

# When the Queen's man sacked Labor

**Janet Burstall reviews the Australian left's response to the greatest political crisis in their country's history, the 'Kerr coup' of 1975.**

**T**WENTY-ONE years ago, on 11 November 1975, Governor-General John Kerr, acting on the Queen's authority, sacked Australia's Labor government. "At a conservative estimate 750,000... stopped work" in the following days.<sup>1</sup> Many more workers struck, in proportion to population, than in the movement of June 1936 which prompted Trotsky to declare: "The French Revolution has begun."

Phil Ilton recalls: "Rally after rally was attended with members waving banners and placards demanding a general strike. [Left papers] sold like 'wildfire'... All left-wing groups experienced similar phenomenal upswings in their popularity. What it did reflect was the anger and confusion of Labor supporters — they'd buy almost anything 'left-looking' and they wouldn't give you 10 cents for a copy, they'd throw you a dollar or two dollars, or more."<sup>2</sup>

Labor had won office in 1972 after 23 years of unbroken, stifling conservative rule. Gough Whitlam's government took Australian troops out of Vietnam, introduced a publicly-funded health service, opened higher education to those who could not afford fees, repealed the "White Australia" immigration policy, and made a start on redress for Australia's Aboriginal people. It was a reformist regime: when hit by the world capitalist downturn of 1974-5 it floundered and started to turn against its working-class base. The opening for the Governor-General came from a budget crisis in which the Upper House of Parliament blocked Whitlam. Yet the widespread working-class gut reaction to the dismissal was that "our government" had been struck down by the ruling class.

And the early 1970s in Australia were a time of radicalism and spontaneous mass working-class outrage. Intellectuals had been writing and talking freely about socialism and revolution. The movement against the Vietnam War had brought tens of thousands on to the streets. There was a large and hungry audience for left-wing ideas.

To the left of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) had a few thousand members and, allied with ALP left-wingers, sizeable influence in the trade unions. It had loosened up, breaking with both Moscow and Beijing, and was under the pressure of an organised Left Tendency. I was then a member of the CPA, but left because of what I saw as their reformist response to the 1975 crisis.

The Socialist Workers' Action Group, forerunner of the International Socialist Organisation (linked to the British SWP), had about 20 members in Melbourne. On 14 November it managed to lead some 15,000 workers to the Stock Exchange, from an official labour demonstration 50,000 strong. Also very new, but a bit larger and more "orthodox Trotskyist", was the Socialist Work-

ers' League, based in Sydney. These left groups united with broad sections of the working class and social movements to agitate for the reinstatement of Labor and the defeat of Malcolm Fraser, leader of the Liberal opposition. Whitlam and the ALP, however, saw this as a matter of re-electing Labor to show



Gough Whitlam

Fraser that the Australian people would not stand for the constitution being undermined. The ALP did not use its majority in the House of Representatives to defy Governor-General John Kerr. It accepted Kerr's election schedule — and Fraser won the election on 13 December.

The CPA responded to the crisis with energy, publishing their paper *Tribune* daily. *Tribune's* headline on 12 November was "Defeat Fraser-Kerr coup: national stoppage". *Tribune* went on to say: "The Communist Party calls for action to continue and rise still higher. A national stoppage should be called, and united action committees set up in factories, offices and localities to resist Fraser and campaign against him."

However, the powerful Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union (AMWU), led by CPA and left ALP officials, did not attempt to override the inertia of the ACTU (Australian TUC) by starting a strike movement on its own. According to a former Queensland Metal Workers' organiser whom I spoke to, an ex-CPAer still loyal to the CPA political tradition, AMWU leaders like CPA president Laurie Carmichael did their utmost to put the brakes on the movement for a general strike.

Another prominent CPer from the time whom I questioned insisted indignantly that the CPA had tried everything in order to get a general strike. He said that my questions implied that I thought the problem in 1975 was a crisis of leadership. However, the evidence is that the CPA were swayed by the likes of ACTU leader Bob Hawke, who argued that Labor was in bother for being too radical, and excessive militancy would scare the electorate.

The CPA, like the ALP, made "democracy" the key focus. A vote for Labor, in their view, would be a vote for parliamentary democracy and a rejection of the undemocratic actions of Kerr and Fraser. This approach required only the mildest criticisms of Labor. "Workers' action is directed to defence of limited capital-

ist democracy", said Laurie Carmichael (*Tribune*, 19 November).

Workers felt a mixture of class sentiment about "our government" and outrage at "unfair play" by the rules of parliamentary democracy; but the CPA's activity was all based on "defence of limited capitalist democracy."

The CPA did criticise Labor's record, but mildly and vaguely. *Tribune's* editorial of 25 November declared: "The working class and other movements today enthusiastically support the return of Labor to power. But they want more than they have been offered in the past. They will expect action to curb the ruling class that has precipitated the crisis — not conciliation and encouragement for them by Labor... the core of Labor's support... will want more dramatic changes in terms of ending discrimination, extending democracy and social liberation. This means that the power of the ruling class must not only be defeated in this current crisis, but broken totally. It means abolishing authoritarian relations between ruler and ruled in the workshop, in the offices, in all social institutions including the family."

The CPA had been arguing for the election of Labor, and for

the strengthening of the official left factions in the ALP, as the way to social progress ever since the 1930s. The Left Tendency of the CPA, growing out of student radicalism, had begun to criticise this approach, analysing the ALP as an obstacle to socialism and anti-working class in government. Its views tended more to sectarianism than to an appreciation of the contradictory role of the ALP, but in any case were too abstract to equip it to publish any practically useful proposals during the political crisis. As a CPA member at the time, at Macquarie University, I did not even know that the CPA had a Left Tendency, let alone that its stronghold was in the same city as me, at Sydney University. Further research in the student press may reveal that the Left Tendency applied its analysis to the events of 1975 on the campuses where it was most influential, but it is certain that it was unable to crystallise its position in the CPA during the crisis.

Could the small left groups have influenced events? I think so. A united front of the Marxists could have threatened to win over sections of the CPA, and pressured the CPA leaders into taking the initiative, defying the ACTU, and setting up the "united action committees" called for in *Tribune*. The combined strength of the SWL, the SWAG, the Communist League ("Mandelite"), and the Left Tendency of the CP, with their student movement, labour movement and women's liberation connections, and their press, would have been quite formidable. Instead, the rest of the left didn't even seem to notice that the CPA was in a position to influence industrial action. The CPA got away with its left rhetoric and inaction unchallenged. General strike agitation was popular, but remained vague.

Some left groups organised a meeting at Sydney Trades Hall, to call on the ACTU to call a general strike, but the meeting was unable to reach agreement.

The central demand of the SWAG's *Battler* was "a national general strike until Whitlam was reinstated", with the slogan "Strike to stop Fraser." The Socialist Workers' League's *Direct Action* (13 November) advocated: "No restraint! Fight back! Labor should call for a General Strike." *Direct Action's* editorial said: "A general strike can defeat the Liberals who will be powerless against the combined efforts of the labour movement."

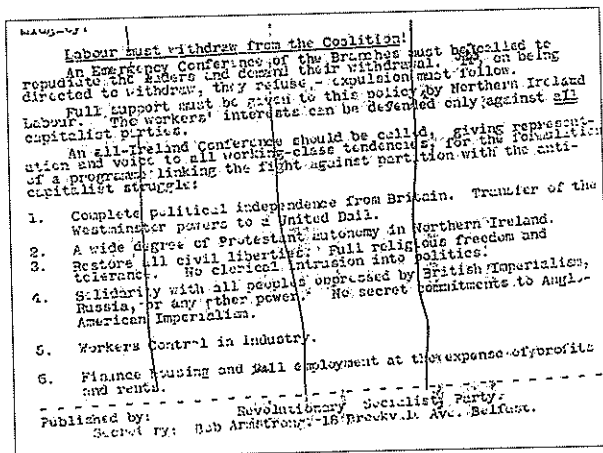
The SWL seemed to think that the same ALP which had quietly given up its parliamentary mandate to Kerr could call a general strike. Others, a little less improbably, appealed on the ACTU to call it; and yet others, such as the "Healyite" Socialist Labor League, seemed to think that they could get it just by putting the slogan on the front page of their paper.

The left doubted the opinion polls which showed Fraser in the lead, seeing them as part of the conspiracy to defeat Labor. They thought a vote for Fraser was a vote for dictatorship, a vote for Whitlam a vote for democracy, and obviously most people would not want to vote for dictatorship. Throughout Fraser's years in office, the left would allude to the Chilean dictatorship, and depict him on posters Hitler-like, with a small dark moustache.

The fact, however, is that parliamentary democracy continued in Australia after the coup much as it had done before. So how could the left groups give practical expression during the crisis to their commitment to class politics and socialism?

*Direct Action* (27 November) argued that "The offensive of the coalition [conservative] parties can only be effectively countered and the living standard of the working class maintained and extended by fighting for socialist policies... This is why the Socialist Workers League is standing candidates in the coming election. The Socialist Workers campaign will enable workers to tell the Labor leadership that its policies are unacceptable, that we do not wish to make sacrifices to the capitalist system, that we want Labor to defend our interests against the interests of the employers." The SWL election platform was a catalogue of reform demands on wages, education, women's rights, Aboriginal land rights, etc.

## As we were saying



INCOMPREHENSION of Irish realities still blinds much of the left. An ignorant hostility to the Irish Protestant minority still predominates, even though it is hostility to a big part of the Irish industrial working class. The idea of advocating a solution in Ireland based on Catholic-Protestant mutual accommodation is still seen as both treasonous and heretical, especially by "Trotskyists". It is with satisfaction as well as surprise, therefore, we discover that the small Trotskyist group that existed in Ireland in the 1940s, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, advocated a policy which resembles our own on the question of Protestant-Catholic relations. It called for "a wide degree of Protestant autonomy in Northern Ireland".

It seems to us that federalism is the only feasible arrangement now, but our fundamental idea has been expressed like this since 1969: "As much autonomy for the Protestant Irish minority as is compatible with the rights of the Irish majority". The exact details will be worked out in discussion and negotiation. The RSP's policy is underdeveloped, but its character, tendency and implications are unmistakable.

The RSP was initially linked to the British Revolutionary Communist Party, and then a separate organisation. In the late 1940s' discussion amongst Trotskyists about the class nature of Russia, they adopted the position of the Workers' Party of America, that it was bureaucratic-collectivist.

Always tiny, the RSP disappeared at the end of the 1940s. One of its members was Matt Merrigan, who has been central to the Irish left for half a century.

*This leaflet was found by Bruce Robinson in the archives of Max Shachtman in the Tamiment Library, New York.*

— not an outline of a policy for workers' action in the crisis to attack the power of the ruling class.

The SWAG concentrated on warning how vicious Fraser's attacks on workers would be: vote Labor, they said, but rank and file action was what we really needed. In the context, they were saying that the working class could not aspire to government even when highly mobilised in a great political crisis. They left out politics.

The new groups of Marxists in Australia in 1975 had little experience of their own to draw on. Marxists also develop ideas from the experience of socialists and class struggles in other times and places; but that too was a weak point for the Marxists in Australia. I have yet to find any written material or oral reports from the period discussing the relevance of the relatively recent example of France in 1968, or the writings of Rosa Luxemburg on the political mass strike.

"The political tricksters who believe they can conjure up a mass strike and then terminate it with a wave of the hand are in error... Mass strikes cannot be made on command... When the class conflicts have become so pronounced and the political situation so tense that parliamentary means are no longer sufficient to advance the cause of the proletariat, then the mass strike is urgently necessary... only when the situation has become so extreme that there is no more hope for co-operation with the bourgeois parties... does the proletariat obtain the impetus necessary for the success of the mass strike. Accordingly, the mass strike is not reconcilable with a policy centred around parliamentarism."<sup>3</sup>

Luxemburg made a sharp distinction between protest action and a general strike to win. An orientation by the left to agitate for the CPA-influenced unions to break away from the ACTU's inertia and set up the action committees which they called for would have tended towards a real political mass strike; but in effect the left groups — by focussing on the ACTU, or even, in the case of the SWL, on Labor — were trying to get a protest strike.

Another relevant source of ideas from history was the Communist International's discussion in 1922 on the united front and the "workers' government". Karl Radek explained it like this:

"The German, Norwegian and Czechoslovakian workers will... prefer a coalition of labour parties which would guarantee the 8 hour day and an extra crust of bread, etc..."

"Now this question arises — shall we recline upon this soft cushion and take a good rest, or shall we rather lead the masses into the fight on the basis of their own illusions for the realisa-

tion of the programme of a Workers' Government? If we conceive the Workers' Government as a soft cushion, we are ourselves politically beaten... On the other hand, if we keep alive the consciousness of the masses that a Workers' Government is an empty shell unless it has workers behind it forging their weapons and forming their factory councils... such a Workers' Government will... become... a lever for the conquest of power by revolutionary means."

The crisis focused attention on the sources of bourgeois power. Agitation for a workers' government could have concretised that focus, on the role of the Senate (the Upper House), the Governor General, the law, the media, and repressive methods. As it was, the Marxists floundered as they tried to express simultaneous support and criticism for Labor ("critical support").

The time for general strike agitation which could perhaps have shattered the strong hold of the union bureaucracy was from about mid-October (as the conflict between the Labor government and the Liberals in the Upper House reached crisis-point) to late November — about five weeks. It would always have been a long shot. Maybe the revolutionary left was too weak to win whatever it said and did. The terrible shame is that despite the mass upheavals and the heady days of working-class fightback in 1975, the story that took hold in the following years was that a radical Labor Government could not survive. This history, told and sold, lent momentum to the drive of Bob Hawke and the right in the labour movement, to reshape the ALP as the solid reliable party of capitalist stability which held office from 1983 to 1996.

Whitlam's government had lost the confidence of the ruling class. Any government which persistently took the side of the working class against the ruling class would likewise face the full battery of ruling class methods for bringing it down. Any workers' government would have that in common with the Whitlam government.

The revolutionary story to be told is that working-class people will stand up to defend a government that they feel is theirs. They will use methods which strain against the limits of parliamentary democracy and which recognise the power of the ruling class resides in many institutions outside parliament. The main reason that they didn't get to stand up for themselves more effectively in 1975 was that the leaders of the ALP, the unions and the CPA all worked hard to keep the movement and its understanding of the issues framed within parliamentary democracy.

It would have been possible in 1975 to fight for a workers' reform government, and for the working class to defend that government from the ruling class with extra-parliamentary methods which pointed beyond the government's limits. The revolutionary story of 1975 is the story of what the working class could have done itself, with an understanding that it could act independently, not just as a cheer squad at an extended ALP election rally.

[This article is part of a larger research project. The author welcomes comments, and especially documents or memories from people active in November 1975: send c/o Workers' Liberty, PO Box 313, Leichhardt, NSW 2040, or by e-mail to janet.burstall@tafensw.edu.au].

## Footnotes

1. *Tribune*, 19 November 1975.
2. Phil Iltan, *The origins of the International Socialists in Australia: a history of the Socialist Workers' Action Group*, Melbourne 1984, pp.45-6.
3. Rosa Luxemburg, *The political mass strike*, in *Selected Political Writings*, Jonathon Cape, 1972, p.181.

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