

Marxism Today

Ted Hill on Communism, Trade Unions and the ALP

by **Duncan B.**

The history of class struggle in Australia has thrown up some inspiring people. The late Ted Hill, founding Chairman of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), was a person closely connected to working class struggles.

Involved in pivotal struggles in Australia such as the Penal Powers struggle and the attempted banning of the Communist Party by the Menzies government in the 1950s, Hill always adhered to communist principles. As a barrister, he championed worker's rights, fighting for compensation for those injured in the course of their employment. He played a leading role in the Communist Party of Australia and during the period of Khrushchev's revisionism and the consequent Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, he helped establish the CPA (M-L).

Hill wrote extensively on the particularities of Australian society, the class struggle, the fight for socialism and the longer-term project of the building of communism in this country. His writing was characterised by a methodical, logical approach to Australian social conditions.

Starting with facts, he sought to analyse concrete conditions, and through critical examination, highlight the key contradictions. Armed with these insights, Hill made strategic and tactical recommendations for class-conscious workers, working people, communists and others concerned with fighting for Australian independence.

The role of the Australian Labor Party in Australian politics attracted his attention a number of times. Similarly, the influence, both positive and negative, of the trade union movement came in for comment from Ted.

Trade unions and working class politics

The fight for better wages and conditions led to the creation of trade unions. Such was the case in Britain in the nineteenth century. With the spread of capitalism and industrialisation throughout Europe and the rest of the world, worker's resistance to impoverishment, long hours and harsh conditions saw trade unions spring up across the globe. Australia was no exception, with strong connections to the British movement because of our colonial ties.

In Chapter Eleven of *Communism*

and *Australia; Reflections and Reminiscences*, Ted Hill outlined the pivotal function that trade unions have played in Australian working class politics. For Hill, "the trade unions emerged to defend the economic interests of the workers."

After bitter resistance from employers in this country, "the capitalists recognised that the formation of trade unions could no longer be successfully resisted." The eventual result was that in Australia an "elaborate system of

improved conditions for the workers under capitalism. It is an *ideology* inconsistent with communist ideology which has as its ultimate aim the ending of capitalism." He contrasted the economist approach with militant trade unionism, which whilst pursuing similar aims to economism, did so more aggressively.

Essentially, trade unions and trade union politics are constrained by their acceptance of or accommodation to capitalism. This does not preclude the

this problem by getting representatives into parliament. Added impetus for the creation of the ALP came from the 1890s depression, which hit Australian workers hard.

The ALP since its inception has carried the hopes and aspirations of Australian working people for a more just and equitable society. "The ALP has always commanded strong electoral adherence among the working class. Even in times of acute electoral difficulties for the Labor Party huge numbers of workers have voted for it." This was a fact of Australian politics that could not be ignored.

Another fact that could not be ignored was that the ALP was a party of capitalism. The tension between the ALP's traditional support base being in the working class (despite the continuing attempts by ALP insiders to distance the Labor Party from trade unions and the working class) and its total commitment to the maintenance of capitalist relations of production always caused problems for the Labor Party.

The tension spoken of here not only found its reflection in the factions in the ALP, it also informed what Hill called the ALP's "built-in tendency to vacillate on important questions." We need only note the vacillation we have seen in the Rudd Government's approach to the repeal of the most noxious elements of the Howard Government's punitive WorkChoices legislation. Vacillation over the crucial issue of climate change also highlights this tendency.

From its inception, the ALP has focussed its attention on achieving parliamentary office, with the objective of introducing reforms. Experience has shown that whilst many become disillusioned with the Labor Party when in office, because its promised reforms do not materialise or are watered down, many workers and working people still grudgingly support the ALP.

The contrast between the ALP and the CPA (M-L)

Ted Hill pointed out that it would take time, repeated experience and patient explanation before working class people completely shed their illusions about the ALP. Only then would they be willing to embrace a vision beyond parliamentary elections and take up the fight for an independent Australia, and ultimately, socialism.

Ted Hill left a legacy of astute political insights that continue to resonate. His work deserves serious study.



E. F. Hill

registration and legislative control of trade unions ... evolved." It should be borne in mind that when this was written (1980s), the concerted ruling class attacks that undermined the legislative basis of Australian Industrial Relations as it had stood for decades, was yet to unfold.

Nevertheless, Hill was correct in his identification of the essence of trade union politics. In the day-to-day struggle against the encroachments of the capitalists, trade unionists and their officials generally either "submit to [the] subordination [of] capitalism" or "resist it." The acceptance of capitalism and capitalist relations of production gives rise to 'economism', where the struggle over purely economic demands is the beginning and end of trade union activities.

According to Hill "economism is an *ideology* of capitalism. It accepts the permanence of capitalism but demands

development of communist ideology by rank and file trade unionists or officials.

Notwithstanding that possibility, Hill pointed out the limits of trade union struggle and trade union politics, based on his analysis of Australian conditions.

The incorporation of trade unions as legal entities into the official Australian Industrial Relations system formalised acceptance by unions of the 'system'. Conversely, the system (or the ruling class) would not bestow recognition on any body that sought the overthrow of capitalism.

Ted Hill on the ALP

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Australian labour movement recognised the limitations of trade union struggle and looked to address