

## THE FAR LEFT IN AUSTRALIA

by Rowan Cahill

**[Review of *The Far Left In Australia Since 1945*, editors Jon Piccini, Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, Routledge, London and New York, 2019. First published in an edited form in *Recorder* (Newsletter of the Melbourne Labour History Society), Issue No. 293, November 2018, pp. 8-9.]**

At the outset, a few comments. First, this is an attractively designed book, not something associated with the bland churn mills of academic publishing. Second, while it is packaged in the usual academic publisher's hugely expensive hardbound library edition, it is also available in affordable paperback and eBook formats. Third, the astute reader will note me cited in a few footnotes and thanked in the acknowledgements, so as a reviewer I'm connected with the book. Hence this explanation: the 'thank you' is due to my having read a draft of the editors' Introduction essay and the feedback I provided. Given the editors aimed this book at a wide readership – academic, general, people new to the era, old hands – I thought they delivered an astute, even-handed introductory treatment of a complex era, its passions, enthusiasms, its politics, strategies and its factional complexities, some of which are still divisively alive. I stand by that judgement.

Now a quibble. When Australian leftist commentators use the term 'Far Right' today, it is generally in a derogatory way, shorthand to describe a gaggle of neo-nazis, fascists etcetera of a thuggish acid-in-your-face kind, racist trolls, a cyberspace of one-person-and-a-dog-flat-earth 'parties' that manage to jag the system and gain traction amongst fake news devotees, Christian clappers with heads buried in the Old Testament, and a galaxy of their combinations and ilk. While there are Australian commentators of a Murdochian/*Quadrantian* kind who regard 'Far Left' as anything to the left of Genghis Khan, in this book 'Far Left' refers to the politics, passions, enthusiasms, strategies and formations to the left of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), which, as is evident in this book, and generally speaking, was not 'Far Left' in the same sense of the 'Far Right' I've sketched above, rather manifestations and expressions of good old social justice issues, concerns for human decency, and pursuit of a better world. Indeed, it could be asked in a Sat-Nav way just where does the Australian 'Far Left' begin, when, as evident in this book, elements of the left of the ALP and the left beyond the ALP often shared the same political space?

As noted above, the Introduction is a useful account of the territory covered by the book and sets the context for the essays that follow. As the editors confidently assert and explain, based on scholarly research, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) ended World War 11 robustly, with some 20,000 members, and with organisational and political clout. Despite the repressive Cold War climate, the Party "seeded or provided impetus" for the emergence of other movements and organisations "steadfastly devoted to a better world". Along with work in the trade union movement, these variously struggled "for indigenous rights, gender equality, ending immigration restrictions, stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and fostering peace", contributing in the process to "reforms that have changed Australia from the racist, sexist and parochial society of 1945".

The fourteen chapters by sixteen authors that follow, variously illustrate, reinforce, and inform this. However, the CPA did not remain the robust outfit it was, and post-1945 went into decline, especially following the 'Secret Speech' of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and the Soviet invasion of

Hungary in 1956, and in the 1960s the impacts of Euro-communism on the party and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968). The Party eventually voted to dissolve itself in 1991. The decline and end of the CPA are a seminal part of the book's discussion, as are the ramifications and morphings of this process.

There is a lot going on in this book, actually too much to encapsulate in a brief review. Much of the content is either new, or adds nuances to previous understandings of the period, if not outright challenges. All of the contributions are based on significant original research, and as the extensive endnotes to each chapter indicate, they are not confectionary cut-and-pastes from secondary sources.

Overall, the striking feature of this book is the way it goes beyond the simplistic, bland and sweeping strokes of much commentary and analysis of the period studied, yes, even in scholarly discourses. The authors and their chapters variously demonstrate that the tumult of the period, the social movements, the protests, the issues, the various struggles for social justice, the splits that wracked the CPA, were complex and nuanced. What transpired did not just occur, did not just happen, but gestated and emerged out of complex local and national processes. When there were transnational influences, and there were, these were *influences*, reimagined, reinterpreted, and ameliorated by the rootedness of the lives of people and their experiences. There was no lock-step international puppeteering or mimicry.

Pressed to describe the book simply, it is a nuanced study of Australian leftism post-1945 offering much of relevance to the present and future. If it gets the circulation and sales it deserves, it will be mined by researchers for years to come, for it is a mother lode. Read thoughtfully, it also has much to offer activists.

**Rowan Cahill**

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