persecuted,” *Australian Labor Defender*, July 1934, 6.

¹⁵⁰ For example, A.N. Brown, Hon. Sec. The Victorian Aboriginal Group, Letter to Minister Perkins, June 29, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁵¹ For example, Thornleigh Relief Workers, Letter to Minister Perkins, July 7, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁵² Belmont Relief Workers’ Council, Letter to Minister Perkins, July 23, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

of just commuting the sentences to imprisonment is only one of sidetracking the right of a just trial of these men.¹⁵³

A model resolution, proposed in the *Red Leader* on July 4, demanded a new trial, the removal of Wells and: “Full national rights for Aborigines tribes – including sovereignty of their tribal lands and the right to deal with whites and Aborigines according to their own laws and customs”.¹⁵⁴ Moxon’s 1931 program had called for “independent Aboriginal republics”,¹⁵⁵ a demand now effectively abandoned by the CPA, one that envisioned the creation of a new state apparatus controlled by Aboriginal people. The “sovereignty” demand, in contrast, recognised a system of law based in existing forms of Aboriginal social organisation currently in conflict with the Australian state.¹⁵⁶ This slogan was far more in tune with Aboriginal aspirations and anticipated the calls for “sovereignty” from the radical Aboriginal rights movement from the 1970s.¹⁵⁷

Alliances and tensions

Early in July 1934, the CPA began to advertise a major ILD protest meeting against the sentences imposed in the Fitzmaurice River case, to be held in the Kings Hall in Hunter St, Sydney on August 6.¹⁵⁸ As it turned out, the meeting took place on the same day that Dhakiyarr was sentenced to death by Judge Wells and this development came to dominate

¹⁵³ St George District Unemployed Association (Rockdale Branch) to Minister Perkins, July 18, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁵⁴ “Demand New Trial for Aborigines,” RL, July 4, 1934, 11.

¹⁵⁵ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery,” WW, September 24, 1931, 2.

¹⁵⁶ Dhakiyarr’s descendants make it clear the warrior was defending the law of his people in Murray and Collins, dir, *Dhakiyarr vs The King*. The similar aims of Tiger and his famous brother Namarluk are discussed in Ivory, “Kunmanggur, Legend and Leadership”, 169-188

¹⁵⁷ There is a thorough discussion of the relationship between the Black Power movement that grew from the late 1960s and the demand for sovereignty in Gary Foley, Edwina Howell and Andrew Shapp eds., *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State*, 1st Ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2014). Press reports from the 1920s also include references to claims to “sovereignty” by Aboriginal leaders in NSW that may have influenced the CPA, including Joe Anderson from Salt Pan creek, “The Abo and the Oyster,” *The Truth*, February 14, 1926, 16; Paul Daley, “Sovereignty never ceded: how two Indigenous elders changed Canberra’s big day,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2017/may/07/sovereignty-never-ceded-how-two-indigenous-elders-changed-canberras-big-day>.

¹⁵⁸ “Rally to the Aborigines Defence – Sydney Protest Meeting,” RL, July 11, 1934, 7.

proceedings.¹⁵⁹ This protest demonstrated that the ILD had managed, through the campaign for the “Fitzmaurice River natives”, to establish a broad enough base of support beyond the ranks of the CPA to offer credible leadership for the entire campaign. Elkin was on the advertised platform, representing the APNR, along with famous author Mary Gilmore and John J Moloney, an Aboriginal rights campaigner from the Hunter region who was one of the few white people to actively support the AAPA.¹⁶⁰ There were also numerous clergymen advertised, as well as Ruby Duncan from the Housewives Association¹⁶¹ and an Aboriginal speaker, Tom Foster from La Perouse.¹⁶² Also listed was Michael Sawtell, a lynchpin in this alliance between radical workers and imperial humanitarians. The remainder of this chapter will analyse the expanding political base of the ILD in 1934.

A thaw in anti-Labor sectarianism had been decisive for the success of the CAWs in 1933 (discussed in Chapter Six). The ILD achieved even greater success in 1934, with a thorough repudiation of the sectarianism that had plagued CPA activity through the Depression.¹⁶³ This did not mean the party softened criticisms of Labor politicians. The NT Labor member in Federal Parliament, Harold Nelson, spoke prominently in defence of McColl and Wells throughout the crisis,¹⁶⁴ and was roundly attacked in the *Workers' Weekly*, which announced that the Darwin CPA would stand against him in the upcoming elections on an anti-racist platform.¹⁶⁵ The *Australian Labor Defender* emphasised the important role played by the ALP leadership in bolstering white chauvinism and facilitating Aboriginal oppression.¹⁶⁶ What shifted in 1934, however, was a renewed CPA appreciation of the possibility and

¹⁵⁹ In references to this meeting in existing works of history, there is often a mistaken assumption that the event was called directly in response to the Dhakiyarr verdict. For example, Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, *Radical Sydney: Places, portraits and unruly episodes* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 208; Reynolds, *Whispering*, 211; In Kylie Tennant’s recollection, learning of Dhakiyarr’s sentence prompted her to initiate the meeting. Kylie Tennant, *The Missing Heir: The Autobiography of Kylie Tennant* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 113-113.

¹⁶⁰ John Maynard, “John J. Moloney: The Voice of the North,” in *Radical Newcastle*, ed. James Bennett, Nancy Cushing and Erik Eklund (Sydney: NewSouth Press, 2015), 94-105.

¹⁶¹ Ruby Duncan is described as an “Aboriginal leader” in Irving and Cahill, *Radical Sydney*, 209. However, no evidence is supplied to demonstrate Ruby Duncan was Aboriginal and contemporaneous press reports identify Ruby Duncan as a spokesperson for the Housewives Association. See, “To Make Good Wives. Housewives’ Association to Establish New Home Training Centre,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 12, 1934, 22; “Housewives’ Association,” *Daily Telegraph*, November 3, 1934, 10.

¹⁶² “Public Meeting – Organised by the International Labor Defence,” RL, August 1, 1934, 4.

¹⁶³ “Struggles of the Unemployed,” RL, April 11, 1934, 2.

¹⁶⁴ Egan, *Justice*, 81.

¹⁶⁵ “Mr Nelson Objects – Coloured Workers’ at Darwin,” WW, July 10, 1934, 2.

¹⁶⁶ “Struggle Against Chauvanism,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 10.

importance of winning rank-and-file Labor activists to anti-racist campaigning. Use of the term “social fascist” dropped away and the party did serious work trying to bring Labor Party branches into activity.¹⁶⁷

One of the best examples of the success of this approach was the recruitment of left-wing Labor leader, Albert Thompson, to a central position in the ILD. Thompson had been a key organiser of the socialisation units, the mass socialist movement within Labor, which by late in 1933 had been decisively defeated by ALP (NSW) leader Jack Lang’s party machine.¹⁶⁸ Thompson accepted an invitation from the NSW CAW executive in early 1934 to chair a major demonstration in the Domain on February 25 as a representative of the CAW.¹⁶⁹ The rally was called in opposition to a “disloyal organisations” bill, proposed by the conservative Stevens government in NSW,¹⁷⁰ explicitly designed to smash the CPA.¹⁷¹ Police attacked the demonstration and arrested nine people, citing a recent regulation which prohibited collection of funds in the Domain without permission.¹⁷² This led to further Domain demonstrations organised in the name of the ILD, and pamphlet sales, in defiance of the ban. A particularly brutal police attack on March 11 saw Selina Moroney, president of the Thornleigh branch of the ALP (NSW) and executive member of the NSW CAW, hospitalised with a head injury.¹⁷³ Left-wing ALP (NSW) Senator, Arthur Rae, emphasised that “the majority of speakers” were from the Labor Party in his account of this attack.¹⁷⁴ The *Workers’ Weekly* claimed thousands of Labor members were participating in the regular ILD demonstrations, routinely chaired by Thompson.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁷ From the first national ILD conference in August 1933, the organisation emphasised the importance of participation by ALP branches and ALP led unions. See, “National Conference Report,” *Australian Labor Defender*, October 1933, 6.

¹⁶⁸ Nick Martin, “‘Bucking the Machine’: Clarrie Martin and the NSW Socialisation Units 1929-35,” *Labour History*, 93 (November 2007): 193.

¹⁶⁹ W.H. Nugent for the NSWCAW, Letter to Arthur Thompson, Albert William Thompson – papers, 1922-1962, ML SLNSW, MLMSS 727, Box 7.

¹⁷⁰ “Proposed Bills,” *Western Herald*, 7 July, 1933, 2.

¹⁷¹ “Big Domain Rally Against ‘Disloyal Organisations’ Bill,” WW, 15 September, 1933, 1.

¹⁷² “Nine Workers Arrested,” WW, March 2, 1934, 1.

¹⁷³ “Another Protest Meeting Attacked – Woman Brutally Assaulted,” WW, March 16, 1934, 1.

¹⁷⁴ Arthur Rae, Statement Regarding Domain Meeting, March 11, 1934, Albert William Thompson – papers, 1922-1962, ML SLNSW, MLMSS 727, Box 7.

¹⁷⁵ “Another Protest Meeting Attacked – Woman Brutally Assaulted,” WW, March 16, 1934, 1.

Thompson later helped to found and lead the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship (CAC), which included both Aboriginal and white activists in Sydney, from 1938.¹⁷⁶ Thompson was listed as a representative of the ILD at early CAC meetings,¹⁷⁷ where he worked in close alliance with Michael Sawtell.¹⁷⁸ Sawtell had also been an enthusiastic supporter of the socialisation units.¹⁷⁹ While Sawtell already had a reputation for public commentary on Aboriginal issues that developed in the 1920s,¹⁸⁰ participation in the ILD campaigns in 1934 represents the first efforts taken by both men to actively campaign for Aboriginal rights.

Michael Sawtell was regarded as a leading labour movement intellectual and an “expert” on Aboriginal people due to his extensive experience travelling in central and northern Australia.¹⁸¹ Initially supportive of the “Protection” system,¹⁸² Sawtell was very enthusiastic about Moxon’s articles in 1931,¹⁸³ and began to imagine a more profound struggle for liberation. The Political Committee of the CPA approached Sawtell for advice during the campaign against the punitive expedition in September 1933.¹⁸⁴ Sawtell wrote a number of articles for the CPA-controlled press in 1934, articulating some of the creative concepts Karl Marx had also experimented with late in his life about the connections between subsistence societies based on communal social relations and global socialist revolution. Sawtell argued that the so-called “primitive communism” of Aboriginal people living on their lands was “a system from which students of modern Communism might well learn”.¹⁸⁵ He praised the responsibilities to both kin and animals built into Aboriginal social organisation and lamented the destruction of their society by capitalism. Against hegemonic conceptions of Aboriginal culture as static and dying, Sawtell argued this communal culture “could be developed at an

¹⁷⁶ Jack Horner, *Bill Ferguson, Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom: A Biography* (Canberra, J. Horner, 1994), 108-109; Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, Meeting Minutes, 1938, Papers of Joan Kingsley-Strack, 1908-1978, NLA, MS 9551, 8.3

¹⁷⁷ Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, Meeting Minutes, 1938, NAA, Papers of Joan Kingsley-Strack, 1908-1978, NLA, MS 9551, 8.3

¹⁷⁸ Victoria Haskins, *One Bright Spot* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 172-173.

¹⁷⁹ Sawtell was listed as a keynote speaker for events held by the Socialisation Units. For example, Waverly Socialisation Units Handbill, Albert William Thompson – papers, 1922-1962. ML SLNSW, MLMSS 727, Box 6.

¹⁸⁰ “Australia’s Abos,” *Labor Daily*, May 13, 1929, 7.

¹⁸¹ “Mr Sawtell on Psychology,” *Labor Daily*, March 20, 1929, 4; “Henry Lawson Lecture,” *Labor Daily*, June 29, 1929, 7; “Our Duty to Natives,” *Labor Daily*, May 21, 1929, 6; “Broadcasting Today 2UW,” *Labor Daily*, January 27, 1930, 7.

¹⁸² “Our Abo. ‘Niggers’,” *Labor Daily*, November 29, 1928, 4

¹⁸³ Michael Sawtell, “Aboriginals, An Appreciation: To the Editor,” WW, September 18, 1931, 2.

¹⁸⁴ Minutes of the CPA Political Committee, September 2, 1933, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, ML SLNSW, FM4-10419, 495-94-106.

¹⁸⁵ Michael Sawtell, “A Lesson in Sociology From the Aborigines,” RL, July 11, 1934, 7.

enormous rate. But while our connections with [aborigines] are based only upon exploitation, the conditions of the aborigines will remain deplorable”.¹⁸⁶

Undoubtedly, Sawtell was a lynchpin in the alliance of communists, clergy and the APNR that came together for the large public meeting planned on August 6. He was, at times, advertised as a spokesperson for the APNR.¹⁸⁷ Sawtell’s celebration of the “scientific” management of “backward races” in the USSR and his advocacy for utilising “the relatively young science of Anthropology” in the Australian context, did create some common discursive ground between communists and the APNR.¹⁸⁸ Historian John Maynard named both Sawtell and AP Elkin as prominent examples of the new figure of the scientific “expert” in Aboriginal politics that increased in prominence from the late 1920s to the detriment of self-organised struggles for liberation:

The media platform [was taken over] by prominent white authorities such as AP Elkin and Michael Sawtell, both of whom were intent on promoting their own narrow views, profiles and positions of eminence.¹⁸⁹

The alliance between the CPA and the APNR leading up the August 6 forum, however, was extremely fragile and Chapter Eight will discuss how it soon broke down. The APNR explicitly supported Minister Perkins, even writing to wish him luck in the impending federal election campaign two days before the August public meeting.¹⁹⁰ Elkin was often careful to distinguish his strident advocacy against the decisions of Judge Wells, whom the APNR wanted removed, from his attitude to the federal government and he urged supporters to “get behind the Government in its effort to solve the problems of contact and clash in the north”.¹⁹¹ In contrast, the CPA consistently sought to saddle Wells’ approach squarely onto

¹⁸⁶ Michael Sawtell, “Slavery in Australia,” *Australian Labor Defender*, September – October 1934, 10.

¹⁸⁷ “More Arrests in Domain – Fight Against Literature Ban,” WW, August 10, 1934, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Michael Sawtell, “Slavery in Australia,” *Australian Labor Defender*, September-October 1934, 10; Michael Sawtell, “In Native Trials, Everything is in Hands of Police – Australian Workers, Aid Class Allies to Fight Exploitation,” RL, June 20, 1934, 7.

¹⁸⁹ Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom*, 131.

¹⁹⁰ Rev. William Morley, To the Honorable J.A. Perkins M.P., Manly, August 4, 1934, Personal archives of Professor A P Elkin, USYD, P130, Series 12, Item 145.

¹⁹¹ A.P. Elkin, “Aborigines and the Death Sentence,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 21, 1934, 8.

Perkins, his government and the broader capitalist system whose interests they were all seen to serve.¹⁹²

Charles Priest and his comrades in Darwin re-entered the political fray after six months of quiet ahead of the August 6 Sydney protest meeting, giving the national campaign a major boost. The Darwin CPA first issued their new broadsheet *The Proletarian*, edited by Priest, on June 27.¹⁹³ In his book on the trials of Dhakiyarr and other Yolngu, Ted Egan discussed the “cosmopolitan” character of Darwin and the traditions of interracial solidarity,¹⁹⁴ something strongly evidenced in *The Proletarian*. Egan insisted, however, that “racial tolerance” did not extend to “tribal Aborigines”, excluded from living within the town limits and who were “deemed ‘lower than shark shit’”.¹⁹⁵ Priest too, argued that particularly in this period, “what had been a general contempt for the Aborigines became one of hatred”.¹⁹⁶ This was owing to the spate of white people being killed in the bush and the huge publicity surrounding the trials. But these killers were actively defended in the pages of *The Proletarian*.¹⁹⁷

The renewed activity of the Darwin CPA branch had a marked, positive impact on the CPA’s national campaigning. Reports from the *Northern Standard* indicate that Darwin communists had begun to openly organise support for Aboriginal prisoners, holding meetings under the banner of the “local branch of the International Labor Defence (ILD)”.¹⁹⁸ The quality of information being circulated in the CPA press improved. CPA publications, and many resolutions they inspired, had mistakenly claimed that there had been no jury empanelled for the trial of the “Fitzmaurice River natives”¹⁹⁹ and lacked any local perspective on

¹⁹² “Aborigines Sentenced to Death – Natives Being Extermination,” WW, June 6, 1934, 6; Kylie Tennant, “Aborigines Persecuted,” *Australian Labor Defender*, July 1934, 6.

¹⁹³ *The Proletarian*, June 27, 1934; “Round About,” *Northern Standard*, June 29, 1934, 11; Priest, *Still Further*, 4.

¹⁹⁴ The first edition of *The Proletarian* for example, carried praise and an appeal for a Chinese unemployed worker taking a stand against discrimination in pay rates for relief work, “Victimisation,” *The Proletarian*, June 27, 1934, 3.

¹⁹⁵ Egan, *Justice*, 73-74.

¹⁹⁶ Priest, *Still Further*, 9.

¹⁹⁷ The CPA branch in Darwin campaigned on some cases that never gained prominence. For example, Priest called for Aboriginal people to be included on the jury in the murder trial of an Aboriginal man named “Butcher” in “British Justice,” *The Proletarian*, August 1, 1934, 3.

¹⁹⁸ “Round About,” *Northern Standard*, August 17, 1934, 2.

¹⁹⁹ For example, “Aborigines Sentenced to Death – Natives Being Exterminated,” WW, June 8, 1934, 6; Kylie Tennant, “Aborigines Persecuted,” *Australian Labor Defender*, July 1934, 6, 9; Charters

developments. In contrast, a *Red Leader* article, “Aborigines meet British Justice,” published in early July 1934, was informed by first-hand experience of dynamics in the Darwin courthouse.²⁰⁰ This article argued that lawyers acting in circumstances like the Fitzmaurice River case were fundamentally compromised due to their reliance on the NT Administration for ongoing work and their integration into the racist Darwin elite. These insights were used to press the importance of the demand for the right of Aboriginal defendants to choose their own lawyers, including representatives from interstate.²⁰¹ The active engagement of CPA members in Aboriginal trials happening in Darwin also helped animate newspaper reports with a sense of urgency and common struggle with, for example, details about the racial dynamics in the jail at Fannie Bay:

Government officials have always showed themselves anxious to isolate working-class prisoners who were in the same jail as the natives. They are forbidden to talk to the aborigines; because they were in the habit of discussing the treatment of the natives in jail and their various grievances.²⁰²

Articles calling all workers in Sydney to rally to the Kings Hall on August 6 described the “notorious treatment of both white and native inmates” in Fannie Bay and characterised Judge Wells as “famous for his vindictive decisions in working-class cases”.²⁰³ A *Red Leader* article on August 1 announced that the Supreme Court trial of Dhakiyarr could take place any time in the next few weeks and called for vigilance, particularly as he would “probably come before Judge Wells”.²⁰⁴ When Dhakiyarr did appear on August 3, charged with murdering McColl, Charles Priest was in attendance for the entire duration of the trial.²⁰⁵

Conclusion

Towers Unemployed Workers’ Movement, Letter to Minister Perkins, June 18, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

²⁰⁰ “Aborigines Meet British Justice,” RL, June 13, 1934, 10.

²⁰¹ “Aborigines Meet British Justice”.

²⁰² “Aborigines and Workers Have Same Enemy,” RL, June 27, 1934, 6.

²⁰³ “Aborigines and Workers Have Same Enemy”; “Rally to Aborigines’ Defence – Sydney Protest Meeting August 6,” RL, July 11, 1934, 7.

²⁰⁴ “More Trial of Aborigines – Protest Movement Must Be Extended,” RL, August 1, 1934, 4.

²⁰⁵ Charles Priest, “Special Supplement to The Proletarian: The Trial of the Aborigine Tuckiar for the Murder of McColl,” *The Proletarian* 1 no. 6 August 8, 1934, i-iv.

Since 1931, the CPA had celebrated the successful Scottsboro campaign, led by communists in the USA, as an inspiring example of working-class struggle against racism.²⁰⁶ Three years later, in their own campaign to “Free North Australian Aborigines”, CPA cadre successfully applied many of the lessons from Scottsboro to the Australian situation, and had a tangible impact on the Fitzmaurice River case. The CPA had successfully built Australian branches of the ILD with a genuine mass following, including thousands of Labor members willing to stand up to police attacks and rally alongside communists for justice. The ILD now had sufficient credibility that prominent imperial humanitarians, including Elkin, agreed to collaborate on a major public meeting.

The analysis printed in the *Workers’ Weekly* in April 1934 that condemned CMS missionaries as “advance agents of capitalist civilisation”,²⁰⁷ who tricked Yolngu warriors into surrender, chimes remarkably well with the perspective of Dhakiyarr’s descendants expressed 70 years later.²⁰⁸ The CPA also adapted critiques of the court system popularised by the US ILD through the Scottsboro struggle into a sophisticated explanation of the way courts in northern Australia operated as an apparatus of imperialist domination. The utility of this analysis for explaining developments in the NT courts will be further demonstrated in the following chapter.

The failure of the CPA to connect with the demands and activity of Aboriginal activists in south-east Australia blunted the radical potential of the CPA’s pro-Aboriginal campaigning in this period. Incredibly, Aboriginal initiative had managed to commit the ALP (NSW) to a position of abolition of the APB and “full citizens’ rights” by April 1934,²⁰⁹ creating opportunities for serious campaigning that were entirely overlooked by the CPA. Despite this weakness, when Dhakiyarr faced Judge Wells for trial in August 1934, the CPA had developed an analysis, strategy and political clout capable of bringing serious pressure to bear on the Lyons government.

²⁰⁶ “Against Legal Lynching of Negro Boys by U.S.A. Imperialism,” WW, July 31, 1931, 3.

²⁰⁷ “Aborigines Trapped by Treachery”.

²⁰⁸ Murray and Collins, dir, *Dhakiyarr vs The King*.

²⁰⁹ “N.S.W. Labor Party’s Annual Conference”.

Chapter Eight

‘The wires are humming the cry... Save Tuckiar!’

1934

On August 4, 1934, Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda was convicted of murdering Constable McColl by the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory and on August 6, Judge Wells sentenced him to hang. The International Labor Defence (ILD), led by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), coordinated a mass campaign against the verdict, culminating in the news on August 27 that the government would run an appeal against Dhakiyarr’s conviction in the High Court,¹ an appeal that was ultimately successful.² The Yolngu warrior’s freedom was short-lived, however. He went missing on release, probably murdered by police.³

The campaign for Dhakiyarr has been well studied by Australian historians. However, rarely has the CPA been credited with leadership and there has never been a proper account of the impact of working-class organisation on developments.⁴ This chapter will provide a detailed analysis of this struggle, demonstrating the significance of the efforts by radical workers in the fight for Dhakiyarr’s freedom. Charles Priest once again played a pivotal role, keeping the national movement informed and agitating for action. There were two large public meetings in Sydney, an outdoor rally in the Sydney Domain of a reported 3000 people,⁵ another wave of meetings and protest resolutions from working-class organisations across the country and in-depth coverage in every edition of newspapers and magazines where the CPA

¹ “Tuckiar Allowed To Appeal – Mass Protest Effect,” WW, September 7, 1934, 5.

² “Tuckiar – and Others,” WW, November 23, 1934, 6.

³ Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Island Killings 1932-1933* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 192-194.

⁴ The most comprehensive accounts are Egan, *Justice*, 114-213; Charles Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice - Volume 1* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970), 201-215; Peter Read, “Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation on the North Eastern Frontier,” *History Australia* 4, no. 1 (February 2007): 09.1-09.15. DOI: 10.2104/ha070009. A short account by socialist historians Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill is exceptional in that it discusses the campaign as an ILD initiative and noted the leading role of Communists, Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, *Radical Sydney* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 208-209.

⁵ “Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines,” WW, August 10, 1934, 1; “Protest Meeting Demands Release of Tuckiar – Calls for Withdrawal of Judge Wells,” WW, August 31, 1934, 5; “Domain Meeting: More Arrests, Police Resisted,” WW, August 31, 1934, 1.

held editorial control. There was also an unprecedented engagement with Aboriginal rights campaigning by Australian Labor Party (ALP) branches and press.

The appeal case heard in the High Court, *Tuckiar vs the King*, is a famous chapter in Australian legal history,⁶ studied by generations of law students.⁷ High Court Justice Virginia Bell has contrasted the supposed “fairness” embodied in Dhakiyarr’s acquittal to the contemporaneous, unjust treatment of racial minorities in Hitler’s Germany and the United States.⁸ Similarly, former High Court Chief Justice Murray Gleeson recently cited the case “in defence of our forebears”, saying that “British justice, as administered in Australia, was understood to protect all Australians”, including Aboriginal people.⁹ In contrast to this nationalist mythology, this chapter will demonstrate the importance of the CPA’s critical analysis of the Australian legal system that informed the campaigning. Judge Wells dealt with Yolngu in his court as enemy combatants and calculated his decisions to hasten full submission to colonial law by all Aboriginal people. The ILD’s strategy, of mobilising working-class organisations to force concessions from the courts, was successful in the case of Dhakiyarr. The Lyons government organised an appeal, and ensured its success, in direct response to pressure from the ILD campaign. Finally, despite the trappings of justice from the High Court acquittal, Dhakiyarr was killed regardless, at a time when the protest movement had demobilised, leaving the warrior particularly vulnerable to police violence.

“The best thing to do is to hang them”

On August 1, 1934, three Yolngu from Caledon Bay stood trial for killing the Japanese trepangers in 1932.¹⁰ The Yolngu were given no chance to participate in proceedings or comprehend what was happening. Egan argued that the prosecution, “does not seem to have

⁶ Thalia Anthony, “Commentary On: In the Matter of Djappari (Re Tuckiar),” in *Australian Feminist Judgements: Righting and Rewriting Law*, ed. Francesca Bartless, Heather Douglas and Rosemary Hunter (Oxford: Hart, 2014), 437.

⁷ John Lawrence, “Reflections on Tuckiar vs The King 1934 52 CLR, Part 2,” *Balance* 168 (July 2000): 7; Robert Hayes and Michael Eburn, *Criminal Law and Procedure in New South Wales*, 3rd Ed. (Sydney: LexisNexis Butterworths, 2009), 39.

⁸ Justice Virginia Bell, “Law and Justice Address,” Speech, Parliament House, NSW, Sydney: Law and Justice Foundation, October 29, 2008, <http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/app/C19B9386B33532B3CA2574F1008285A9.html>.

⁹ Murray Gleeson, *Recognition in Keeping with the Constitution: A Worthwhile Project* (Sydney: Uphold & Recognise, 2019), 9.

¹⁰ Egan provides a lengthy critique of the case in Egan, *Justice*, 85-102.

proved, beyond reasonable doubt, that these particular Caledons had killed any Japanese”.¹¹ The lawyer acting for the Yolngu failed to offer any meaningful defence.¹² After the all-white jury returned a guilty verdict, Chief Protector Cecil Cook made an appeal for leniency. For the first time, Wells made a concession, utilising his recently granted discretion to avoid the death penalty, and imposed a twenty-year sentence on the Yolngu.¹³ His comments during the exchange with Cook, however, ensured this sentence was just as controversial as any of the executions ordered in the previous four months. Wells speculated that these “wild savages” would struggle to cope with confinement in prison, so “perhaps the best and kindest thing to do is to hang them”.¹⁴ This line was soon widely printed and condemned across the country.¹⁵ It was even reproduced in press reports in London, where Wells was branded “North Australia’s ‘Judge Jeffries’”, a reference to a notorious seventeenth century judge in Britain who ordered large-scale hangings.¹⁶

The *Workers’ Weekly* argued:

Judge Wells, in passing sentence, sent forth the oldest cry of the reactionary, the chauvinist and the pogromist, for the slaughter and torture of an oppressed minority... This invitation to race hatred must be ruthlessly rejected and fought against by the Australian working class, who, in common with the aborigines, are exploited by the class which pays Wells his stipend for the job of legal murder.¹⁷

A number of Wells’ comments illustrate the importance of the analysis that the CPA had developed through the campaign to “Free North Australian Aborigines”. Wells’ court in Darwin was indeed a mechanism to terrorise and collectively punish Aboriginal people, forcing full submission to police authority. The *Red Leader* emphasised:

¹¹ Egan, *Justice*, 101.

¹² Egan, *Justice*, 86-96.

¹³ “The Arnheim Land Murders,” *Northern Standard*, August 3, 1934, 11.

¹⁴ “The Arnheim Land Murders”.

¹⁵ Egan, *Justice*, 99.

¹⁶ “Aborigines,” August 8, *London Daily Herald*, 1934, 4.

¹⁷ “More Aborigines Sentenced to Death,” *WW*, August 10, 1934, 6.

The judge [said] that if conditions improved in Arnhem Land and it was placed under proper control and the conduct of the natives in prison was exemplary, he would suggest their release after four or five years.¹⁸

Correspondence held in the National Archives shows that the public outrage that followed this verdict exacerbated growing tensions between the Interior Ministry, the NT Administration and Judge Wells.¹⁹ Wells was directly questioned by Perkins about his comments on hanging,²⁰ and argued he had been taken out of context by the press. Perkins wrote back he was “glad to hear the reports [are] not justified” and complained about the media sensationalism.²¹ However, when it was announced that Dhakiyarr would soon face trial, the Department of the Interior made sure detailed notes were taken in the courtroom, “without the judge’s knowledge”, to ensure they were across potentially “embarrassing” developments.²²

Charles Priest and Dhakiyarr in the Supreme Court

Dhakiyarr’s trial began just two days later on August 3. Reflecting the importance of the case in Australian legal history, there are a number of detailed accounts of the injustice palpable throughout the conduct of the trial.²³ The first of these critical analyses was produced by Priest in the days immediately following Wells’ verdict.²⁴ It remains one of the most comprehensive and compelling accounts of the trial. Almost one year since Priest had celebrated Dhakiyarr’s spearing of McColl and began agitation to defend the warrior and his

¹⁸ “Brutal Sentences Against Aborigines Excused on Political Grounds,” RL, August 8, 1934, 4.

¹⁹ Department of the Interior, Apprehension and trial of Caledon Bay Natives charged with murder of Japanese, NAA: A1, 1936/111.

²⁰ Minister John Perkins, “Telegram to His Honour Judge Wells,” August 6, 1934, NAA: A1, 1936/111.

²¹ Minister Perkins, “Telegram to His Honour, Judge Wells, Darwin,” August 15, 1934.

²² Egan, *Justice*, 116.

²³ Nicole Watson, “In the Matter of Djaparri (Re Tuckiar) [2035] First Nations Court of Australia 1” and Thalia Anthony, “Commentary On: In the Matter of Djapparri (Re Tuckiar),” both in *Australian Feminist Judgements: Righting and Rewriting Law*, ed. Francesca Bartless, Heather Douglas and Rosemary Hunter (Oxford: Hart, 2014); 437 – 499; Lawrence, “Reflections on Tuckiar”; Egan, *Justice*, 114-213; Read, “Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation”; Tom Murray, prod, “Tuckier (Dhakiyarr) v the King and Territory,” *Hindsight*, ABC Radio National, Sydney: July 7 2013, Radio Documentary, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/tuckier-vs.-the-king-and-territory/4760592>.

²⁴ Charles Priest, “Special Supplement to The Proletarian: The Trial of the Aborigine Tuckiar for the Murder of McColl,” *The Proletarian* 1 no. 6 August 8, 1934, i-iv.

people from police bullets, Priest now sat in the courtroom to defend them from the lies and corruption that marked the trial. Priest prepared a lengthy, blow by blow account of the case, which he described as “one of the greatest travesties of a trial ever held in Australia” and published this as a pamphlet, a “special supplement to *The Proletarian*”, ready for distribution almost immediately.²⁵ Priest and other CPA activists campaigned with the pamphlet on the streets of Darwin and it was mailed to “nearly one hundred influential citizens in the Southern states”.²⁶ An extract was published in the *Workers’ Weekly* later in August.²⁷ The short account of the trial which follows draws heavily on Priest’s pamphlet. His insights anticipated those of both future scholars and the High Court judges who acquitted Dhakiyarr.

Dhakiyarr was provided no translation to allow him to understand proceedings. The prosecution relied on two contradictory reports, from people to whom Dhakiyarr had apparently confessed, but had not witnessed the killing themselves. These were Parranar, “a Caledon Bay aborigine absolutely unable to understand even pidgin English” and Harry, from Millingimbi Mission.²⁸ A key point of consternation in the courtroom was that the prosecution had not attempted to find any eyewitnesses. The prosecutor was openly chastised for this by Wells, who said this negligence severely compromised the case – but urged the jurors to deliver a guilty verdict regardless.²⁹ Priest argued:

Everything goes to show that the lubras and trackers [potential eyewitnesses] knew something that the police did not want known... Tuckiar was convicted, not on circumstantial evidence, but on no evidence at all.³⁰

In the eventual High Court judgement, handed down in November, the judges confirmed this assessment, citing the fact that “the evidence was insufficient to support a conviction” as one rationale for acquittal.³¹

²⁵ Priest, “Special Supplement”.

²⁶ Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 10.

²⁷ “Trial of Aborigine a Travesty - Tuckiar Sacrificed to save ‘honor’ of McColl - Defence in League with Prosecution,” WW, August 24, 1934, 3.

²⁸ Priest, “Special Supplement,” i.

²⁹ Priest, “Special Supplement,” iii.

³⁰ Priest, “Special Supplement,” iv.

³¹ *Tuckiar v The King* (1934) 52 CLR 335, 336.

The central point of controversy in the case, however, was a sensational suggestion in Harry's testimony, that McColl had sexually assaulted Djappari, Dhakiyarr's wife, whom he was holding in chains at the time. In Priest's account:

Before Harry started, the Judge did everything to intimidate this witness, who spoke fairly good English. Harry stated that, on the lugger [sailing ship] coming to Darwin, Tuckiar told him that he had seen McColl misbehaving with one of his lubras.³²

Nicole Watson has written powerfully on the Dhakiyarr case, highlighting the entrenched dehumanisation of Aboriginal women by the justice system, a phenomenon which continues into the present day. Watson emphasised the way that developments in this trial demonstrated the "binary of invisibility and control" that the colonial state enforces on Aboriginal women:

[H]er right to be protected from sexual assault became invisible. At the same time, the colonial state exercised extraordinary control over Djaparri, as evidenced by her unlawful detention [by McColl on Woodah Island]. Like Djaparri, Aboriginal women over the supervening decades continued to grapple with invisibility, while at the same time, being subject to excessive control by the state.³³

Following the allegations of sexual assault, it was McColl, not Djaparri, who was characterised as a victim.³⁴ All protagonists in the trial – Judge Wells, the prosecution, the defence, the jury and all the mainstream court reporters – took extraordinary measures to protect the reputation of McColl by both denying and attempting to suppress Harry's testimony.³⁵ Character witnesses were allowed by Wells to testify that McColl would never mistreat women, evidence the High Court later ruled was "quite inadmissible".³⁶ Priest described the extraordinary steps taken by Wells to defend McColl in his summing up, where Wells warned the jury that an acquittal of Dhakiyarr would be "a serious miscarriage of justice... and a stigma affixed to the name of a dead man [McColl].":

³² Priest, "Special Supplement," ii.

³³ Watson, "Matter of Djaparri," 450.

³⁴ Watson, "Matter of Djaparri," 449.

³⁵ Egan, *Justice*, 145-146.

³⁶ *Tuckiar v The King* (1934) 52 CLR 335, 341.

He delivered what must be one of the most biased, one eyed, prejudiced summings up ever heard in a Court of Law. By overemphasizing details which might indicate guilt, by minimizing or completely ignoring facts which should give rise to doubt in the minds of all men, by every artifice of suggestion known to lawyers, he endeavoured to thrust into the minds of the jurymen a conviction of guilt.³⁷

The High Court judges who eventually ruled on Dhakiyarr's appeal confirmed Priest's analysis when they ruled that both Wells' directions to the jury and attempts to defend McColl invalidated the conviction.³⁸

William Fitzgerald, the lawyer appointed by the NT Administration to represent Dhakiyarr, was described by Priest as "far more concerned about the 'honour' of McColl than the safety of his client's neck".³⁹ At the conclusion of the trial, Fitzgerald stood up and told the court that Dhakiyarr, who was ostensibly pleading not guilty, had in fact confessed to spearing McColl and had invented the story told to Harry.⁴⁰ Dhakiyarr was found guilty by the all-white jury in less than an hour. Priest's pamphlet argued:

Anyone who was at the trial from start to finish can come to only one conclusion and that is that McColl was speared over a lubra... [Dhakiyarr] was sacrificed on the altar of a dead man's reputation.⁴¹

Ted Egan cited correspondence from Jesse Litchfield, a *Northern Standard* court reporter, about a coordinated effort to suppress the allegations against McColl:

The police, Mr. F. Thompson, who is a press reporter, myself, Mr. Fitzgerald, counsel for the defence, and Mr. Harris, counsel for the prosecution, and also Mr. Bell the Coroner, all agreed that no good could come from the story being made public.⁴²

³⁷ Priest, "Special Supplement," iv.

³⁸ *Tuckiar v The King* (1934) 52 CLR 335, 336-337.

³⁹ Priest, "Special Supplement," iii.

⁴⁰ Priest, "Special Supplement," iii.

⁴¹ Priest, "Special Supplement," iv.

⁴² Egan, *Justice*, 146.

Watson argued that “the only frank reporting of Harry’s evidence came from the Darwin *The Proletarian*, the Communist Party newspaper” and Egan also suggested that Priest’s pamphlet was responsible for bringing these allegations into the ensuing national debate.⁴³ In his autobiographical account of the frenetic years of communist agitation in Darwin in the early 1930s, Priest is most proud of this pamphlet. He claimed the pamphlet, “probably had a greater influence on public opinion on the treatment of aborigines than any pamphlet printed before or since that time” and “a great influence on the subsequent treatment of the whole of the aboriginal population of Australia”.⁴⁴ To “demonstrate this claim is not bombast”, Priest listed a number of prominent campaigning personalities from the mid-twentieth century who cited the impact of his pamphlet on their decision to take up the Aboriginal cause including the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and Dr Charles Duguid.⁴⁵ Priest also noted direct communication from A.P. Elkin about the important impact of his work.⁴⁶ While his claim is a clear case of hyperbole, written more than 50 years after the events, there is no doubt about the important impact of the pamphlet on developments in the Dhakiyarr case. Priest’s sketch of the court case provided all the main lines of attack utilised by the ILD in the coming months. The secretary of the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR), William Morley, raised the scandalous allegations made by Priest directly with Minister Perkins, who confirmed that they were all corroborated by notes made by Joseph Carrodus from his Department.⁴⁷

Apart from providing a compelling, defiant account of proceedings in the face of a major institutional cover-up, the real sting in the tail of Priest’s pamphlet was the fact that it was authored by a communist connected to a rapidly developing mass campaign. The truth of the brutal treatment of Aboriginal prisoners was not just being noted down, it was being forced onto the national political agenda. Priest’s pamphlet concluded with a prescient, if overly optimistic, account of the political impact that would flow from his revelations about the conduct of the case:

⁴³ Egan, *Justice*, 146-147.

⁴⁴ Priest, *Still Further*, 10.

⁴⁵ Priest, *Still Further*, 10.

⁴⁶ Priest, *Still Further*, 10.

⁴⁷ William Morley, Letter to Dr. Elkin, August 23, 1934, Personal archives of Professor A P Elkin, USYD, P130, Series 12, Item 145.

Tuckiar may or may not have killed McColl, he may or may not have had provocation for killing him. That has yet to be proved, notwithstanding the verdict of the jury, and I venture to say that such a storm will be raised over the trial of Tuckiar as may yet rock the Administration to its foundations, shake Judge Wells from his seat, result in a review of all the cases tried by this enemy of the aborigines and justice and result in radically different treatment for the aborigines in the future. Already the wires are humming a cry that will soon be nation-wide. "SAVE TUCKIAR".⁴⁸

Before returning to examine the important action taken by Priest and the CPA branch in Darwin to advance the appeal to the High Court, I will first look at the immediate impact of the verdict on the ILD campaign.

Rally at the King's Hall

News of Dhakiyarr's conviction, which occurred late in the evening on Saturday August 4, was published in the national papers on Monday morning, August 6.⁴⁹ This fuelled the momentum towards the mass meeting planned by the ILD that night in the King's Hall in Sydney, often referred to as a "rally" in the CPA source material.⁵⁰ The fact that Elkin was a keynote speaker has led some historians to emphasise his initiative.⁵¹ As outlined in Chapter Seven, however, the CPA was the driving force, the ILD was the auspicing organisation for the rally and all the communist press had been heavily promoting the event for more than six weeks.

More than 750 people attended the meeting,⁵² crowding the hall.⁵³ The direct connections with communists campaigning in Darwin helped give the meeting a sense of urgency and purpose. Wells sentenced Dhakiyarr to death on the morning of August 6, news which had

⁴⁸ Priest, "Special Supplement," iv.

⁴⁹ "Murder of Constable McColl," *The Age*, August 6, 1934, 11; "Aboriginal – Found Guilty," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 6, 1934, 9.

⁵⁰ "In Defence of Aborigines," WW, August 3, 1934, 5.

⁵¹ Rowley, *Destruction*, 295-296.

⁵² "To Defend Aborigines – Mass Meeting Demands Removal of Judge Wells," RL, August 15, 1934, 1.

⁵³ "Meeting's Resolution," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 7, 1934, 9.

not yet been published in the papers but was announced in the meeting.⁵⁴ A telegram from the Darwin ILD was read out by CPA leader, George Bateman, speaking on behalf of the ILD:

All white jury. Only evidence two carrying alleged uncorroborated confessions to police-boy and mission-boy that he speared McColl over lubra. Travesty of trial, found guilty to clear McColl's name. Seven witnesses not produced apparently because would reveal true facts. Astounding irregularities. Give utmost publicity.⁵⁵

As noted in Chapter Seven, the meeting featured the only Aboriginal speaker formally included in the CPA's campaigning in 1934, La Perouse community leader, Tom Foster. Foster went on to work with numerous socialists involved in the King's Hall meeting, when he was active in the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) later in the 1930s.⁵⁶

Apart from the size and impact of the King's Hall rally, the most interesting feature was the resolution, supported by all the speakers and passed unanimously.⁵⁷ This represented a very real compromise between the radical workers led by the CPA and the imperial humanitarian forces most prominently represented by Elkin. As discussed in the previous chapter, Michael Sawtell was playing a key role mediating between these two poles and likely had a key hand in formulating the resolution, which he moved in the meeting. It was seconded by Bateman on behalf of the ILD.⁵⁸ The lead demand was for the "release of all aborigines now doing life sentences or condemned to death in the Northern Territory". Subsequent demands included reforms to the justice system in the NT, including to ensure that "the court have the assistance of a competent person who understands the languages and customs of the accused", for the "recall" of Judge Wells, and for the creation of "more native reserves".⁵⁹

⁵⁴ "Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines," WW, August 10, 1934, 1.

⁵⁵ "Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines".

⁵⁶ Jack Horner provides an account of a protest meeting in 1938 involving Foster, Michael Sawtell, Albert Thompson and prominent CPA member, Jean Devanny, in Jack Horner, *Bill Ferguson: Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom* (Canberra: J. Horner, 1994), 108-109.

⁵⁷ "To Defend Aborigines – Mass Meeting Demands Withdrawal of Judge Wells," RL, August 15, 1934, 1.

⁵⁸ "Meeting's Resolution".

⁵⁹ "To Defend Aborigines".

Significantly, in his address to the crowd, Elkin argued that his views were “fully in accord” with those of the resolution.⁶⁰ Nowhere in his previous correspondence with government had Elkin or the APNR clearly called for the release of Aboriginal prisoners. Generally, they restricted their requests to commutation of the death penalty, or to appeals for greater leniency, rather than challenging directly the legitimacy of the convictions.⁶¹ The unity of such a broad range of political forces calling unequivocally for freedom at this meeting undoubtedly contributed to Dhakiyarr’s eventual release. However, despite this demand shifting Elkin’s public position to the left, the resolution also included compromises which blunted the challenge to racism that formed such an important component of the rationale for the CPA’s campaign activity. Distinctly absent from this resolution was any call for self-determination for Aboriginal people.

As outlined in Chapter One, the demand for self-determination for peoples oppressed by imperialism had been a crucial component of anti-colonial Marxism since the foundational work of Marx. It was central to the politics of the Comintern and had informed the CPA’s approach to Aboriginal struggle since 1931.⁶² Theoretical articles in the *Australian Labor Defender* in 1934 explained the importance of winning workers to this demand as a way of breaking them from racist ideas about the inferiority of Aboriginal people.⁶³ Recognition of Aboriginal agency, capacity and fundamental rights, embodied in a demand that Aboriginal people be granted control over their own affairs, provided a direct challenge to the paternalism that justified colonial rule. But demands for self-determination in the context of the King’s Hall meeting, with Elkin so prominent, would have put the CPA directly at odds with the plans of Elkin and the APNR, as outlined by Heather Goodall, for the continuation of “existing colonial relations of power”, albeit using more “civilized” and “scientific” methods.⁶⁴ Whereas communists had demanded the creation of more “native reserves” as part

⁶⁰ “To Defend Aborigines”.

⁶¹ A comprehensive archive of correspondence from the APNR on NT Aboriginal cases is available in Personal archives of Professor A P Elkin, USYD, P130, Series 12, Items 145-146.

⁶² “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery,” WW, September 24, 1931, 2.

⁶³ “Struggle Against Chauvanism,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 10.

⁶⁴ Heather Goodall, “An Intelligent Parasite: A.P. Elkin and White Perceptions of the History of Aboriginal People in New South Wales,” Paper presented to the Australian Historical Association Conference, University of New South Wales, Sydney, August 26-28, 1982, 6.

of a fight for greater Aboriginal autonomy from the state, Elkin advocated for reserves to be managed by state Protectors trained in anthropology.⁶⁵

In his speech, ILD spokesperson Bateman pushed beyond the politics of the resolution, calling for continued mobilisation of working-class power, not just to free all those convicted, but to “abolish the social and economic evils which the aborigines suffer”.⁶⁶ He gave a lengthy account of the Scottsboro case and the need for a movement on a similar scale to confront the racist justice system in Australia.⁶⁷ But from available reports, it seems his speech also failed to raise the issue of self-determination. Even in the proposal put forward at King’s Hall for immediate reforms to the justice system, the CPA supported the APNR proposal for anthropologists to be involved in the court process,⁶⁸ but did not push forward existing ILD demands that recognised Aboriginal agency, such as for Aboriginal people to be represented on juries, or choose their own counsel.

Both the size and the broad platform of the mass meeting were widely noted by the mainstream press⁶⁹ and decisively increased the pressure on Perkins to implement some change.⁷⁰ It certainly helped provide a further boost to Elkin’s growing influence over government policy. Charles Rowley’s account of the meeting failed to mention the role of either the ILD or the Communist Party. Instead, Rowley quoted from Elkin, who explained a sequence of events that ensured the prime minister was on the phone to him seeking advice the very next day:

A report of a meeting... was published next day in England. Emphasis was placed on my own speech regarding the unsatisfactory nature of court proceedings in Aboriginal cases. Authorities in England inquired through our High Commissioner there whether the position was as reported. He rang the Prime Minister, who rang me. He was given the facts.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Goodall, “An Intelligent Parasite,” 6-8.

⁶⁶ “Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines”.

⁶⁷ “Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines”.

⁶⁸ Point b) of the resolution moved at the meeting. “To Defend Aborigines”.

⁶⁹ “Meeting’s Resolution”; “Recall of Judge Urged,” *The Argus*, August 7, 1934, 7.

⁷⁰ Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 212.

⁷¹ Rowley, *Destruction*, 295.

Elkin's proposals for reform of court process in the NT was a major focus for much of the mainstream newspaper reporting throughout August 1934.⁷² However, it was communists who continued to do the campaign work on the ground that ended up forcing the concession to allow Dhakiyarr's successful appeal to the High Court. The alliance between communists and the APNR at the King's Hall meeting proved to be short lived, as will be explained later in this chapter. The meeting was very successful, however, in kick-starting the specific ILD initiative around Dhakiyarr's case. The *Workers' Weekly* report urged a new drive for resolutions of protest and an appeal for funds to allow an ILD lawyer to travel to Darwin to appeal against the conviction.⁷³

This campaign proved to be a powerful example of the general strategy that communists had argued was necessary to extract any semblance of justice from capitalist courts. On the one hand, the formal legal process was taken very seriously, with competent lawyers making cogent representations on behalf of Dhakiyarr, that would go on to inform the submissions of government lawyers and be upheld by the High Court. Crucial for ensuring these legal arguments made an impact, however, was not their inherent rationality or accordance with abstract principles of justice. It was a mass campaign of protest, with the threat of escalating action from working-class organisations that forced the court to consider these arguments at all. The remainder of this chapter will consider both aspects of this approach in turn, first looking at the legal initiative of Priest and his comrades in Darwin.

Communists in Darwin push forward an appeal

ILD efforts to appeal Dhakiyarr's sentence began immediately following the conclusion of the trial on August 6. Communists in Darwin met to discuss their strategy and then Priest approached Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of Aborigines, on Wednesday August 8, "and told him I wished to lodge an appeal to the High Court of Australia".⁷⁴ Priest said the ILD could easily secure the funds required. Reports in the *Northern Standard* confirm that a branch of the ILD was operating in Darwin at this time.⁷⁵ In many of the CPA press reports from

⁷² Adolphus P. Elkin, "The Aborigines – Legal Problem in North Australia," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 20, 1934, 8.

⁷³ "Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines".

⁷⁴ Priest, *Still Further*, 15.

⁷⁵ "Round About," *Northern Standard*, August 17, 1934, 2.

August 1934, there are pleas for funds to support this appeal.⁷⁶ However, Priest recalled: “We [CPA members in Darwin] could get one thousand pounds to pay for the appeal from one of our supporters, near at hand, merely for the asking”.⁷⁷ Priest explained that a prosperous American market gardener, Edwin Verberg, married to an Aboriginal woman and worried about the future of their children, had been impressed with his articles agitating against the police in the Borroloola case. Priest spent time working on his property and winning his trust. Verberg pledged to cover the costs of Dhakiyarr’s appeal, on the condition of anonymity, “since the NT Administration would make his life impossible if it was ever found out”.⁷⁸

In his initial meeting with Cook to press for an appeal, Priest was told that Dhakiyarr had no rights to instruct his own solicitors. Approval for any appeal would need to be given by the NT Administrator. Cook, however, did not shut his door in the face of the ILD: “He told me it would be impossible for the Administrator to refuse his consent if there was no other organisation prepared to lodge an appeal”.⁷⁹ However, in archived correspondence between Cook, the NT Administration, the Interior Ministry and Attorney General’s Department, we can see that the serious preparation of an appeal by the ILD pushed elements within government who had been concerned about the growing embarrassment of Judge Wells to act themselves.⁸⁰ By August 9, Cook had already taken the step of asking Fitzgerald, the lawyer who had represented Dhakiyarr so disgracefully at the trial, to draw up an opinion regarding the possibility of an appeal. A comprehensive opinion was ready by August 10. Fitzgerald argued there were numerous grounds for the appeal, many of them noted in Priest’s pamphlet, including the failure of the court to consider that Dhakiyarr may have acted in self-defence, an argument Fitzgerald himself had refused to run during the trial.⁸¹

On August 13, Joseph Carrodus, who had travelled to Darwin to take up an appointment as acting NT Administrator, wrote to the Interior Ministry about further developments in the ILD’s moves to appeal. He named Priest and John Waldie as the ILD representatives in

⁷⁶ “Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines”; “Campaign for Defence of Aborigines,” RL, August 15, 1934, 4.

⁷⁷ Priest, *Still Further*, 15.

⁷⁸ Priest, *Still Further*, 15-18.

⁷⁹ Priest, *Still Further*, 18.

⁸⁰ Department of the Interior, Re Murder of Constable McColl at Woodah. Tuckiar V The King [Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda] NAA: A432, 1934/1437.

⁸¹ William J. Fitzgerald, Tuckiar’s Conviction for the murder of M.C. McColl, Letter to C.E. Cook, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Darwin, August 10, 1934, NAA: A432, 1934/1437.

Darwin. He explained that Fred Patterson from Townsville had been briefed in the case and “Mr. Michell, Solicitor, Darwin would act locally for the organisation”. The ILD had already put forward four grounds for appeal, including:

- 1) Misdirection of the Jury by the Judge;
- 2) The verdict was contrary to the weight of evidence;
- 3) Deliberate withholding of evidence by the Crown and
- 4) Bias of the Judge.⁸²

Points one, two and four would eventually be upheld by the High Court.⁸³ In internal correspondence, Carrodus attempted to discredit the ILD, describing them as “Communists probably wanting to use the appeal for the Territory elections”.⁸⁴ Darwin-based barrister, John Lawrence, along with Egan and Peter Read, have all argued that both NT and Commonwealth government administrators had real anxiety about the communist-led ILD running Dhakiyarr’s appeal. Fear it could win the communists real political capital, given widespread public recognition of injustice in Dhakiyarr’s case, pushed the bureaucrats towards a strategy of running the appeal themselves.⁸⁵ It was, however, not just the ILD’s legal maneuvering that forced this action, but a growing movement of protest that no existing scholarship has properly accounted for.

In correspondence with the Minister for the Interior on August 13, Carrodus discussed the ILD legal initiative in some detail and seemed reasonably confident in the advice of the Crown Solicitor in Darwin that there were in fact no legitimate grounds for an appeal.⁸⁶ In the coming fortnight, letters from Herbert Brown at the Department of the Interior to the Attorney-General’s Department combined a serious response to the ILD’s drive for an appeal with a real anxiety about the growing movement. On August 22, Brown wrote with the subject line “International Labor Defence” and emphasised an upcoming “mass protest

⁸² Joseph A. Carrodus, Acting NT Administrator, Trial of Tuckiar for Murder of Constable McColl, Letter to the Secretary, Department of Interior, August 13, 1934, NAA: A432, 1934/1437.

⁸³ *Tuckiar v The King* (1934) 52 CLR 335.

⁸⁴ Egan, *Justice*, 155. Unfortunately, the correspondence cited by Egan where Carrodus both spoke about his concerns with the Communist initiative and also corresponded directly with Waldie, cannot currently be located in the NT archives. Egan refers to “NT Administration file 34/11”.

⁸⁵ Lawrence, “Reflections on Tuckiar,” 8; Egan, *Justice*, 155-156; Read, “Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation,” 13.

⁸⁶ Carrodus, Trial of Tuckiar for Murder of Constable McColl, August 13, 1934.

meeting” at the Sydney Town Hall. Enclosed with the letter was correspondence from the ILD requesting an audience with Dhakiyarr to advance their appeal, a memorandum from Carrodus assessing “the particulars of the proposal” and the opinion from Fitzgerald that there was a real basis for the appeal.⁸⁷ Another letter on August 24 enclosed further correspondence from Sawtell, stressing that widespread meetings of protest were being prepared to demand justice.⁸⁸ It was in response to these letters that the Attorney-General’s Department, on August 27, wrote to inform Brown: “the Attorney-General considers that an appeal should be lodged forth-with against Tuckiar’s conviction”.⁸⁹ This breakthrough was clearly the result of a combination of both serious legal initiative by the ILD and the intensive weeks of campaigning since the King’s Hall rally on August 6. As will be demonstrated below, the August 27 communication about the Attorney-General’s decision to appeal came on the very day of the second mass meeting planned by the ILD to protest Dhakiyarr’s sentence, and immediately followed a demonstration of thousands of workers in the Sydney Domain on August 26 where they were attacked by police while demonstrating for the warrior’s freedom.⁹⁰

The mass campaign

The campaign mobilisation by the ILD was on a scale unprecedented on the issue of Aboriginal rights. There were weekly reports on developments in the communist press throughout August, creating a real sense of growing momentum. The practical efforts of the ILD in Darwin to seek an appeal brought a sense of urgency and legitimacy to the activities of the campaign and helped build support into the ranks of the mainstream labour movement. The strategy of a coordinated drive for resolutions of protest, already utilised in the campaigns against the punitive expedition and in the Fitzmaurice River case, was rolled out on an enlarged scale. The *Workers’ Weekly* reported that one thousand copies of an ILD

⁸⁷ Herbert C. Brown, re International Labour Defence, Letter to The Secretary, Attorney-General’s Department, August 22, 1934, NAA: A432, 1934/1437.

⁸⁸ Herbert C. Brown, Sentence Imposed on Aboriginal Tuckiar, Letter to The Secretary, Attorney-General’s Department, August 24, 1934, NAA: A432, 1934/1437.

⁸⁹ Secretary, Attorney-General’s Department, “MEMORANDUM for- The Secretary, Department of the Interior,” 27 August, 1934, Department of the Interior, Tuckiar [Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda], Aboriginal - Arrest and trial for murder of Constable McColl – Appeal to High Court, NAA: A1, 1936/4022 Part 2.

⁹⁰ “Domain Meeting – More Arrests, Police Resisted,” WW, August 31, 1934, 1.

circular calling for protests against Dhakiyarr's sentence, had been sent to "all working-class and liberal organisations".⁹¹

This campaign was supported far more readily by sections of the ALP than any previous initiative discussed in this thesis. There were multiple articles a week in the *Labor Daily*,⁹² with clear acknowledgement the campaign was being driven by the ILD.⁹³ These reports included information on various meetings of ALP branches, unions and unemployed bodies that were demanding the recall of Judge Wells and the release of both Dhakiyarr and other Aboriginal prisoners.⁹⁴ These supportive *Labor Daily* reports were particularly significant given the ostensible position of the ALP (NSW) executive that Labor activists should not participate in Communist Party-led organisations through the period.⁹⁵

Many of the resolutions from Labor branches,⁹⁶ or reported in the Labor press,⁹⁷ were centrally informed by the CPA's analysis, including by the politics of anti-imperialism. A feature article by editor, Arthur Howless, in the *Labor Call* argued:

The policy of Imperialism has always been that of exploitation or extermination - the former where it is profitable, the latter where it is not... in the case of the Australian Aborigine the policy has been, and is still, extermination... only when the white workers realise that they, too, are victims of imperialism, and unite to shatter the whole ugly institution, will the Aborigine find peace.⁹⁸

⁹¹ "Mass Protest Demands Release of Aborigines".

⁹² For example, "Recall of Judge is Demanded – Strong Plea for Aborigines," *Labor Daily*, August 7, 1934, 5; "Further Defence of Abos," *Labor Daily*, August 8, 1934, 1; "Release of Aborigines Urged," *Labor Daily*, August 11, 1934, 5.

⁹³ "Want to Interview Condemned Abo," *Labor Daily*, August 10, 1934, 7.

⁹⁴ "Release of Natives is Urged," *Labor Daily*, August 17, 1934, 6.

⁹⁵ The *Labor Daily* had supported moves by the ALP (NSW) Executive to prohibit participation in "Communist auxiliaries" earlier in 1934, for example, "A.L.P. Executive's Anti-War Declaration Adopted," *Labor Daily*, February 13, 1934, 6; Despite widespread support from Labor branches and Labor-aligned union officials for the campaign to free Dhakiyarr, some Labor leaders were still insisting in October 1934 that "the I.L.D. has been banned by the A.L.P.," "Union Officials and the I.L.D. Conference," WW, October 5, 1934, 3.

⁹⁶ For example, the Wickham Branch of the ALP called for, "immediate release" of Aboriginal prisoners. B. Gale, Hon. Secretary, Wickham Branch, ALP, Letter to Hon. J.A. Perking, Minister for the Interior, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

⁹⁷ "Release of Aborigines Urged," *Labor Daily*, August 11, 1934, 5.

⁹⁸ Arthur F Howless, "The Abos' Plight: Imperialism and the Australian Aborigine," *Labor Call*, August 2, 1934, 11.

At the same time, however, a number of resolutions from Labor branches relied on explicitly racist and paternalistic arguments, similar to those marshalled by imperial humanitarians. The Concord branch, for example, argued that, “the mental caliber [sic] of these aboriginals is of a much lower standard”.⁹⁹ Anti-Japanese racism was also sometimes a feature. The fact that the “Caledon Bay natives” had been sentenced for killing Japanese, and Dhakiyarr for spearing McColl while he investigated these killings, led to a line of argument that the government was sacrificing Aboriginal lives to placate Japanese interests.¹⁰⁰ One cartoon in the *Labor Daily* for example featured “scales of justice” tilted towards the side holding a racist caricature of a Japanese man, over an Aboriginal figure.¹⁰¹

Despite these real limitations, however, it is clear that the CPA’s arguments about the importance of fighting for Aboriginal rights reached into the Australian labour movement on an unprecedented scale during the campaign for Dhakiyarr’s release. At the end of August, just before the federal government announced that an appeal would be lodged on Dhakiyarr’s behalf, Stan Taylor, the ALP (NSW) candidate for North Sydney in the forthcoming federal election, made a special appeal for the Labor Party to do more for Aboriginal rights. This was published in the *Labor Daily* in terms that clearly demonstrate the impact of CPA politics on his thinking:

The Australian aborigine’s condition urgently calls for the serious attention... ‘civilisation’ goes on leaving a trail of vice, bestiality and rottenness in its wake. I hope the incoming Labor Government will do what is necessary and just. Our slogan should be ‘Leave the black people alone!’¹⁰²

By the end of August, the uneasy alliance between the ILD and the APNR on display at the King’s Hall meeting had come to an end. An article in the *Red Leader* openly criticised the APNR for their failure to challenge the legitimacy of court rulings and fight for freedom:

The Association for the Protection of Aborigines [sic] and similar bodies are apparently satisfied that the eight Fitzmaurice River natives are not to be hung, but

⁹⁹ The Hon. Secretary, Concord Branch, ALP (NSW), Letter to Hon. G. Perkins (sic), Minister for the Interior, September 3, 1934, NAA: A1 1936/1229.

¹⁰⁰ “This World of Ours,” *Labor Daily*, August 2, 1934, 4.

¹⁰¹ “Not So Blind,” *Labor Daily*, August 3, 1934, 6.

¹⁰² “Hands Off Abos! Plea By Labor Man,” *Labor Daily*, August 19, 1934, 8.

will be imprisoned for life, with the same prospects for Tuckiar. The ILD is determined to wage a consistent campaign to secure their release. This can only be achieved by the workers themselves taking up the issue in the factories, shops and jobs, and sending resolutions of protest.¹⁰³

Indeed, despite Rowley crediting the APNR with organising Dhakiyarr's appeal,¹⁰⁴ across the numerous files in the National Archives that include correspondence on related matters in 1934, there is no evidence they called for an appeal, nor reiterated the demand of the August 6 rally for his immediate release.¹⁰⁵

The major ILD public meeting organised for August 27 initially included Elkin as a speaker,¹⁰⁶ but he did not appear at the meeting.¹⁰⁷ APNR Secretary William Morley complained to Elkin that requests by the ILD to use the Sydney Town Hall for a protest meeting about the Dhakiyarr case would likely be rejected, and would then be used as a precedent to stifle potential future public meetings organised by the APNR.¹⁰⁸

Despite apparently failing to secure the Town Hall, the ILD did press ahead with the August 27 event. It was held in the Emerson Hall in Sydney and was based far more squarely on the labour movement than the August 6 rally. By this time, numerous union bodies, including the NSW Labor Council (the peak body for unions in NSW), had passed strident resolutions demanding freedom for Dhakiyarr and other Aboriginal prisoners on the request of the ILD.¹⁰⁹ The Labor Council officially endorsed the August 27 meeting, promoted it to affiliates and provided two speakers.¹¹⁰ One speaker, F. Taylor, said to the meeting:

¹⁰³ "Aborigines Campaign," RL, August 29, 1934, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Rowley, *Destruction*, 296.

¹⁰⁵ Morley's letter to Perkins at the height of the crisis surrounding Wells' sentence of Dhakiyarr, complained about the injustice of the case but made no mention of an appeal. William Morley, Hon. Secretary, APNR, Letter to the Honorable J.A. Perkins, M.P., Minister for the Interior, August 16, 1934, NAA: 1936/4022 Part 2.

¹⁰⁶ "Defence of Tuckiar," WW, August 24, 1934, 6.

¹⁰⁷ "Protest Meeting Demands Release of Tuckiar – Calls for Withdrawal of Judge Wells," WW, August 31, 1934, 5.

¹⁰⁸ William Morley, "Letter to Dr. Elkin," August 23, 1934, Personal archives of Professor A P Elkin, USYD, P130, Series 12, Item 145.

¹⁰⁹ "Release of Natives is Urged," *Labor Daily*, August 17, 1934, 6.

¹¹⁰ "Protest Meeting Demands Release of Tuckiar".

The motion passed by the (Labor) Council to send delegates to this meeting was passed unanimously, showing that the whole of the organised trade union movement is against the persecution of the aborigines. We must not be fobbed off with a mere remission of the death sentence on Tuckiar, as had been done in other cases, but we must demand that he be returned to his tribe.¹¹¹

This very day, the Attorney-General informed the Department of the Interior that he had decided to appeal Dhakiyarr's conviction,¹¹² though the crowd at the Emerson Hall would not learn of the news until later in the week. This decision followed a large open-air protest in the Domain on August 26 that was attacked by the police on a pretext of enforcing the continuing ban on selling literature. The only record of this demonstration is a *Workers' Weekly* report that estimated an attendance of 3000 people,¹¹³ a crowd no doubt bolstered by the ILD's momentum around Domain protests on a Sunday to defy the ban on collecting funds. Nevertheless, when considered alongside the King's Hall and Emerson Hall public meetings, this protest means that a total of three major mobilisations demanding justice for Aboriginal people took place in Sydney between August 6 and August 27, a scale of activity probably not matched again over any three-week period, by any Aboriginal rights campaign until the comprehensive push in the 1960s for a referendum.¹¹⁴

Some meetings held by individual unions were also very substantial. On August 31, there was an extraordinary meeting of 500 waterside workers, packing into the union hall on a Thursday morning, to hear from the ILD's speaker, Naomi Luvis.¹¹⁵ Luvis was part of a milieu of left-wing literary figures in Sydney who supported the ILD, including her close friend Kylie Tennant.¹¹⁶ Luvis grew up in a Romanian village, witnessed the Russian revolution, studied at a Russian university in North-Eastern China during the 1920s and

¹¹¹ "Protest Meeting Demands Release of Tuckiar".

¹¹² Secretary, Attorney-General's Department, "MEMORANDUM for- The Secretary, Department of the Interior," 27 August, 1934, NAA: A1, 1936/4022 Part 2.

¹¹³ "Domain Meeting – More Arrests, Police Resisted".

¹¹⁴ Assessment based on a survey of major Aboriginal rights campaigns in a number of works including Gary Foley, "Timeline of Significant Moments in the Indigenous Struggle in South-East Australia," The Koori History Website, <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/timeline/histimeline.html> and Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996).

¹¹⁵ "Wharfies Addressed," RL, September 5, 1934, 9.

¹¹⁶ Luvis discussed her close relationship with Tennant in Naomi Luvis, "Kylie Tennant, Battler," *ABC Weekly*, May 17, 1941, 50.

worked for a Chinese export company before settling in Australia in 1928.¹¹⁷ Described as “a Jewess, tall, dark, and vivacious” in an article advertising one of many radio lectures in 1934,¹¹⁸ Luvis had spoken at the NSW Labor Council meeting that passed the resolution calling for freedom (cited above)¹¹⁹ and also at the Emerson Hall public meeting on August 27.¹²⁰ Luvis explained that she was “a victim of an outraged race, the Jews” and said that “the persecution of the aborigines seemed similar to the terror she had witnessed against the Jews in Rumania.”¹²¹ The *Red Leader* reported that her speech to the waterside workers, “dealt effectively with the struggles of minorities in various countries, linking these struggles with the aborigines’ trial held recently in Darwin”, a speech that was “heartily applauded upon completion of her address”.¹²² “More than 60 copies” of a special “pamphlet on the aborigines” produced by the ILD were sold at the meeting.¹²³

Breakthrough

On August 31, the same day that the 500 waterside workers met in Sydney, news of a breakthrough in the campaign hit the national news – an appeal to the High Court on behalf of Dhakiyarr would be supported by the government.¹²⁴ The *Red Leader* reported:

Agitation raised by the ILD for the right of appeal for Tuckiar, has resulted in the Commonwealth Government deciding to allow the appeal.... The protest movement has penetrated all sections of the community and forced the Government’s hand.¹²⁵

The *Workers’ Weekly* headline read: “Tuckiar Allowed To Appeal – Mass Protest Effect”. This article similarly argued that the decision to grant leave for appeal had come about “as a

¹¹⁷ “Trends in Soviet Literature,” *ABC Weekly*, September 1, 1945, 43; Naomi Luvis, “Gloom Follows Joy in the Passover,” *ABC Weekly*, April 5, 1941, 52.

¹¹⁸ Isabelle Grace, “For the Woman Listening,” *Wireless Weekly*, August 17, 1934, 29.

¹¹⁹ “Unions Demand Release of Tuckiar – And Removal of Judge Welss,” RL, August 22, 9.

¹²⁰ “Protest Meeting Demands Release of Tuckiar”.

¹²¹ “Protest Meeting Demands Release of Tuckiar”.

¹²² “Wharfies Addressed,” RL, September 5, 1934, 9.

¹²³ “Protest Meeting Demands Release of Tuckiar”. This pamphlet, “Trial of Aborigines,” was one of nine produced by the ILD in 1934, “I.L.D. Fights Against Fascism,” RL, January 9, 1935, 10.

¹²⁴ “The Aborigine Tuckiar – High Court Grants Leave to Appeal,” *The Age*, August 31, 1934, 11.

¹²⁵ “Tuckiar Granted Appeal,” RL, September 5, 1934, 9.

result of the mass protest made by all sections of the working class under the leadership of the International Labor Defence”.¹²⁶

Charles Priest also rammed home the message in *The Proletarian*:

Our paper in conjunction with the ILD were instrumental in running a sustained campaign for the retrial of Tuckiar... The tiny snowball set rolling by “The Proletarian” has now assumed gigantic proportions. From the very start the ILD has conducted a most intensive campaign against the verdict passed on Tuckiar. For weapons they have mass agitation such as public halls, street meetings, pamphlets, leaflets and addressing various organisations and interviews with various authorities.¹²⁷

In the month following the announcement of the appeal, the NT Administration moved to try and shut down production of *The Proletarian*, lobbying successfully for an amendment to the Newspapers Ordinance, to give greater censorship powers to the NT Administrator.¹²⁸ The Darwin CPA vowed to defy any attempts at censorship and argued that the move was retaliation for the key role they played winning an appeal for Dhakiyarr.¹²⁹

All of the CPA-controlled papers urged a continuation of the campaign in early September, with the *Red Leader* holding out hope that with continuing pressure, the appeal could still be run by the ILD’s barrister, Fred Patterson. They condemned the role of Fitzgerald, Dhakiyarr’s defence lawyer during the disastrous trial that had seen him convicted:

The next step is to raise a demand for Tuckiar to have the right to choose his own defending counsel. P. Fitzgerald, who was Tuckiar’s counsel at the trial, and who dodged the appeal, refused at first to have anything to do with an appeal. Why this change of front?... Fitzgerald must not be allowed to act as a break of the defence

¹²⁶ “Tuckiar Allowed to Appeal – Mass Protest Effect,” WW, September 7, 1934, 5.

¹²⁷ “Tuckiar Case,” *The Proletarian*, September 5, 1934, 4.

¹²⁸ “Government Gazette,” *Northern Standard*, September 28, 1934, 7; Fred Thompson, “Freedom of the Press,” *Northern Standard*, September 28, 1934, 4.

¹²⁹ “The Amended Newspapers Legislation,” *The Proletarian*, October 3, 1934, 1.

movement around Tuckiar. His conduct in the original trial should preclude him from being responsible for the defence before the High Court.¹³⁰

An article the following week seized on an announcement that the appeal might be heard in Adelaide, urging comrades in that city to fight to influence the shape of the hearing:

To organise a strong committee for the defence of Tuckiar under the leadership of the ILD is an immediate task that the Adelaide workers must get down to. Adelaide must give more assistance in raising the slogans for the right of Tuckiar to choose his own counsel. The authorities must be pressured to allow ILD representatives and an interpreter to interview Tuckiar and assist his defence.¹³¹

Further editions of the *Workers' Weekly* in September printed news of fresh resolutions calling for the resignation of Judge Wells and for freedom for both Dhakiyarr and the "Fitzmaurice River natives" from meetings of unions and unemployed bodies in NSW and Queensland.¹³² The journal *War! What For?* also noted continuing campaigning through September in "Notes of the Month" published later in 1934.¹³³ The September-October edition of the *Australian Labor Defender* had both a feature article by Sawtell that theorised Aboriginal oppression (analysed in Chapter Seven), and urged further resolutions of protest.¹³⁴ There was also an article focused on a critique of Judge Wells.¹³⁵ The ILD maintained correspondence with the Interior Ministry, pressing demands that ILD representatives be allowed to meet with Dhakiyarr and represent him at trial.¹³⁶

From the middle of September, however, the intensity of CPA campaigning both on Dhakiyarr's case, and more generally to "Free North Australian Aborigines", appears to slow down significantly. Egan argued that that the decision of the Lyons' government to grant

¹³⁰ "Tuckiar Appeal Granted".

¹³¹ "Tuckiar Appeal to be Heard in Adelaide," RL, September 12, 1934, 9.

¹³² "Unemployed Demand Recall of Judge Wells," WW, September 14, 1934, 2; "Railmen Protest Against Tuckiar Sentence," WW, September 21, 5;

¹³³ "Diary of the Month," *War! What For?*, November 1934, 163.

¹³⁴ Michael Sawtell, "Slavery in Australia," *Australian Labor Defender*, September – October 1934, 10.

¹³⁵ "Two Judges: Thayer – Wells," *Australian Labor Defender*, September – October 1934, 13.

¹³⁶ Herbert Brown, Secretary, Department of Interior, Letter to The National Secretary, International Labor Defence, October 4, 1934, NAA: 1936/4022 Part 2.

Dhakiyarr's appeal was taken, in part, as an attempt to neutralise the prominent case as an issue in the federal election scheduled in September.¹³⁷ Allowing the appeal does certainly seem to have alleviated the immediate pressure the Lyons government was under. Despite initially arguing that "this question [Aboriginal justice] should be brought out to the foremost at all election meetings", ¹³⁸ the *Red Leader* did not cover developments in Dhakiyarr's case, or any cases involving Aboriginal prisoners in the NT, for a number of months after the September 12 report.

In Darwin, Priest stood as the CPA's NT candidate in the elections.¹³⁹ He left the town right after the news that Dhakiyarr's appeal would be allowed, travelling to central Australia on a motorcycle to prosecute his campaign.¹⁴⁰ There was a strong emphasis on anti-racism through his campaign, and *The Proletarian* polemicised that a vote for Priest would be a vote against the White Australia policy, and for citizenship rights for all "coloured" people – both "Asiatic" and Aboriginal.¹⁴¹ There were also continuing calls to lift racist restrictions on membership of the NAWU.¹⁴² But *The Proletarian* seemed confident in the prospective success of Tuckiar's appeal and insisted that "Judge Wells' seat is shaky".¹⁴³ While in September the ILD national office was still arguing publicly that the organisation should be able to represent Tuckiar during the appeal,¹⁴⁴ I could find no evidence of any initiative taken in Darwin, where Tuckiar was still being held, to press this point and try to make contact with the warrior and there was no campaigning focus on the upcoming appeal. This lack of continuing agitation in Darwin probably contributed to the loss of focus on the case by the CPA in the southern capital cities.

Despite this, the impact of the intensive campaigning that led to Dhakiyarr's appeal had an important influence on the outcome of the case. As already argued, many of the legal grounds relied upon to acquit Dhakiyarr were outlined both in Priest's pamphlet and the initial legal

¹³⁷ Egan, *Justice*, 156.

¹³⁸ "Tuckiar Appeal to be Heard in Adelaide".

¹³⁹ "Federal Election – Policy Approach," *The Proletarian*, September 12, 1934, 3.

¹⁴⁰ Priest, *Still Further*, 19.

¹⁴¹ "Federal Election – Policy Approach".

¹⁴² "Aerodome Job News," *The Proletarian*, September 29, 1934, 4.

¹⁴³ "The Amended Newspaper Legislation".

¹⁴⁴ "Tuckiar Appeal to be Heard in Adelaide".

submission by the ILD requesting an appeal.¹⁴⁵ The ILD sought to puncture the façade of objective rationality claimed by the bourgeois legal system, arguing this masked the process of political struggle that was often crucial for determining the outcome of court cases.¹⁴⁶ The impact of politics on Dhakiyarr's appeal to the High Court took an interesting form. A central pillar of the CPA's critique of trials of Aboriginal prisoners had been that the NT Administration, and the Commonwealth government behind it, was responsible both for running the defence of prisoners like Dhakiyarr, while also prosecuting them at trial.¹⁴⁷ Generally, these circumstances worked to severely disadvantage Aboriginal defendants. In the case of Dhakiyarr's appeal, however, the Commonwealth's decision to launch an appeal was also, effectively, a decision to ensure it would be successful. Legal counsel acting for the Crown did not mount any serious defence of Wells' judgement. Ted Egan notes Wells' "caustic" reply to the Solicitor General in Canberra, who forwarded him a transcript of the proceedings: "This document is interesting, if only because it discloses the fact that not a single affidavit was filed by the Crown in answer to those filed on behalf of the appellant".¹⁴⁸ In their judgement handed down on November 8, 1934, the High Court judges ordered full acquittal and immediate release, "since it would be impossible to find a jury who had not been influenced by reports of the trial, that Dhakiyarr should be set free".¹⁴⁹

Demobilisation and Dhakiyarr's death

As noted at the opening of this chapter, Dhakiyarr was released from Fannie Bay prison on November 9, but he never had the chance to enjoy his freedom. After being taken to the Kahlin compound, Dhakiyarr disappeared during a heavy storm on November 10 and was never heard from again.¹⁵⁰ Ted Egan writes, "It is widely believed in Darwin that Tuckiar was shot by the police and dropped in Darwin harbor."¹⁵¹ Egan also speculated about a

¹⁴⁵ Joseph A. Carrodus, Acting NT Administrator, Trial of Tuckiar for Murder of Constable McColl, Letter to the Secretary, Department of Interior, August 13, 1934, NAA: A432, 1934/1437.

¹⁴⁶ Allan Gale, "Open Letter to Judge Wells," *Australian Labor Defender*, January-February 1935, 14.

¹⁴⁷ "Trial of Aborigine a Travesty - Tuckiar Sacrificed to save 'honor' of McColl - Defence in League with Prosecution," *WW*, August 24, 1934, 3.

¹⁴⁸ Egan, *Justice*, 189.

¹⁴⁹ Read, "Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation," 6.

¹⁵⁰ Read, "Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation," 6.

¹⁵¹ Egan, *Justice*, 192.

number of other possible scenarios, all built around the idea of police killing Dhakiyarr during an attempted overland trip back to Arnhem Land.¹⁵²

In *Dhakiyarr vs the King*, Dhakiyarr's own family said they believed he had been killed by police, and were still demanding answers, 70 years on. Dhukal Wirrpanda said:

That was the first time the High Court stood up for the Black people... But he never came back home. And here we are. Looking, searching, who can tell us the truth... Did you throw him into the sea? Give to the crocodile? Did you shoot him? And cut him into pieces and made a bait for the fish and throw him into the deep water?¹⁵³

Peter Read highlighted the incredible silence in remaining archival material on the fate of Dhakiyarr, from the moment he was released. Despite the fact that "Darwin must have been seething with rumors":

Of these conjectures, documents in the National Archives of Australia say nothing. Three or four shelf metres of documents before and up to November 1934 dwindle to reveal... nothing. Upon the files descends an appalling silence. But it must have been known about. It was as if the possibility of police foul play was too dangerous even to put into private memos.¹⁵⁴

This silence, however, did not just come from official government sources. From the numerous organisations that had demonstrated support for Dhakiyarr in various ways during his trial, many on the initiative of the CPA, none of them seriously fought to protect Dhakiyarr post-release. The APNR was certainly concerned, and Morley wrote to the Interior Ministry, urging authorities to find him and protect him from "dangers he is exposed to... his present position is equivalent to re-imposition of death penalty".¹⁵⁵ Those "dangers" were imagined to be "falling into the hands of hostile tribes".¹⁵⁶ A telegram to the Interior Ministry from the Australian Aborigines Amelioration Association also demanded a search for

¹⁵² Egan, *Justice*, 193.

¹⁵³ Murray and Collins, dir, *Dhakiyarr vs The King*.

¹⁵⁴ Read, "Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation," 7.

¹⁵⁵ "Tuckiar's Flight – Little Hope of Recapture," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 13, 1934.

¹⁵⁶ "Tuckiar's Flight – Little Hope of Recapture".

Dhakiyarr and a protective escort back to his country.¹⁵⁷ A November 23 *Workers' Weekly* article on Dhakiyarr's release included no information from CPA members in Darwin, relying on mainstream press reports instead. The article said Dhakiyarr had "gone bush" and that "the Press is very emphatic on the point that Tuckiar will be a very lucky man if he ever reaches his own tribe", also citing danger from other tribes along with "alligators".¹⁵⁸ Any serious communist assessment of Dhakiyarr's circumstances should have recognised the danger he faced from the NT police. As the *Australian Labor Defender* argued in January 1935, too late to take any action:

We fear that Tuckiar will never be heard of again and are of the opinion that he has met the same fate as thousands of other aborigines who the imperialists wished to get out of the way – that is, that [the] previous death sentence has been carried out unofficially.¹⁵⁹

It had been the power of organised workers that provided an effective check on the power of the state to persecute Dhakiyarr in court. The CPA celebrated this power as the force that won Dhakiyarr's freedom, but with radical workers demobilised, he became fatally exposed to state violence once again. When communists in Darwin successfully lobbied for the release of another Aboriginal prisoner, "Sugarbag", in 1932 (case discussed in Chapter Five), efforts had been made to take a deputation to the prison to greet him on release.¹⁶⁰ A similar effort in November 1934 may have protected Dhakiyarr and opened possibilities for a more profound connection between the workers' movement and the Yolngu resisting colonisation.

Communists in Darwin were under real pressure through the period when Dhakiyarr was acquitted, with the NT Administration trying to suppress *The Proletarian* and members suffering consistent police harassment. In December, a decision was taken to move production away from Immigrant House to take the heat off unemployed residents.¹⁶¹ The new office was subsequently "raided by the police and the typewriter, duplicator and anything else that could be related to *The Proletarian* was seized". This pressure exacerbated internal tensions. Priest later wrote that he felt the Darwin CPA branch was becoming "too conservative" and he was "growing away" from the party. He fell out with Waldie, and was

¹⁵⁷ N.M. Morley, Lettergram Minister of Interior, November 13, 1934, NAA: 1936/4022 Part 2

¹⁵⁸ "Tuckiar – And Others," WW, November 23, 1934, 6.

¹⁵⁹ Allan Gale, "Open Letter to Judge Wells".

¹⁶⁰ "Aborigines and Workers Have the Same Enemy," RL, June 27, 1934, 6.

¹⁶¹ Priest, *Still Further*, 22.

subsequently expelled for “inactivity and political unreliability” in January 1935, a process he says was cordial.¹⁶² There is plenty of evidence that the Darwin CPA continued to challenge anti-Aboriginal racism following Priest’s expulsion,¹⁶³ but not with the same campaigning fervour, nor the orientation to push for Australia-wide mobilisation that Priest had displayed in 1933-34. After spending all of 1935 working outside of Darwin, Priest returned in 1936. He took up the case of Alice Mindil, an Aboriginal house-maid who had accused her master, a local policeman, of rape. Priest published independently on the issue, and was charged with “defamatory criminal libel”.¹⁶⁴ He asked the CPA for funds and political support for a defence campaign, but was denied by Waldie, who apparently said the party, “did not want to be involved in such a sordid affair”.¹⁶⁵ Priest was found guilty and sentenced to nine months in Fannie Bay prison.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

The intensive campaign for Dhakiyarr’s release in August 1934 was the culmination of a process that had begun in 1928, with the formation of a CPA branch in Darwin and the first flickers of solidarity with Aboriginal struggle by communists in Australia. In the intervening years, the CPA had shifted from accepting the hegemonic idea that Aboriginal people were inferior and doomed to disappear, towards a stance that led thousands of workers in Sydney into confrontation with police, to assert Aboriginal humanity and stand in solidarity with the struggle for survival.

This development of a pro-Aboriginal communist position had transformed the landscape of Aboriginal affairs. Elkin’s biographer, Tigger Wise, argued that the professor “always referred to the events of 1934 as ‘the turning point’”, triggering unprecedented government engagement with imperial humanitarian opinion and the beginning of formal integration of

¹⁶² Priest, *Still Further*, 22.

¹⁶³ “Protection of Aborigines in the Northern Territory – ILD Victory,” WW, July 19, 1935, 3; “Prison Labor Exploited – Protest Against Practice in NT,” WW, October 22, 1935, 3. Priest, *Still Further*, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Legal scholar and historian Stephen Gray published two essays examining this case. Stephen Gray, “The Communist, the Copper and the Court-House: Racism and Libel in 1930s Darwin,” *Northern Perspective* 20, no. 2 (1997), 107-113; Stephen Gray, “Black Skeletons in a White Man’s Cupboard,” *Overland* 150 (1998), 79-82.

¹⁶⁵ Gray, “The Communist, the Copper and the Court-House,” 109.

¹⁶⁶ Gray, “The Communist, the Copper and the Court-House,” 112.

anthropologists into the protection regime. More significant for the struggle for Aboriginal rights is the opinion expressed by William Cooper in 1936: “from the time of the apprehension, trial and acquittal of Tuckiar on the charge of murder, it has been daily evident that the sun of the Aboriginals’ Cause is rising”.¹⁶⁷ Despite the CPA’s shift away from focused campaigning on Aboriginal rights in October 1934, Cooper and other Aboriginal activists in Melbourne had established a large, supportive audience in the labour movement¹⁶⁸ and started to join activities of the new Movement Against War and Fascism.¹⁶⁹ This was just one example of a renewed process of Aboriginal political self-organisation that would flower later in the 1930s.

Writing the radical workers who fought to free Dhakiyarr into the historiography of this case is important, both for properly appreciating how progressive change has actually happened in Australian history, and how it can be made today. As Charles Priest argued in October 1934, powerful interests were already working hard to obfuscate the fact that it was communist agitation that “forced the Aboriginal Department to lodge an appeal on [Tuckiar’s] behalf”:

This was the first time the Aboriginal Dept had lodged an appeal and the newspapers try and create the idea that the appeal was forced by the missionaries, but that will deceive no one acquainted with the facts.¹⁷⁰

The NT Administration was at that very time trying to censor *The Proletarian* to ensure the facts could not even be printed.

The broader facts are these: the NT Police had wanted to invade Arnhem Land to kill Dhakiyarr, and others, in retaliation for their militant defence of their country. The NT Supreme Court wanted to hang him. Both attempts failed due to the solidarity of radical workers who saw in Dhakiyarr an ally in the struggle against the brutal system of capitalism. The crucial importance of this solidarity was proved in the negative sense by Dhakiyarr’s

¹⁶⁷ William Cooper, “To the Minister for the Interior, Thomas Patterson, 31 October 1936”, in *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines’ League*, ed. Andrew Markus and Bain Attwood (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), 54.

¹⁶⁸ In November 1934, for example, Cooper addressed an ALP women’s conference. “Labor Women in Conference”, *Labor Call*, November 29, 1934, 11.

¹⁶⁹ Egon Kisch documented Aboriginal participation in an anti-fascist rally that took place during his tour of Australia in early 1935. Egon Kisch, *Australian Landfall* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1969), 182.

¹⁷⁰ “Amended Newspapers Ordinance”, *The Proletarian*, October 3, 1934, 1.

likely assassination by police after workers had demobilised and shifted their attention elsewhere. Alliances between the radical workers' movement and Aboriginal rights activists, however, would play a central role once again in many struggles to come.

Conclusion

In September 1934, the *Australian Labor Defender* included the most detailed content on the struggle for Aboriginal rights of any communist-controlled publication consulted during my research. There were two feature essays, one condemning Judge Wells' rulings against Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda and other Aboriginal prisoners,¹ and another theorising the connections between workers' struggle and Aboriginal resistance.² This same edition also included a call for Australian workers to join the campaign to free an Italian communist prisoner, Antonio Gramsci, who had been imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime.³ Gramsci and Dhakiyarr, both then being held under armed guard on opposite ends of the earth, could not have known of each other. Both, however, had led forms of political resistance that communists worked hard to connect and strengthen. These two leaders stand as powerful representatives of the two main social forces that shaped the development of the CPA's theory and practice on questions of Aboriginal rights between 1920 and 1934 – the international communist movement, and Aboriginal resistance to colonisation.

Gramsci described Marxism as the "philosophy of praxis", an outlook committed to developing an analysis of the world through taking action to transform it.⁴ He believed that a revolutionary workers' party was the crucial mechanism needed to unite theory and practice, and the *Australian Labor Defender* highlighted both Gramsci's "devotion" to building the Italian Communist Party prior to his arrest and his continuing intellectual work in prison. In his famous *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci argued the task of Marxists was to:

construct, on a specific practice, a theory which, by coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the practice itself, can accelerate the historical process that is going on, rendering practice more homogeneous, more coherent, more efficient in all its elements.⁵

¹ "Two Judges, Thayer-Wells," *Australian Labor Defender*, September-October 1934, 13.

² Michael Sawtell, "Slavery in Australia," *Australian Labor Defender*, September-October 1934, 10-11.

³ "Gramsci's Life Must Be Saved!", *Australian Labor Defender*, September-October 1934, 14.

⁴ Peter Thomas, "Gramsci and the Political," *Radical Philosophy* 153 (January-February 2009): 33.

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 365, quoted in Chris Harman, "Gramsci, the Prison Notebooks and philosophy," *International Socialism Journal* 114 (Spring 2007), <http://isj.org.uk/gramsci-the-prison-notebooks-and-philosophy/>.

We have seen this dynamic unity of theory and practice at work through key transformative moments discussed in this thesis.

Chapter One analysed the genesis of anti-colonial Marxism. Karl Marx recognised that in the working-class slums of industrial English cities, the most militant English workers identified with the resistance of Irish independence fighters against British imperialism. The mobilisation of thousands of English workers in support of Irish self-determination, alongside their Irish republican workmates, was a “specific practice”, in Gramscian terms,⁶ that posed a profound challenge to the racist division of the working class relied on by the rulers of Britain. Marx fought for the International Workingmen’s Association to recognise the significance of this development and act to co-ordinate working-class solidarity with Irish insurgents. In arguing his position, he developed a nascent theory of revolutionary working-class struggle against colonialism based on this practice. This theory profoundly influenced the outlook of the early Comintern, formed in the wake of WWI. The Comintern, in its terms of admission, insisted that affiliated parties develop alliances between revolutionary workers and anti-colonial movements across the world, helping to accelerate the historical process first identified by Marx.

In the Australian context, however, Marxists did not initially recognise that Aboriginal resistance constituted an important anti-colonial struggle. In Chapter One I argued that the work of Marx and Engels themselves, by ignoring or dehumanising Indigenous peoples, failed to adequately grasp the dynamics of oppression and resistance in Anglosphere settler colonies like Australia. Their knowledge of Indigenous peoples came, not from experiences of struggle, but from racist bourgeois anthropology. This weakness also characterised the early outlook of the CPA who, living in a society saturated with anti-Aboriginal racism, initially reproduced some of these racist ideas, and failed to stand alongside Aboriginal resistance. The failure to support the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA), was a significant missed opportunity. The AAPA was led by Aboriginal industrial workers, and activists like Fred Maynard combined their agitational trips to oppressed reserve communities with shifts working alongside union militants on the docks in Sydney. Solidarity from Maynard’s union, the WWF, and other working-class organisations in the late 1920s,

⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 365.

could have helped the AAPA to more effectively resist repression by the police and Protection Board, while also strengthening the unity and broadening the horizons of the working-class movement.

A number of historical processes working to transform this acceptance of anti-Aboriginal racism by the CPA were closely analysed in Chapters Three and Four. In the years between 1927 and 1931, the CPA both applied Marxist principles developed elsewhere in the world to the Australian situation and developed original insights, based on practices of solidarity that emerged out of the working-class experience in Australia. I argued that Indian revolutionary M.N. Roy, who had operated in anti-colonial struggles across the world, made a decisive intervention into a theoretical argument at Comintern meetings in Moscow in 1927 about Australia's role in the global imperialist system. In the face of opposition from Australian communist Tom Wright, who insisted that Australia was oppressed by Britain, Roy asserted that Australia was itself an emerging locus of imperialist power. Chapter Three included the first analysis of the contribution of senior Bolshevik leader, Nikolai Bukharin, to this debate. Bukharin largely concurred with Roy, and this pushed a fundamental reorientation in how the CPA imagined their place in the world. Recognising that Australia was an "oppressor nation", led the CPA to understand the importance of supporting the struggles of colonised people controlled by the Australian bourgeoisie. Contemporaneous with these theoretical developments was an armed Indigenous struggle against Australian forces sent to pacify Malaita in the Solomon Islands, and then a large strike of Indigenous workers in Rabaul, New Guinea, that was also brutally suppressed. The resistance leaders on Malaita and Rabaul were celebrated in the pages of the *Workers' Weekly* in articles that also drew connections between the colonial violence inflicted by Australian forces on Pacific islands, and the massacres of Indigenous people still taking place on the Australian frontier.

In 1928, a call published in the *Workers' Weekly* for white workers in Darwin to unite with indentured Aboriginal labourers fell on fertile ground. A number of historians have already highlighted the importance of communist initiative in encouraging anti-racist activism in Darwin in the early 1930s. In Chapter Three, however, I demonstrated that the very roots of the CPA branch in the tropical town came from the coherence of a small number of activists around a political line that the North Australian Workers Union (NAWU) should open its ranks to Aboriginal members. The "specific practice" of inter-racial solidarity developed in Darwin during the Depression, particularly in the Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM),

was popularised and generalised in the pages of the *Workers' Weekly*. Experiences of hunger, homelessness and police brutality were well known to both white unemployed and Aboriginal people in Darwin at this time, and defiant demonstrations demanded recognition of this common humanity. A number of communists also developed a particular admiration for Aboriginal people asserting their rights to country, and recognised the fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of Australian law bound up with this stand. In his 1931 program for Aboriginal liberation, Herbert Moxon argued that the continuing drive to try and erase the presence of Aboriginal people in Australia was bound up with a nationalist ideological project. The ruling class, contended Moxon, were trying to bury the truth about the genocide and land theft at the foundations of Australian capitalism.

The 1931 program has been well cited in historical writing, but this thesis has provided the first detailed analysis of its genesis and political character. Crucial for its development were lessons from the struggles in Darwin, but perhaps more important, was the emergence of a practice of solidarity between white and Aboriginal activists involved in the Unemployed Workers' Movement in south-east Australia. In Darwin, where Aboriginal people constituted a significant proportion of the town's population, and surrounding regions had an Aboriginal majority, the colonial oppression that formed an integral part of Australia capitalism was palpable and had a direct impact on the operations of the labour market. In the south-east, where Aboriginal people were often a tiny minority of the population, colonial oppression had been far less apparent for most white workers, and was far less pressing as a political issue in their daily lives. In the Depression, contact between the CPA and Aboriginal people in the south-east notably increased. CPA membership grew rapidly, and many white unemployed workers, experiencing extreme hardship for the first time, came into contact with Aboriginal families who had long been confined to the margins of society. In August 1931, an initiative by the Bourke UWM to protest the exclusion of Aboriginal people from access to unemployment relief payments precipitated a decision of the CPA executive to commission Moxon to draft the program. There is also evidence of joint Aboriginal and white initiative behind similar demands in a number of UWM branches in NSW and Queensland.

Standing together with Aboriginal people for equality also exposed white activists in the UWM to Aboriginal testimony about the brutality of Australia's past and present, along with demands for self-determination and control of their own lands. Moxon drew on experiences and insights gained by this practice of solidarity in the UWM, sketching these into a

sophisticated analysis of continuing genocide and the possibilities for resistance. One of the most dynamic aspects of this program was an insistence that Aboriginal oppression was a continent-wide phenomenon, not something confined to frontier regions. The program demanded self-determination and rights to culture and land for all Aboriginal people, regardless of “caste”.

Despite the power of Moxon’s analysis, a number of features of the outlook and political culture of the CPA in the early 1930s initially stifled any moves towards serious campaigning for Aboriginal rights. From 1930, under the influence of the Stalinised Comintern, the CPA developed an authoritarian internal political culture. Moxon fell out of favour and was expelled. Rather than campaign amongst the membership to promote the importance of his ideas, Moxon appealed to Moscow for support that was not forthcoming. No one else in the CPA leadership seemed genuinely committed to Moxon’s insight, expressed in the 1931 program, that “in all states... there are problems of the aborigines to be taken up and fought for by the Australian workers”. Imperial humanitarian groups and the mainstream press most often focused on the scandalous treatment of Aboriginal people in the north of Australia, and this too became almost the sole focus of CPA reporting and activity on Aboriginal issues. A specific practice of solidarity between white and Aboriginal activists in the UWM in south-east Australia continued between 1932 and 1934, but without any effort by the CPA to support this activity with serious party-wide campaigning.

Another severe limitation on the CPA’s practice in this period was commitment to the Comintern’s Third Period perspective. This mandated an ultra-sectarian approach to reformist workers’ parties. From 1930, the CPA branded the Australian Labor Party (ALP) a “social fascist” organisation. This made any campaign initiative that sought to mobilise workers beyond the ranks of the CPA very difficult. This thesis has demonstrated that a thaw in this sectarian approach in 1933 was an important factor in the emergence of large-scale working-class campaigns for Aboriginal rights. Rank-and-file Labor members and a number of left-wing Labor leaders became allies in struggle through organisations such as the Council Against War (CAW) and International Labor Defence (ILD) that operated as effective united front organisations despite the centrality of CPA initiative and oversight.

By mid-1933, the CPA was in a good position to put newly developed ideas about the importance of Aboriginal rights into practice. The party was leading major anti-war public

meetings and demonstrations through the CAW, with serious support from trade unions, and had built ILD branches capable of effectively fighting for political prisoners. Charles Priest, a CPA member recruited through UWM struggle, had spent time at the heart of CPA operations in the *Workers' Weekly* office in Sydney and also had connections across the NT, including in Aboriginal communities. He had returned to Darwin in June 1933, and took responsibility for editing the UWM bulletin with an explicit commitment to push forward Aboriginal rights campaigning.

When Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda speared Constable Albert McColl on August 1, 1933, this catalysed the first instance of nationally coordinated, working-class campaigning for Aboriginal rights in Australia's history. An account of the spearing opened this thesis, to signpost how pivotal this event was in the development of communist initiative. Dhakiyarr's mind may have been focused on defending his own country and people, but his militant leadership inspired many thousands of radical workers across Australia, who faced constant police brutality fighting hardship in the Depression. The events that followed the death of Constable McColl were closely analysed in the final three chapters of this thesis. My focus shifted from accounting for the development of a pro-Aboriginal theoretical position by the CPA towards an analysis of the impact that the party had on the course of history through its campaign efforts in 1933-34. The specific practice first theorised by Marx, of workers from an "oppressor nation" mobilising to support the resistance of colonised people, now manifested in a profound way in Australian circumstances.

In response to the spearing of McColl, police in Darwin, with the support of the NT Administration and the Department of the Interior in Canberra, planned a punitive expedition to "teach the natives a lesson" and force submission to colonial law, a pattern that had played out across the Australian frontier since the initial invasion of Australia in 1788. Through careful analysis of the timing and content of internal correspondence between government departments, mainstream press reports and records of meetings of protest against the planned massacre, I have demonstrated the central role of workers' organisations in forcing the government to cancel plans for a police expedition. Imperial humanitarian groups, generally credited by historians with leading the successful campaign, largely dropped their objections to a police party re-entering Dhakiyarr's lands after they received reassurances from the government it would not be a "punitive expedition". In contrast, the CPA argued that *any* police party would still be prepared for violence and successfully agitated for continuing

protests. Mass meetings made it clear that there were elements of the labour movement willing to support Aboriginal warriors using lethal force against police officers who entered their lands to try and arrest them. Trade unions threatened escalating action. To avoid the possibility of further labour movement radicalisation over the question of frontier warfare, the government decided to work with missionaries on a “peace party”.

Chapters Seven and Eight made a similar argument about the centrality of workers’ protests in forcing important shifts in the relationship between Aboriginal people and the justice system in the NT in 1934. My analysis of the six-month CPA-led campaign to “Free North Australian Aborigines” included an original interpretation of developments in the famous Dhakiyarr case after the warrior was sentenced to hang by Judge Wells on August 6, 1934. This account explicitly challenged the claim, still made by prominent Australian judges, that Dhakiyarr’s acquittal was an example of the fairness and justice embodied in Australia’s legal system. Again, combining close analysis of the mass protest campaign against Dhakiyarr’s conviction, and internal government correspondence, I demonstrated that workers’ protest, led by militants who rejected the legitimacy of Australian law entirely, was a crucial force that compelled the government to successfully appeal Dhakiyarr’s conviction in the High Court. Tragically, the demobilisation of the workers’ movement around issues of injustice towards Aboriginal prisoners in the NT made Dhakiyarr particularly vulnerable when he was released, and likely killed by police in November 1934.

These final chapters made an argument about the important impact of communists on developments in Aboriginal politics, and the power of organised workers to drive social change. My purpose here, however, has not been to uncritically celebrate the CPA. Apart from the most intensive weeks of campaigning documented in this thesis, Aboriginal rights activism rarely engaged the same number of members as other party-led campaigns. Chapter Seven detailed a continuing failure to engage with Aboriginal political initiative in the south-east. This had serious consequences. The mid-1930s saw an intensification of Aboriginal oppression in NSW, with extraordinary new practices of control and austerity codified in legislation in 1936, widely known as the “Dog Act” by Aboriginal people.⁷ This development was not even noted in the *Workers’ Weekly*, despite continuing pro-Aboriginal activism by

⁷ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 193.

CPA members in central-west NSW,⁸ continuing calls by Labor branches to abolish the NSW Aborigines Protection Board,⁹ and initial opposition from Labor MPs to the “Dog Act”.¹⁰

What I have sought to illustrate, however, is the *potential* for solidarity between the non-Indigenous working-class in Australia and Aboriginal people in struggle. With clear analysis and leadership, non-Indigenous workers can be convinced of the importance of standing in solidarity with Aboriginal struggle. This history shows that there can be powerful, transformative consequences from this practice of solidarity. The struggles of the early 1930s laid important foundations for continuing working-class solidarity that played a central role in many of the major Aboriginal rights campaigns of the twentieth century, including the Pilbara strike in 1946,¹¹ the formation of FCAATSI in the 1950s,¹² the Gurindji strike in 1966¹³ and the Black Power movement from the late 1960s.¹⁴

It is important to recognise the real courage and the sacrifices made to build these foundations. There were powerful forces working to try and smash the nascent practices of solidarity between white workers and Aboriginal people between 1920 and 1934. The *Australian Labor Defender* described “white chauvinism” as “one of the most deep-rooted of the ideological weapons of the Australian ruling class against the workers”.¹⁵ This ideology was enforced on the working class using very real weapons too. The CPA-controlled paper *Red Leader* was being confiscated and burned by the authorities at the same time it first carried articles about Aboriginal rights, as part of Moxon’s series. Moxon himself was first arrested and then chased out of Bourke by armed right-wing vigilantes, supported by land owners outraged at communist agitation amongst local Aboriginal people. Demonstrators in Darwin demanding unemployment relief regardless of race, and in the Sydney Domain calling for freedom for Dhakiyarr, also faced bashings and arrest by police. Aboriginal activists trying to speak out against their oppression of course faced the greatest risks. As

⁸ “Treatment of Aborigines”, *Workers Weekly*, March 10, 1936, 2; “Powerful Rally in Defence of Unemployed & Relief Workers”, *WW*, March 3, 1936, 4.

⁹ “A.L.P. Conference Items Show United Front Possibilities”, *WW*, March 31, 1936, 2.

¹⁰ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 194-197.

¹¹ Anne Scrimgeour, *On Red Earth Walking: The Pilbara Aboriginal Strike, Western Australia 1946-1949* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2020).

¹² Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 277.

¹³ Frank Hardy, *The Unlucky Australians* (Melbourne: One Day Hill, 2006).

¹⁴ Kevin Cook and Heather Goodall, *Making Change Happen: Black and White Activists talk to Kevin Cook about Aboriginal, Union and Liberation Politics* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013), 25-61.

¹⁵ “Struggle Against Chauvinism,” *Australian Labor Defender*, May 1934, 10.

Moxon wrote in 1931: “Aborigines (full or half-caste) who take part in politics are subject to the vilest of terror, denied the right to live, and threatened with their children being taken from them”.¹⁶ This was true both for leaders of the AAPA, who faced threats to their children and Dhakiyarr, who had become a nationwide symbol of resistance, but was likely assassinated.

Before he knew the name of Dhakiyarr, Charles Priest had written in praise of “the courage” of Aboriginal warriors who “had pit their spears against the 303s of police, rather than tamely submit to the white man’s domination”, calling on “all members of the working class” to rally in their defence.¹⁷ Thousands of workers responded to this call. They recognised that a militant Black challenge to “the white man’s domination”, would in fact strengthen the struggles of white workers, and all oppressed people, for dignity and freedom. This courage should inspire us today too, in dangerous times when a transformative practice of working-class solidarity with Indigenous peoples defending their lands remains vital for human liberation and the survival of the planet.

¹⁶ “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery”, WW, September 24, 1931, 2.

¹⁷ “A study in psychology,” *Northern Voice*, August 30, 1933, 2.

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