

Chapter Six

‘They will make splendid allies..’: the CPA and European Migrants

Introduction

This chapter continues the examination of the CPA’s attitude towards the mass immigration programme that was to transform Australia’s economic, social and political framework from 1948 onwards. The previous chapter analysed the prolonged and vitriolic campaign that Communist-led unions waged against the arrival of East European and German migrants from 1948 onwards. However, when migrants from other countries such as Greece, Italy and Malta started to arrive in Australia they faced a different reception from Communist-led unions. While a positive approach towards these migrants was not always uniform or consistent by all Communist-led unions, it was in general a continuation of the internationalist outlook that had been a central feature of the CPA since its formation.

For the CPA working class unity in Australia was crucial if its aim of a working class revolution against the Australian capitalist state was to be achieved. As the mass immigration programme gathered pace, the CPA hierarchy stressed that one of the central tasks facing its trade union activists was combating the entrenched racism of the Australian working class. Its own members were expected to be exemplary in their attitudes towards migrants and on occasions the Party hierarchy took active measures to enforce the high standards expected from members. As migrants started to enter the industrial workforce they encountered Communist union activists who often offered them friendship and helped them adapt to Australian society. This was a prelude to their possible involvement in the trade union movement or the CPA.

The CPA faced a particular challenge as it attempted to build a unified working class movement at a time when tens of thousands of new workers were arriving in Australia. Immigrant societies can face the strong possibility of a working class divided between native born and migrant worker. At times of economic recession when there is a sharp increase in unemployment, many native born workers often blame migrant workers for their unemployment. During the 1952 recession when unemployment started to increase

rapidly, Communist-led unions such as the BWIU responded quickly and supported unemployed Italian migrants when they protested at the lack of promised jobs. Their struggles led the CPA leadership to acknowledge that Australian workers had much to learn about working class struggles from their Italian co-workers. A similar pattern emerged during the 1961 recession when unemployed migrants again demonstrated at the lack of promised jobs. Once again Communist-led unions supported their campaign for employment.

This was a sharp contrast to many of the historical traditions of the Australian labour and helped to forge strong bonds between the CPA and Italian migrants. Similar policies towards migrants were adopted by other Communist-led unions. In Sydney the WWF helped Maltese migrants find jobs and accommodation. In return, the Maltese became a significant part of the support base of the Communist leadership of the union. Other migrants did not encounter any major problems in being active in other Communist-led unions such as the Victorian branch of the Painters' Union.

Despite these positive approaches the relationship between the CPA and migrants was often complex and difficult. There were also some difficulties in fully integrating migrants into local suburban branches where their lack of English often raised barriers to their full participation in activities. These difficulties were sometimes acknowledged, and did not prevent a number of post-war migrants assuming important leadership positions within a relatively short period after joining the CPA. These members would often be used by the leaderships of Communist-led unions to address other migrants who did not speak English. Thus, in the 1940s and 1950s the CPA continued to be a multi-ethnic Party, while for the main part the ALP remained predominantly a party of the Anglo-Celtic working class.

Migrants: The Communist Outlook

The previous chapter examined the prolonged and vitriolic campaign that Communist-led unions waged against the arrival of the East European and German migrants from 1948 onwards. But even at its height Communist union activists could sometimes transcend the barriers imposed by the CPA policy and find some common ground with these migrants. From the late 1930s to the late 1940s, the Communist writer John Morrison, worked on the

Melbourne waterfront. He used his skills to write a series of stories steeped in the socialist realist tradition drawn from events he had actually witnessed. In *The Welcome*, Morrison displays some of the ambiguities of the CPA's attitude towards the East European migrants.

The story opens with the arrival of the *Ville de Nice* on a hot February day in 1947. One of the first refugee ships to arrive in Australia, it is crammed full of what appears to be mainly Maltese, Yugoslav and Czech migrants. The Yugoslav and Czech migrants were among the targets of the CPA campaign against Calwell's immigration programme. At first there is open resentment by the Melbourne wharfies to the new arrivals. The collective memory of the waterside workers is that during the 1928 strike by waterside workers migrants were used to destroy the union. However, the sight of hundreds of children looking hungrily at an ice cream van soon breaks through the openly displayed resentment. Defying the orders of a foreman, the waterside workers quickly organise to ensure that every child on the ship has an ice cream. A new understanding has started to emerge between the migrants and Australian workers before the ship departs for Sydney and Brisbane.¹

The veracity of this story can be confirmed from a number of different sources. In 1950 the Melbourne *Herald*, reported that migrant children on their way to the Bonegilla migrant hostel seldom left Melbourne without a supply of sweets and ice cream. It was, as the paper reported, a way of 'setting New Australians off on the right foot'.² Reg Saunders, Australia's first Aboriginal army officer, recalls from his time when he worked on the Melbourne waterfront in the late 1940s, that the waterside workers were militant anti-capitalists, but they showed surprising kindness and 'kicked in a few bob' for the refugee children.³ His description of the involvement of militant anti-capitalists in giving confectionary to migrant children is almost certainly a reference to Communist union activists, or those influenced by them,

¹ John Morrison, *Stories of the Waterfront*, Ringwood (Vic.), Penguin Books, 1984, pp.65-72.

² *Herald*, 23 January 1950.

³ Harry Gordon, *The Embarrassing Australian: The Story of an Aboriginal Warrior*, Melbourne, Lansdowne Press, 1965, p.141.

The initial response of the waterside workers to the arrival of the first of the post-war migrants, was based on false memories of what they believed was the major role played by migrants in helping to break the 1928 strike, which almost destroyed the union. Yet, while some migrants did act as strike-breakers, the majority of those who crossed the picket lines were of Anglo-Celtic background.⁴ The situation meant that the ‘few of us who knew better’ had to be prepared to challenge and defeat the resentment that many waterside workers felt towards migrants.⁵ There was also a need to destroy the ‘popular idea that immigration is the direct cause of unemployment, an idea that the real culprits take care to foster when it suits them’.⁶ Morrison’s story encapsulates two of the themes that were at the centre of CPA policy – the need for working class unity particularly with the possibility of another depression, and the necessity of rejecting the chauvinistic traditions of the Australian labour movement. The challenge that faced the CPA was to abide by these high ideals.

The CPA and anti-racism

An important feature of the CPA was its internationalist outlook and its core view that all workers in Australia whatever their national origin had interests in common. As the post-war migration gathered momentum, the CPA again stressed the need for working class unity, ‘irrespective of differences in nationality, colour or creed’.⁷ It emphasised that this unity could be best achieved by migrants learning English and becoming involved in the trade unions and progressive movements.⁸ Ralph Gibson, a leading Victorian CPA functionary, later conceded that this approach was mistaken. It was based on assimilation attitudes and that the correct approach for Communists was integration into a multilingual and multicultural society.⁹ The approach also underestimated the difficulties that faced migrants learning a new language, while working full time as an industrial worker. Trade unions, including those led by Communists, were slow in supplying information in languages other than English to their new migrant members.

⁴ Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, pp.273-281.

⁵ Morrison, *Stories of the Waterfront*, p.65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁷ L. H. Gould, ‘Questions and Answers’, *Communist Review*, March 1948, p.92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.92-93.

⁹ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p.118.

However, the CPA argued that its understanding of assimilation differed from that of many Australians. The Party's concept of assimilation was based primarily on 'unity in struggle against the boss and in political activity against Menzies'. Once this was done real assimilation and absorption can then take place on the basis of common interests.¹⁰ It called on trade union movement to 'educate' migrants about Australian radical movement history.¹¹ While this was important for the CPA's goal of building a united working class movement it failed to address a number of key issues. In particular, it failed to acknowledge that Australian workers could have learnt as much about anti-capitalist struggles from some newly arrived migrants, as migrant workers could have learnt from Australian workers. At this point the CPA policy stressed the need for *political unity* between Australian and migrant workers, which limited its approach only to those migrants who shared some of its political goals. It failed to address the broader question of the right of migrants to maintain their own culture – while integrating into a multicultural society..

The Newcastle Trades and Labor Council, which had a significant Communist presence did respond by recognising that migrants had 'special problems that required study by unions to ensure improved industrial relationships'.¹² It was a belated recognition, after ten years of mass immigration, that migrants had specific problems that differed from Australian workers and that unions had to do more if they wanted to earn the respect and trust of migrants. But the CPA was still slow on occasions to approach migrant workers and talk to them about their problems. In a report to 1958 Party Congress H. Stein, emphasised that before the labour movement could make greater efforts to approach migrants we, 'had to clear the decks within our own party'.¹³ Stein reported that there was still some hesitations by Party members to approach migrant workers and that while language difficulties did create some problems this was often over-emphasised.¹⁴ This criticism was similar to the criticisms that other Party functionaries had made about Communist union activists involvement in the peace movement. However, as we shall see, when presented with an opportunity to support migrant workers who were engaged in political struggle, Communist-led unions actively supported them.

¹⁰ F. Bruce, 'An Approach to the Migrants', *Communist Review*, March 1958, p.114.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² H. Stein, 'Notes on the Immigration Drives', *Communist Review*, December 1958, p.502.

¹³ H. Stein, 'Our Tasks in Relation to Migrant Workers', *Communist Review*, June 1958, pp.246-249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The narrowness of the CPA approach to migrants on occasions was shown when it said that it was ‘not a desirable practice’ for migrants to establish their own communities where they exclusively ‘spoke their native tongue, continue national customs, etc.’.¹⁵ This can be seen as a concession to the prevailing chauvinistic attitudes that were deeply embedded in Australian society. It also ignored the factors that led migrants to live in concentrated communities. Apart from the obvious issue of racial prejudice that denied many migrants equal access to housing, many migrants resided in suburbs adjacent to the industrial factories where they worked. There was also a failure to understand that many migrants wished to maintain aspects of their culture while integrating into Australian society on their own terms. Despite some of the limitations of the CPA approach to migrants in the post-war period it remained a multiethnic party that was attractive to left-wing migrants as it had been from the 1930s onwards. For example, more than two hundred Greeks joined the Party during the 1950s.¹⁶

What often flowed from CPA policy was the requirement that its members had to be free from the chauvinistic attitudes that were common in the working class. Open displays of such attitudes could hamper the recruitment and integration of migrants into the CPA at a time when it was committed to recruiting as many members as possible. In all their areas of their political activity, both within the CPA and more importantly in the trade unions, Communists were expected to be exemplary in their attitudes and behaviour towards migrants. In an address to migrant workers, Sharkey stressed that that one of the more important tasks for Communist union activists was to challenge and defeat the chauvinism that existed in the working class. This would be a prelude to recruiting migrant workers.¹⁷ The address by such a high-ranking CPA leader is indicative of the importance that the leadership of the Party placed on the issue of combating working class racism. Yet, Sharkey failed to acknowledge or even address the explicit racist campaign that the CPA had conducted against the arrival of the Eastern European and German migrants. Despite Sharkey’s urgings, Communist union activists were not always immune to the effects of the chauvinism that surrounded them in the workplace.

¹⁵ Bruce, ‘An Approach to Migrants’, p.115.

¹⁶ Zangalis, *Migrant Workers and Ethnic Communities*, p.128.

¹⁷ L. L. Sharkey, ‘A Talk to Migrant Workers’, *Communist Review*, January 1954, p.12.

In the late 1940s Paddy Troy, the Communist secretary of the CDRHWU, would fine members of the union who made racist comments about the union's migrant members.¹⁸ But Troy was not exempt from the occasional display of prejudice. At a Western Australian CPA State Conference in the late 1940s, Leah Healy, who was of a Jewish background, raised the issue of an unnamed person who had made a racist comment about Jews collecting money. Troy immediately admitted the offence and said that it was an 'attitude that I picked up and I recognise the need to combat it'.¹⁹ Thus, even Communist union officials alert to the dangers of dangers of racial prejudice could inadvertently succumb to mild racism. What was different about the CPA was that it recognised the issue and was willing to take steps to solve it. This stands in sharp contrast to the ALP which remained a firm supporter of the White Australia Policy and whose leaders such as Calwell and Evatt, as previously noted, had long standing chauvinistic attitudes.

During the 1952 Youth Carnival for Peace and Friendship in Sydney, Communist activists Rupert Lockwood and Stephen Murray-Smith were drinking in a hotel. A row erupted between them and the hotel owners after barmen refused to serve two Indian seamen. When the issue could not be resolved, Lockwood and Murray-Smith walked out refusing to drink in a 'Jim Crow hotel'. They left behind about half-a-dozen of their friends. Lockwood was extremely angry at the lack of support on such a fundamental issue of racial discrimination and threatened 'dire action' against those involved.²⁰ It is almost certain that those concerned were members of the CPA or perhaps a member of a Communist-led union such as the Seamen's Union or the WWF, or quite possibly both. As a leading CPA functionary with close ties to a number of Communist-led unions, Lockwood was in a position to carry out his threat.²¹ A few weeks later Lockwood informed Murray-Smith that a number of those concerned had visited him in his flat to apologise for their behaviour.²² Their apology indicates that Lockwood had acted on his promise to take action against those concerned. It is another confirmation that the CPA was

¹⁸ Macintyre, *Militant*, p.102.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ McLaren, *Free Radicals*, pp.108-109.

²¹ Rowan Cahill, 'Geo-Politics of a Soul: Robert Lockwood (1908-1997)', *Labour History*, No 72, May 1997, pp.248-251.

²² *Ibid.*, p.109.

willing, on occasions, to take action against those who breached their standards on racial prejudices.

Despite these instances the CPA was not always consistent in its campaign to eliminate racial prejudices from its ranks and in the workplace. For example, in Perth at rallies or public meetings, Jack Marks, a leading Communist activist at the Perth Midland workshops, would frequently use terms with racist connotations such as 'spaghetti eaters' or 'septic tanks'.²³ There appears to have been little attempt by the CPA leadership to persuade Marks to modify his language, and he persisted with it.²⁴ Other examples of racial prejudice also existed in the Party. During World War Two, the CPA's enthusiastic support for the war, after June 1941, often involved racist caricatures of the Japanese.²⁵ This left a legacy which lasted well into the post-war period. Charles D'Aprano, who had joined the CPA in 1943, found it difficult to talk to the Japanese until he met Japanese women who were victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima or Nagasaki.²⁶

In 1952 unemployment levels increased to 2.9 per cent - about three times the recent rate.²⁷ One of the most immediate impacts of this was that fifty-two per cent of those polled thought that immigration levels were too high. The opposition to immigration levels was higher from those who voted for the ALP.²⁸ This development had an impact on the CPA and its outlook. A meeting of the Central Committee in August called for the complete cessation of all immigration until full employment was achieved.²⁹ After this policy was adopted Communist union activists attempted to implement it. A special congress of the ACTU in September 1952 endorsed the call for an end to immigration despite opposition from some conservative union officials.³⁰

²³ Read, *Marksy*, pp.84-85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Humphrey McQueen, 'Glory Without Power' in J. Playford & D. Kirsner (eds.), *Australian Capitalism: Towards a Socialist Critique*, Ringwood (Vic.), Penguin Books, 1972, p.353.

²⁶ Moore, 'Charles D'Aprano', p.4.

²⁷ Hagan, *History of the A. C. T. U.*, p.213,

²⁸ Murphy, *Imaging the Fifties*, p.158.

²⁹ R. Dixon, "Report of R. Dixon", *Communist Review*, October, p.299.

³⁰ Hagan, *History of the A.C.T.U.*, p.320; E.J. Rowe, "'New" and "Old" Australians', *Communist Review*, November 1952, p.337.

The growth in unemployment led to an increased chauvinism in the working class and a demand that migrant workers be the first to be retrenched. What was alarming for the CPA leadership was that this trend was reflected to some extent inside the CPA.³¹ While the scope and nature of the problem is not revealed in detail, the frank admission does indicate that it was enough of a problem to place it on the public record. Ted Rowe, who made the issue public, was both a member of the Central Committee and the leading Communist activist in the AEU. He would have been in frequent contact with a range of Communist union activists from different industries around Australia. In his report, Rowe stressed that the CPA had to assume the leading role in explaining the cause of unemployment and build a united movement of the working class, both Australian and migrant, to overcome it.³²

Rowe also stressed that the relationship between the CPA and migrants was a two way process. After unemployed Italian migrants had demonstrated at the Bonegilla migrant camp, Rowe claimed that the incident, according to Rowe, showed that they would make ‘splendid allies’ of the Australian working class in the coming battles against capitalism.³³ It also showed that the Australian working class had much to learn from migrants. Australian communists had to avoid a narrow approach and they needed to learn and understand the traditions and culture of their migrant co-workers.³⁴ At a time when widespread unemployment could have led to bitter divisions in the working class, the CPA’s committed support for migrant struggles stood in sharp contrast to many of the historical traditions of the Australian labour movement. Rowe’s comments echo similar calls made by other Communist leaders. For example, L. Harry Gould, the CPA theoretician, stated in 1948 that Greek, Italian and Maltese rebel songs would become an integral part of Australian culture.³⁵

These sentiments placed the CPA well in advance of the rest of the labour movement. However, there was sometimes a dichotomy between CPA policy and the ability or willingness of rank-and-file Communist trade unionists to fully implement it. As we have seen, the CPA was not necessary immune from chauvinism, or consistent in acting against

³¹ Rowe, “New” and “Old Australians”, p.338.

³² Ibid., pp.338-339.

³³ Ibid., p.339.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gould, ‘Questions and Answers’, p.93.

it. The CPA felt the closest affinity to those migrants who shared either its overall political goals or who were willing to support its credo of militant trade unionism. But even here it struggled at times to fully integrate them into the CPA or the trade unions. The differences of language and cultural traditions were not always overcome. The question of how to relate to the East Europeans in a positive way was never solved. The political gulf between the two groups was too great to find common ground. This problem was most acute in the late 1940s when the East European refugees were a significant proportion of the migrant intake. To some extent the problem was eased by the arrival of migrants from other countries whose numbers far exceeded those from Eastern Europe. It was towards these new arrivals that the Communist union activists started to turn.

CPA and migrants

When migrants started to enter the industrial workforce in the late 1940s it was not unusual for them to come into contact with Communist union activists in the same workplace. This was often the first step for some migrants to becoming involved in the trade union movement and from there to join the CPA. Shortly after arriving in Melbourne from Greece in February 1950, George Zangalis started work at GMH, where he met Aldonis Panagis an activist in the Communist-led Democritus League. Zangalis quickly joined the Eureka Youth League and a year later in February 1951, the CPA.³⁶ By 1954 Zangalis was a member of the CPA's Metropolitan Committee and calling on local branches to do more to recruit migrant workers.³⁷ Earlier, in 1951, Basil Stephanou who had joined the CPA in 1944 was elected to the State Committee where one of his main areas of activity was the Greek CPA branch.³⁸ Even at this stage in post-war migration history, there were not unsurmountable barriers to migrants holding important leadership positions in the CPA.

Giovanni Sgro arrived at the Bonegilla migrant hostel in April 1952, and a few weeks later was one of the leaders of the Italian migrants who staged a militant demonstration when the promised jobs did not eventuate.³⁹ Despite claims of CPA involvement in the

³⁶ Blears, *Together With Us*, p.141; Gibson, *Fight Goes On*, p.120; Lopez, *Origins of Multiculturalism*, pp.145-146; Zangalis, *Migrant Workers and Ethnic Communities*, p.123.

³⁷ Zangalis, *Migrant Workers and Ethnic Communities*, p.141.

³⁸ C. Allimonos, *Greek Communist Activity in Melbourne 1917-1970*, MA (History), University of Melbourne, 1992, p.103.

³⁹ See below for further details of the demonstration and the CPA's role.

demonstration, it was not until he arrived in Melbourne that Sgro established contact with the CPA which he joined in 1954.⁴⁰ His initial contact with the CPA came from his attendance at the monthly meetings of the Painters Union which had a number of Communists in key leadership positions.⁴¹ While the union leadership, as we have seen, was hostile to the arrival of the East European migrants it was more receptive to migrants like Sgro who shared a similar political outlook. Sgro was also able to form a close friendship with Doug Gillies, the organiser of the Coburg CPA branch, who worked in a factory with one of Sgro's friends. Gillies, a former school teacher, had gone into industry so that he could have direct contact with industrial workers.⁴²

Over the next four years Sgro's major area of political activity was working with other migrant workers and attempting to recruit them to the CPA. Sgro spoke at lunchtime meetings at the railway and tramway workshops as well at factory gates and construction sites.⁴³ These meetings would have been organised with the support of various Communist union officials. His activity is a clear indication that the CPA was often serious about its commitment to reach out to migrant workers. Sgro left the CPA in 1958 to join the ALP, but was to remain a Marxist for the rest of his life.⁴⁴

The 1952 Bonegilla 'Riot'

In January 1952 the Communist journalist Rupert Lockwood stressed the need to link the struggle against the Menzies Government's war plans with the necessity to fight against the threat of growing unemployment.⁴⁵ The situation led the CPA to escalate its opposition to the mass migration programme. Its policy for the half Senate election, which was due in the first half of 1953, called for the immediate ending of all immigration as the new arrivals only contributed to the growing numbers of the unemployed as well as compounding the housing shortage.⁴⁶ Unemployment grew rapidly during 1952, the direct product of the Menzies government's economic policies and massive military spending in

⁴⁰ Lopez, *Origins of Multiculturalism*, p.148; Sgro, *Mediterranean Son*, p.45.

⁴¹ Sgro, *Mediterranean Son*, pp.45-46; Spierings, *Brush With History*, pp.37, 68, 115-117.

⁴² Sgro, *Mediterranean Son*, p.45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁴⁴ Lopez, *Origins of Multiculturalism*, p.149; Sgro, *Mediterranean Son*, p.47.

⁴⁵ R. Lockwood, 'Unemployed Pool For War', *Communist Review*, January 1952, p.25.

⁴⁶ R. Dixon, 'Report of R. Dixon', p.299.

preparation for war with the Soviet Union, which it believed would break out in 1953.⁴⁷ This helps explain the vigorous support given by Communist union activists when unemployed Italian migrants started to campaign against their unemployment later in the year. For the CPA, the growing threat of a possible war with the Soviet Union, and increasing unemployment were directly linked, and it was incumbent upon the Party to struggle against both.

In March 1952 the *Chartered Accountant* reported that increasing numbers of Australians were talking about a possible depression.⁴⁸ In May, half the people surveyed considered they were worse off than the year before.⁴⁹ In response to the growing economic crisis and widespread union opposition to the arrival of any more migrants, the Minister of Immigration Holt announced a cut in the immigration intake.⁵⁰ In September a Special Congress of the ACTU endorsed a call for an immediate cessation in all immigration.⁵¹ The danger for the CPA was that such calls from within the trade union movement could trigger a wave of chauvinism: where recently arrived migrants could become the targets of unemployed workers who would blame them for their predicament. The onus on the CPA was to honour its commitment to migrants that once in Australia they had the same rights as other Australian workers.

In the first six months of 1952 almost 20,000 Italian migrants arrived in Australia.⁵² By July 1952 the *Guardian* reported that there were three thousand Italian unemployed migrants at Bonegilla. It called on all workers, Australian and migrant, to unite to oppose the war plans of the Menzies government and to act jointly to prevent any dismissals taking place.⁵³ At Bonegilla the Italians had been isolated from other nationalities and were overwhelmingly young men from rural Italy.⁵⁴ A detailed ASIO report on a large number

⁴⁷ Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists*, p.270; Louis, *Menzies' Cold War*, pp.28-34; O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream*, p.75.

⁴⁸ Humphrey McQueen, *Social Sketches of Australia 1888-2001*, St Lucia (Qld.), University of Queensland Press, 2004, p.179.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Louis, *Menzies' Cold War*, p.58; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 1952, p.1.

⁵¹ Hagan, *History of the A.C.T.U.*, p.320; Rowe, "'New' and 'Old' Australians", p.337; *Tribune*, 5 November 1952, p.1.

⁵² V. G. Venturini, *Never Give In: Three Italian Antifascist Exiles in Australia, 1924-1956*, Sydney, Search Foundation, 2007, p.776.

⁵³ *Guardian*, 17 July 1952, p.1.

⁵⁴ Lampugnani, 'Post-war Migration Policies', p.205.

of the Italian migrants present at Bonegilla during the upheaval shows that none of them had any political connections before they arrived in Australia, and only a handful had been previously a member of a trade union.⁵⁵

Despite this evidence, in an interview between an unnamed officer from the Melbourne ASIO office and Giuseppe Guelj, who had been Acting Chief Patrolman at Bonegilla, claims were made by Gueli that he had heard conversations about Communist cell leaders from Italy being present at the hostel.⁵⁶ In another interview Frattura, the Assistant Supervisor, Block 2, reported that he had heard residents singing the 'Red Flag' and that one migrant had made comments suggesting support for Mao Tse Tung.⁵⁷ However, the diary entry of R. Casey, Australia's Minister for External Affairs, detailing his discussions with Italian Ministers during a visit to Italy the year before, about the extensive political vetting of potential migrants meant that known Communists were precluded from emigrating to Australia.⁵⁸ It is therefore unlikely that there were any significant numbers of active Communists at the camp.

The unrest at Bonegilla in mid-1952 cannot therefore be attributed to the activities of alleged Communist agitators. Its real cause was a deep seated anger by many Italian migrants at what they regarded as the Australian government's broken commitment of employment shortly after they arrived in Australia.⁵⁹ After some weeks of simmering unrest an angry demonstration by at least one thousand unemployed Italian migrants took place on 17 July.⁶⁰ Around the same time a report by a Senior Detective O'Connor reported that a group of Italia Libera members was on the way to Bonegilla.⁶¹ His information followed a discussion with Dr L. Dainelli, the Italian Consul for Victoria, who claimed that 'Communist members of Italian Libera' were frequently attending

⁵⁵ AA, A6122, Item 384: CPA Interest in Migrant Communities Migrant Hostel Bonegilla Victoria.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Appendix "C": An interview between (blanked) of the Victorian Office, A. S. I. O. and Giuseppe Gueli, Patrolman at C. I. C., at Bonegilla, Vic., p.1.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Appendix "B": Interview between (blanked) of the Victorian Office, A. S. I. O. and the Chief Patrolman, Frattura, Galvan and Pavan at C. I. C., Bonegilla, Victoria, p.1.

⁵⁸ Casey, *Australian Foreign Minister*, p.51.

⁵⁹ Richards, *Destination Australia*, pp.228-229; Sgro, *Mediterranean Son*, p.27; Sluga, 'Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre', p.112.

⁶⁰ AA, A6122, Item 384, 'Resume of events immediately preceding and leading up to a demonstration at the Administrative Office, Commonwealth Immigration Centre (C. I. O.), Bonegilla, Victoria, which took place on Thursday, 17th July and in which approximately 1,000 recently arrived Italian migrants took part'.

⁶¹ AA, A6122, 384, 'Memorandum for: Headquarters', A. S. I. O. (2), 17 July.1952.

Bonegilla.⁶² The organisation had been established in Melbourne in March 1943 as an antifascist organisation and to mobilise Italian-Australians support for the war effort.⁶³ It had a strong Communist presence. Charles D'Aprano, a CPA member was the Victorian secretary of *Italia Libera*.⁶⁴ In February 1950 the organisation held its first National Congress and committed itself to assist newly arrived Italian migrants.⁶⁵ Thus, *Italia Libera* had a long standing interest and commitment in the welfare of Italian migrants.

However, even before the major disturbance on 17 July there had been at least some informal contact between Italian migrants at Bonegilla and *Italia Libera*. A widespread complaint about the quality of food on 14 July was later attributed to the circulation of the newspaper *Italia Libera*.⁶⁶ There had also been some contact between T. Manetta, a Bonegilla resident and the D'Aprano family. The contact address he gave authorities when he left Bonegilla was that of Charles D'Aprano's uncle, Arturo D'Aprano.⁶⁷ Also living at the address was a Teodoro D'Aprano identified by ASIO as an official in *Italia Libera* and an alleged Communist.⁶⁸ *Italia Libera* was therefore often the first contact between the CPA and Italian migrants. For the CPA it would have been natural to establish contact in this way because so few of the migrants would have been able to speak English.

The CPA immediately welcomed the struggle by the Bonegilla Italian migrants. It compared the action of Holt in sending the army into Bonegilla with the policies Hitler and Mussolini during fascism.⁶⁹ Hector Varenti, an EYL activist, was active in exposing the conditions that led to the disturbances at Bonegilla.⁷⁰ Following the events of July 17 Greek Communist activists Panos Gerondakis, Dimitris Gogos and George Zangalis from the Democritus League were the first Greeks to visit Bonegilla after the 17 July, events. Despite attempts by the administration to prevent their entry into the camp they did enter,

⁶² AA, A6122, 384, 'Letter from J. O' Connor to Officer in Charge C. I. B. Special Branch'. 18 July 1952.

⁶³ Venturini, *Never Give In*, pp. 707-717.

⁶⁴ Moore, 'Interview with Charles D'Aprano', p.2; Venturini, *Never Give In*, p.783; Zelda D'Aprano, makes a brief reference to the events at Bonegilla without mentioning her then husband's involvement; see D'Aprano, *Zelda*, p.71.

⁶⁵ Venturini, *Never Give In*, p.764.

⁶⁶ AA, A6122, Item 384, 'Letter from J. B. Lopatko to Director, C. I. C., Bonegilla', 15 July 1952.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 'Memorandum From H. G. Wright to Headquarters A. S. I. O'. 3 November 1952.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 'Memorandum From T.H. E. Hayes to Director-General, Attorney-General's Department, "D" Branch. Dated 9 October 1952.

⁶⁹ *Tribune*, 23 July 1952, p.2.

⁷⁰ Blears, *Together With Us*, p.141; AA, A6122, Item 384, 'Memorandum from H. G. Wright', p.1.

and received a warm welcome from the residents.⁷¹ In Queensland the CPA linked the struggle by the Italian Bonegilla migrants with other struggles by Italian migrants in the 1930s.⁷² The Queensland, BWIU State secretary, G. M. Dawson, said that Italian migrants had ‘proved by their words and deeds that they are good unionists’ and went on to add this ‘had been demonstrated in many disputes on the job’.⁷³ The union sent a message of support to Bonegilla, but it was withheld by the camp authorities.⁷⁴ It can be assumed that the intention of the authorities’ aim was to isolate the demonstrators from any possible contact with the more radical section of the Australian trade union movement.

On 20 July forty copies of the *Guardian* were found at the camp.⁷⁵ The CPA was also able to distribute a leaflet in Italian to the residents. It demanded immediate jobs for all Italian workers and said that the CPA was waging the same fight as the Italian Communist Party.⁷⁶ It called on the Italian migrants to reject the use of ‘devastation, fire or vandalism’ as this would alienate them from the Australian people.⁷⁷ The leaflet called on the Italian migrants to support Australian trade unions and have confidence in Australian workers.⁷⁸ As well as providing the postal addresses of Italia Libera offices in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, the leaflet also gave the postal address of the BWIU in Brisbane.⁷⁹ The leaflet was authorised by L. Kelton, later identified by ASIO as an executive member of the Albury CPA branch.⁸⁰ There were also claims that there members of the CPA working at the Hume Weir were visiting the camp to distribute Communist material.⁸¹ An editorial in *The Argus* claimed that the resentment of the Italians at Bonegilla was ‘understandable’ as they had been given ‘frustrating idleness and five shillings a day’.⁸² The paper later warned that the situation was providing ‘fertile soil for Communism to feed on’.⁸³ The situation led to

⁷¹ Zangalis, *Migrant Workers and Ethnic Communities*, p.281.

⁷² *Queensland Guardian*, 6 August 1952.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ AA, A6122, Item 384, ‘Resume of events’, p.4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁷⁶ English translation located in ASIO file.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ AA, A6122, Item 384, ‘Memorandum for; Headquarters A. S. I. O’.,! 2 September 1952.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Letter from Attorney-General’s Department to Chief Commissioner of Police, Special Branch, 7 August 1952.

⁸² *Argus*, 22 July 1952, p.2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 27 August 1952, p.2.

the Menzies government deciding to reduce the migration intake by half.⁸⁴ The fear that the CPA would benefit by an economic crisis was not groundless, as the Party grew during the early 1950s but these gains short lived as the fears of another depression ebbed away.⁸⁵

Apart from the issues of unemployment and the campaign for peace there was another strong reason for the CPA's support for the Italian migrants. In 1952 there was an intense battle for control of the FIA between the Communist leadership and its Grouper-led opponents.⁸⁶ Many migrants, including the Italians, were directed to work in large industrial complexes such as BHP, where the union representing workers was often the FIA. In Wollongong, the arrival of large numbers of migrants saw the Italians emerge as the largest non-British immigrant group.⁸⁷ The changing composition of the Australian workforce posed a new challenge to the CPA, and how it would respond to the new arrivals. However, with a long history of supporting Italian migrants dating back to the 1930s, it was in a position to respond positively.

The support given to the Italian Bonegilla migrants by the CPA can be seen as an attempt to build a wider support base for the embattled Communist leadership in the union. An ASIO report claimed that there was an Italian fraction functioning in the FIA in October 1951.⁸⁸ It had been established by Doug Gillies, the secretary of the Coburg CPA branch.⁸⁹ Gillies friendship with Sgro and other Italian migrants can be seen as part of the CPA's attempt to win their support in the FIA elections. Other Communist Italian-Australians also had links with the FIA in this period. Charles D'Aprano had worked with the FIA in their attempts to organise Italian migrants.⁹⁰ During 1952 Hector Varrenti either worked or attempted to get work in factories where there were large numbers of Italian workers. One

⁸⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 July 1953, p.1.

⁸⁵ L. Aarons. 'Build the Party' *Communist Review*, June 1955, p.176.

⁸⁶ Murray & White, *The Ironworkers*, pp.222-229.

⁸⁷ John McQuilton, 'Community 1940-1980', in Hagan & Lee, *A History of Work and Community in Wollongong*, p.144.

⁸⁸ AA, A6122, Item 384, 'Memorandum', 3 November 1952, .p.5

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5; Sgro, *Mediterranean Son*,

⁹⁰ AA, A6122, Item 384, 'Memorandum', 3 November 1952, .pp. 1, 5-6. .

suggested workplace was Wiltshire Tiles where he was expected to spare no effort to recruit Italian migrants to the Party or Italia Libera.⁹¹

Italian migrants continued to struggle against unemployment. On 25 October a Sydney meeting of four hundred and fifty unemployed Italians passed a series of resolutions calling on the Federal government to take immediate action to end their unemployment. These resolutions included a call for an immediate end to immigration, a massive public works campaign, the abolition of hostel charges for unemployed migrants, and for the Federal government to rescind the £31 that each migrant was expected to pay for their assisted passage.⁹² The meeting also declared that they would work with any Australian organisation that fought against unemployment and for the right to work. The BWIU and the WWF sent representatives to the meeting as an indication of their support.⁹³ The motions that were passed were consistent with CPA policy and indicated that many migrants did not necessarily regard a call to end immigration as anti-migrant. Despite the ACTU Congress resolution on immigration, the NSW ALP declined to attend the meeting.⁹⁴

A few days after the meeting there were violent clashes between the police and two hundred unemployed Italians who were marching on the Italian consulate.⁹⁵ There were also other protests by unemployed Italians during October and November in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.⁹⁶ The Italian Prime Minister, Alcide de Gasperi, called on the Federal government to urgently address the issue and find work for Italian migrants.⁹⁷ Earlier, following the Sydney demonstration the Italian Minister Dr S. Danco, said because of the careful vetting of potential migrants, he was certain that there was no Communist involvement in the unrest.⁹⁸ However, B. A. Santamaria proposed to establish a special

⁹¹ Ibid., p.3.

⁹² *Tribune*, 29 October 1952, p.10.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 1952, p.1.

⁹⁶ Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, *A Divided Working Class*, p.125.

⁹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 1952, p.3.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 31 October 1952, p.1.

Italian branch of Catholic Action, to act as a bridge to the Australian Catholic community.⁹⁹

In November 1952, Rowe cited the actions of the Bonegilla migrants as a demonstration of the possibilities of Italian migrants becoming allies of the Australian working class in the coming struggles.¹⁰⁰ What was important for the CPA was not just the fact that the Italian migrants were waging a militant struggle against their unemployment but they had looked towards the Australian trade union movement for support. This offered the opportunity for building alliances between the two groups and in the process Australian workers could learn a great deal from the Italian migrants.¹⁰¹

The 1961 Recession: the Communist response

In 1961 the onset of another recession again and a subsequent increase in unemployment again raised the prospect of a major depression. During the year unemployment averaged 2.4 per cent, the highest level for a decade.¹⁰² In South Australia there were nine thousand unemployed, double the rate of the year before.¹⁰³ This development was largely the product of the harsh 1960 federal budget which saw increased interest rates, cuts in social welfare and other increased taxes and imposts.¹⁰⁴ By the end of the year there was widespread disillusionment with the Menzies Government and it only narrowly survived the December 1961 election by a majority of one seat.¹⁰⁵ For the CPA the challenge was to ensure that there would be no repeat of previous recessions in which migrants were blamed for the rising unemployment levels.

Migrants were invariably the first to be laid off when unemployment started to increase. There was strong evidence that many employers were deliberately targeting migrant workers and retrenching them before Australian-born workers. Tom Wright, NSW Secretary of the SMWU, reported that a large majority of those retrenched from his

⁹⁹ Patrick Morgan (ed.), *B. A. Santamaria Your Most Obedient Servant: Selected Letters 1938-1996*, Carlton South (Vic.), Miegunyah Press in association with the State Library of Victoria, 2007, p.69.

¹⁰⁰ Rowe, "New" and "Old" Australians', p.339.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Hagan, *History of the A.C. T. U.*, p.213.

¹⁰³ Moss, *Sounds of Trumpets*, p.384.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.216; McKinlay, *The ALP*, pp.123-124.

¹⁰⁵ McMullin, *Light on the Hill*, pp.291-292.

industry were migrant workers.¹⁰⁶ In response to mounting evidence of discrimination against migrant workers, Pat Clancy, the NSW secretary of the BWIU, pledged his union to fight against any employer who adopted such practices. He called for a united campaign by all workers to fight against discrimination and for the Right to Work.¹⁰⁷ At the May 1961 NSW CPA State Conference, Harry Stein again acknowledged that many migrants were bearing the greatest burden of the recession and wanted to know how they could win the right to work.¹⁰⁸ The demand for the 'Right to Work' and the call for a united campaign by Australian and migrant workers were to become dominant themes of CPA propaganda throughout 1961.

Throughout that year, Communist union activists attempted to establish closer links with unemployed migrant workers. Their actions stood in sharp contrast to the experiences during the Great Depression when significant numbers of workers blamed migrants for the economic crisis. In May Roger Wilson, Assistant Secretary of the Victorian branch of the SUA, addressed a meeting of unemployed Greek workers drawing up plans for a bigger meeting. In common with other Communist union leaders Wilson called for a united labour movement response to the economic crisis.¹⁰⁹ In early June a mass meeting of three hundred unemployed Greek migrants called on the Federal government to honour the commitments on employment that had been made to them before they left their homeland.¹¹⁰ Another mass meeting of three hundred unemployed workers from Fitzroy and Collingwood was addressed by Ron Hearn, from the BWIU management committee, who called for solidarity by all workers, Australian or migrant, employed or unemployed.¹¹¹ In July 1961, after hearing a report by the SMWU about the alleged police intimidation of one of their Greek members, the NSW Labor Council unanimously passed a resolution calling on the State Labor government to investigate other similar cases.¹¹²

The high point of working class solidarity between migrants and Australian workers came in the aftermath of a demonstration by unemployed Italian migrants at Bonegilla in July

¹⁰⁶ *Tribune*, 5 April 1961, p.11.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 24 May 1961, p.9.

¹⁰⁹ *Guardian*, 25 May 1961, p.1.

¹¹⁰ *Tribune*, 14 June 1961, p.1.

¹¹¹ *Guardian*, 6 July 1961, p.8.

¹¹² *Tribune*, 19 July 1961, p.5.

1961. For many weeks there had been weekly demonstrations demanding employment. These had been peaceful until 17 July when a policeman's manhandling of a demonstrator provoked an angry reaction.¹¹³ The Federal government attempted to evade responsibility for the demonstration and subsequent damage to buildings by blaming the trouble that erupted on Communist agitators.¹¹⁴ However, the real cause of the demonstration was similar to the events of 1952. Many migrants considered that the government had broken commitments of employment given to them before they left Italy, and as a result vented their anger when the promised jobs failed to materialise. However, on this occasion the CPA was able to marshal considerably more support for the demonstrators than in 1952. This can be best understood by the growing numbers of migrant workers in trade unions as well as an easing of some of the political tensions from the height of the Cold War.

Almost immediately following the demonstration the CPA called on the Australian working class to support the Bonegilla migrants.¹¹⁵ It sent Malcolm Salmon, a *Guardian* journalist and George Zangalis a leading Melbourne Communist to Bonegilla to interview residents. Despite attempts to intimidate them many migrants responded warmly to the visit.¹¹⁶ The following week the *Guardian* hailed the 'heroic' actions of the migrant demonstrators and called for an end to the police repression of migrant workers.¹¹⁷ A week after the demonstration, eleven migrants were arrested and charged with a variety of offences. Following this development, support for the migrants started to flow in from trade unionists around the country.

The NSW, Queensland and South Australian Labor Councils voted to support the arrested Bonegilla migrants.¹¹⁸ In Victoria, V. J. Stout, Secretary of the Trades Hall Council also condemned the arrests and opposed the excessively high bail of £30.¹¹⁹ In Sydney, support came from unions representing building workers, painters, builders' labourers, miscellaneous workers, gas workers and brick and tile workers.¹²⁰ Support also came from

¹¹³ *Guardian*, 27 July 1961.

¹¹⁴ Haebich, *Spinning the Dream*, p.172; Richards, *Destination Australia*, p.230.

¹¹⁵ *Guardian*, 20 July 1961, p.3; *Tribune*, 19 July 1961, p.12.

¹¹⁶ Zangalis, *Migrant Workers and Ethnic Communities*, p.432.

¹¹⁷ *Guardian*, 26 July 1961, p.1.

¹¹⁸ *Guardian*, 10 August 1961, p.1; *Tribune*, 9 August 1961, p.5.

¹¹⁹ *Tribune*, 2 August 1961, p.12.

¹²⁰ *Tribune*, 26 July 1961, p.1.

the Combined Waterfront Action Committee which described the charges as a witch-hunt against migrants.¹²¹ As well as supporting the arrested migrants, the BWIU called for an immediate end to unemployment.¹²² In the face of this widespread union support when the arrested migrants finally appeared in court, the charges of rioting and assault were dropped.¹²³ For the CPA the successful outcome of the campaign would have vindicated its view that, despite the recession, it was possible to build actions that united Australian and migrant workers.

Throughout 1961 the CPA opposed the arrival of additional migrants. Where possible it sought to highlight claims that incorrect information was being given to intending migrants. For example, *Tribune* reported a demand by some Italian workers for an end to misleading information given to potential Italian migrants.¹²⁴ A similar demand was made by Ron Hancock from the BWIU about misleading information on wage levels supplied to British migrants.¹²⁵ At the eighteenth Congress of the CPA in 1958, Harry Stein had warned of the possible dangers of a campaign against mass immigration. During the Great Depression there had been chauvinistic outbursts against migrant workers in Queensland and Western Australia as well as widespread hostility towards British migrants.¹²⁶ The only way this could be avoided was for the CPA to take the leading role in any campaign that emerged to ensure that it did not develop into a similar direction.¹²⁷ Stein's report specifically rejected all attempts to discriminate against migrants already in Australia, and called for joint campaigns by Australian and migrant workers around common interests. As the above examples demonstrate, this was a course that the CPA followed throughout 1961. Its trade union members actively supported every struggle where migrant workers were playing a leading role. In adopting this course the CPA started to break down the long standing chauvinistic traditions of the Australian working class.

The Waterside Workers' Federation and Migrants

The vast majority of migrants that arrived in Australia during the post-war period commenced their working life in Australia as industrial workers. While Communist-led

¹²¹ *Tribune*, 9 August 1961, p.8.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Guardian*, 17 August 1961, p.8.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26 April 1961, p.8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 May 1961, p.4.

¹²⁶ H. Stein, 'Our tasks in Relation to Migrant Workers', *Communist Review*, June 1958, p.249.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.247.

unions were almost uniformly hostile to the refugees from Eastern Europe, the reception given to other migrants was often very different. It was possible for some Communist-union leaderships to establish some common ground with their new migrant members and win their support for militant policies. This was despite the attempts by successive federal governments to bar any potential migrant who had shown any sympathy for Communism. However, when migrants did arrive in Australia and experienced the harsh reality of the Australian workplace they were sometimes receptive to the appeal of militant unionism as advocated by Communist-union leaderships.

As World War Two drew to an end the WWF saluted the courage of the Maltese resistance to the Axis powers in the face of widespread bombing.¹²⁸ This common experience in the war against fascism was to provide one of the links that the CPA could use to attract Maltese migrants once they started to arrive in Australia in the late 1940s. However, much of the mainstream Australian labour movement had previously been virulently opposed to Maltese migrants. During the 1916 conscription referendum, when a boatload of Maltese migrants, arrived they were met by a storm of chauvinistic abuse.¹²⁹ During the 1928 waterside workers strike the Melbourne WWF targeted the non-Anglo- Celt strike breakers, including the Maltese, even though they were in a minority of trike breakers.¹³⁰ Thus, the willingness of Communist waterside workers to approach Maltese migrants in the post-war period was a sharp break with both the traditions of the Australian labour movement and their own union. It was a move that was to bring significant gains for the Communist union leadership.

On the Sydney waterfront Maltese waterside workers overwhelmingly supported the Healy leadership and played an important part in helping to consolidate the left-wing leadership of the union.¹³¹ This was despite the fact that the Maltese were overwhelmingly Catholic and in theory, natural allies of the Grouper-led forces in the union.¹³² In Europe the Maltese were among the most frequent church attendees and the Catholic Church had a

¹²⁸ *Maritime Worker*, August 1945.

¹²⁹ Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, pp.196-197; McQueen, *A New Britannia*, p.54.

¹³⁰ Lockwood, *Ship to Shore*, p.275.

¹³¹ Richard Parkes, 'The Australian Waterfront', *Quadrant*, Vol. 1, no. 2, August 1957, p.8.

¹³² *Ibid.*

major influence on Maltese society.¹³³ However, their political outlook contrasted sharply with the Catholic migrants from Eastern Europe who were virulently opposed to Communist union leaderships. This underlines that there were not necessarily any insurmountable barriers to Catholic-influenced workers supporting a Communist-led union leadership. Presumably one major reason for this support was the assistance the Sydney WWF leadership gave Maltese migrants in finding accommodation and employment after they arrived in Sydney.¹³⁴ There was also a strong presence of Communist supporters in the various Maltese Clubs; this also served as a link with both the CPA and the WWF.¹³⁵

Similarly, in 1950 in Melbourne, Manny Calleja, a newly arrived Maltese migrant and a British Naval veteran, was given financial assistance by waterside workers for six weeks after he had lost his thumb in an accident at home. At the time he was not even a member of the WWF.¹³⁶ Calleja was working as a crane driver for the Melbourne Harbour Trust and respected the WWF for its industrial militancy and the solidarity it offered to fellow workers. Defying pressure from his employer, Calleja resigned from his union to join the WWF where he remained an active member for many years.¹³⁷ It was through such examples of practical help provided to Maltese migrants in Sydney and Melbourne that the WWF won the support of many Maltese migrants. Loreto York, a Maltese migrant, arrived in Melbourne via Britain in 1954. During the war he had served in the British Royal Air Force where his political views were shaped by the Jews, Communists and socialists whom he met there. On his arrival in Australia he became an active shop steward and a member of the ALP. Despite this he became an admirer of Ted Bull, the Communist secretary of the Melbourne WWF.¹³⁸

The support given to Maltese migrants by the WWF was replicated in its approach to other migrants. In Sydney the majority of Greek CPA members were active members of the

¹³³ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (ed.), *The Times Guide to the Peoples of Europe*, London, Times Books, 1994, p.197.

¹³⁴ Parkes, 'The Australian Waterfront', p.8.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Lowenstein & Hills, *Under the Hook*, pp.105, 119. At the time the Melbourne WWF was led by Grouper supporters. It remains unclear whether the collection was official/unofficial and who was the driving force behind it. After joining the union Calleja associated with the left and this may indicate that the left may have played an important role in the collection.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 119-120, 175

¹³⁸ Barry York, 'Idealist who helped fellow migrants cross language and cultural barriers', *Age*, 14 October 2009, p.19.

WWF and there were Greek Communists active in the Adelaide WWF.¹³⁹ In 1953 the Sydney WWF established a film unit. The aim of the unit was to provide an alternative point of view that challenged the dominant Cold War consensus. As a result the films it made were often strident in their condemnation of the oppressive nature of capitalist society.¹⁴⁰ In 1954, in a report to the Sydney WWF Tom Nelson, the Communist Branch secretary, said that that the films were potentially a 'new and important weapon in the hands of the working class to aid them in the fight against reaction'.¹⁴¹ Once completed the films were shown wherever workers worked, lived or gathered. Indeed one of the first experiences that migrants had of Australian culture was when the films were shown at migrant hostels or emergency housing settlements.¹⁴² They were also shown outside factory gates and where possible with union support at various worksites.¹⁴³

Conclusion

This chapter thesis has examined the CPA's response to the profound changes in Australian society in the first two decades after the end of World War Two. These decades saw the transformation of what was a predominantly Anglo-Celtic workforce into a multiethnic workforce. This development posed an enormous challenge for the CPA. The danger of immigrant societies is that they can fracture along ethnic lines making it more difficult to build a united working class movement to challenge the capitalist system. The CPA's approach was based to circumvent this by attempting to build a union movement that that was inclusive of migrants and would respond to their specific issues. While the CPA was not always consistent, it generally honoured its policy that once migrants arrived in Australia they should have the same rights as other Australian workers. On occasions it took action against its own members who displayed signs of racist and/or chauvinistic behaviour. As a result a number of migrants did join the CPA or found no insurmountable barriers to being active in Communist-led unions.

¹³⁹ Zangalis, *Migrant Workers and Ethnic Communities*, pp. 435, 437.

¹⁴⁰ Lisa Milner, *Fighting Films: A History of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit*, North Melbourne, Pluto Press, 2003, p.v.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.33.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.64.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.35, 61-62.

The greatest challenge for the CPA came during the recessions in 1952 and 1961. When unemployment starts to increase the danger of working class racism is at its greatest, since unemployed workers often blame migrants for their plight. During the Great Depression unions such as the AWU displayed openly racist attitudes to Italian migrants and attempted to prevent them working in the canefields. In sharp contrast to this outlook the CPA actively supported the Italian workers and their demands for improved conditions. In the post-World War Two period the CPA again responded positively to the demands of Italian migrants. During the 1952 recession FIA Communist-union activists, who supported Italian migrants in their demands for employment, gained potential allies as the battle for control of the union reached its climax. During both the 1952 and 1961 recessions the BWIU took a public stance in support of migrants by issuing leaflets, providing speakers at their meetings and throwing the weight of the union behind their campaigns. This activity helped cement an alliance between the CPA and a section of the migrant workforce that was willing to support militant trade unionism. The still relatively strong position of the CPA in the trade unions throughout this period also meant that the CPA's strong opposition to working class chauvinism helped to diminish its extent, but did not eliminate its presence.

The following chapter will analyse another area in which Communist union activists challenged working class chauvinism. Aboriginal workers faced an institutionalised system that denied them the same rights as other workers. For many decades the labour movement had either ignored their plight or had viewed Aboriginal workers with outright hostility. However, in the aftermath of World War Two the oppressive conditions endured by Aborigines became increasingly untenable, both domestically and internationally. The situation provided new opportunities for the Communist union activists to campaign against these conditions and bring them to an end. The ways in which this was done will be detailed in the following chapter.