

LOCALITY WORK AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT :

By Ruth Crow

(Report prepared for the Communist and Labor Movement Conference -  
23rd and 24th August, 1980)

Towards the end of the 1930's I was a member of the Brighton Branch of the Communist Party. Our main campaign was against war and fascism and we were particularly active in rallying support for the Spanish Republican Government. We did take up these issues at local level to the extent that we gave publicity to the war-mongering policies of local councillors, some of whom were very closely identified with army recruiting campaigns. But I cannot remember working out any ideas on the needs of the local community.

In the 1940's when I was a member of the Brunswick Branch of the Party our campaigns on local issues were part and parcel of the daily life of the Party.

To begin with the C.P.A. bookshop was almost next door to the Brunswick Town Hall - we had a drop-in place right in the hub of the district. This was a direct way of knowing what was happening in the locality and the factories.

At election times we stood Party members for the Council; for example Pop Spicer who had won considerable respect for his work with tenants on the Brunswick Housing Commission estate, and Jock McEwan who was a well known trade unionist.

At that time some of the trade unions had local branches based in Brunswick; these provided a natural link between the community movement and the trade unions. We also used the facilities at the Brunswick Town Hall; for example, the communist women held discussion groups in the Town Hall supper room. Meetings to discuss child care would attract about 50 or more Brunswick women. I have brought along some photos and other documents about the Brunswick Children's Centre which illustrate one of the ways some communist women were active in the early 1940's. (Exhibit 1)

It was during this period that the branches of the Party prepared plans for their municipalities. I do not have a copy of our program for Brunswick but it was along similar lines to these. We all contributed to discussing and writing the Brunswick Program and of course this became our manifesto for the municipal elections. (Exhibit 2)

Because of the nature of our local work the Party had fairly strong relationships with some councillors and with the State and Federal Members of Parliament. The popularity of the party in the local scene can be gauged by the fact that when the war ended the Brunswick Branches of the Party held a Victory Picnic in one of the municipal parks which was attended by hundreds of Brunswick families.

Before the end of the 1940's, however, the "Cold War" freeze had set in.

In Victoria, in addition to all the other attacks on the Left, we had the Sharpley defection and the Sharpley Inquiry. This was in 1949 well before the Petrov Commission of the early 1950's.

In Brunswick the Communists were denied use of all Council facilities and the Council would have no dealings with any organisation in which there was a communist or "anyone thought to be a communist". In addition there was a concerted attack on communists in the school organisations and the social welfare organisations, such as the Council of School Committees, despite the widespread support we had gained in the early 1940's.

Reflecting this attack on the Left, the local school organisations became much more conservative and directed their main attention on school amenities rather than on campaigns for better education. Typical of this reaction was that the Victorian Country Party Government refused to give any government grants to the Victorian Association of Creches while a communist (myself) was on the Committee of Management. My forced resignation was the type of action that helped to dismantle the movement around children's services which had flourished during the war. These expulsions ushered in the 1950's 1960's period of sessional so called "community" kindergartens which diverted the child care movement into very parochial and limited areas.

It is important to note that the attacks on the Left during the cold war were first made on the communist influence in the community organisations, the schools, the day nurseries and so on. As women were the main people active in these organisations, the women were the first to feel the effect of the cold war.

There are various estimates as to when the cold war started, but I place its beginning with the loss of the 1944 Referendum. If this Referendum had been won then the wartime powers that had been claimed by the Labour Government would have continued into peace time. These powers enabled the Federal Government to subsidise day nurseries and provide other essential social services, including factory meals. The loss of these powers was like the dismantling of the Whitlam Government's Australian Assistance Plan in 1976.

This defeat of Labour Government policy heartened the reactionary forces.

It is important to pause here and to consider the significance of the United Front and the People's Front. The Party's policy in the 1940's was based on an understanding of the need to build a United Front of the working class organisations on which there could be developed a wider coalition of the People's Front. The People's Front was a linking of other groupings . . . middle class, intellectuals and farmers and so on, with the united working class organisations as its core. (Exhibit 3)

Dimitrov, the internationally famous Communist called for all the working class organisations to unite on only one condition . . . unity to defeat fascism. He also called for the building of a People's Front based on the strength of the United Front . . . To a large extent work in localities is in the nature of People's Front work . . . but such loose coalitions proved to be easily broken when the working class movement began to be defeated.

The loss of the referendum heralded in a period when the People's Front began to crumble. The reactionaries picked off individuals who were prominent in community welfare services and managed to isolate the communists long before attempts were made to isolate communists in the union movement.

I would like to pause again and to re-emphasise that work in the localities or community organisations etc. is mainly the responsibility of women, and thus women were the first to be attacked in the cold war.

Compounding this situation was the fact that in the late 1940's (from about 1946 or thereabouts) the Communist Party in Australia began to be concerned about "Browderism". Earl Browder was a leader of the Communist Party of the U.S.A. and he was criticised for giving too much significance to the movements in the community and for thinking that we could win socialism through community action.

Looking back, I think the Party's rejection of a socialist movement with the main emphasis on community action rather than workplace activity was quite correct, but I think we over-reacted a bit. Anyway, one negative effect was that the discussions on Browderism meant that coinciding with the attacks by the Right on comrades working in community organisations, the Communist Party began to under-value this sphere of political work. This under-valuing of local work is referred to in the article by Gwen George in The Tribune, 13th August this year. (Exhibit 4)

In the late 1940's there were all sorts of attacks on the Left, especially on the Trade Unions, and so, in addition to losing confidence in the significance of locality work, there was very little time left over to be active locally.

In any case the Cold War freeze affected daily relationships. Many comrades were ostracised for their political beliefs and this was felt more acutely by those working in the locality than those on the job where the day to day work relationships would more effectively counter-balance the attacks on the Left.

Thus many communists (especially women) were not able to maintain their local links and there was a tendency to seek to become active in centrally situated organisations. It was during this period that the Union of Australian Women courageously and perseveringly began to gather together small groups of progressive women in localities and helped them to break out of the narrow subjectivism forced on them by the Cold War. Hats off to the U.A.W.

During the late 40's and early 50's, most Party members, whether they were working in industry or not, tried to find ways of helping to make the main blow against capitalism "at the point of production". Thus, those who were not in employment spent a great deal of their time handing out leaflets at factory gates and in charring factory gate meetings. This left little time for work in the locality.

Adding to this, the main issues of concern to the Party tended to be concentrated on national and international politics. Thus there are very few examples of how we were able, during this period, to link up local issues with the broader campaigns of the day. However, gradually local campaigns did develop, for example, around such slogans as "Federal Aid for Education; "Half the Basic Wage for Pensioners" and "Federal Aid to Local Government. (Exhibit 5)

It will be noted that all of these campaigns were part of the attacks on the Federal Menzies Government. Thus, in the localities we tended to develop relationships with our Federal Members of Parliament and to by-pass the State and municipal representatives or the movements on state and municipal issues,.

There are a few shining examples of communists who stood for Councils in the 1950's - 1960's. Jack O'Mara in Moorabbin, Margaret Wilson in Hawthorn, and Bill Barnes in Preston. They did take up some of the traditional local government issues, such as traffic and pre-school education, but the main emphasis of their campaigns was for lower rates through Federal aid for councils.

Thus the local government campaigns by the Left in the 1950's and early 1960's tended to be rather parochial and only of very temporary significance but by the end of the 1960's it began to be recognised that the emerging urban issues could not be confined to such a narrow base.

The Trade Unions helped to give this broader perspective. In 1967, in Victoria, the Trade Unions held a Living Standards Convention which included seminars on social services and on Town Planning. This opened out a much wider view of local government and locality work.

A group of Communist Party members formed the "Modern Melbourne Committee" of the Party and prepared a report "Plan for Melbourne, Part 1", as a document for the 1968 State Conference of the Party. It was pre-circulated to all delegates and a pre-conference discussion resulted in a number of amendments, and finally the Conference itself carried the document. (Exhibit 6)

At the same time a group of left people interested in town planning formed a loose organisation called the Town Planning Research Group. This consisted of some local government councillors, some trade unionists, some town planners and architects and some people involved in local organisations. This group met monthly and produced a monthly bulletin examining current town planning issues. (Exhibit 7)

This group functioned as a "ginger Group" for more than twelve years and it helped to initiate the Radical Ecology Conference which was held in Melbourne in 1975 (attended by 500 people). (Exhibit 8)

It is difficult to measure the influence of this Left group on town planning; but it will be seen from these publications (Ecoso Exchange and Irregular) that in addition to dealing with some Federal political issues the Town Planning Research Group was mainly a forum for examining State and municipal reports and reporting on urban campaigns as well as providing some information on some of the literature of town planning.

These opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of ideas helped Maurie Grow and myself to write the other two editions of Plan for Melbourne (Parts 2 and 3).

It is important to note that whereas Plan for Melbourne Part 1 was written by a group of Communists and carried by a State Conference of the Party, Parts 2 and 3, although they are published by the Party, they do not represent the Party's view on the issues discussed. The Communist Party published these documents to further discussion on these issues. The C.P.A. has popularised some of the ideas in the Tribune and in booklets by Dave Davies. (Exhibit 9)

Plan for Melbourne Parts 2 and 3 examined reports of the State Government while they were still being debated. . . they were both written to deadlines so that they would appear before policy had been decided. Part 2 examines community services, the Urban Renewal Bill and the Transportation Report and Part 3 was written as an objection to the Board of Works' Plan for future growth of Melbourne.

A measure of the popularity of some of the articles is that quite a number have been published by other publications. These efforts at trying to analyse urban issues were such a breath of fresh air to the traditional architects and planners that both the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the Town and Country Planning Association awarded Maurie and me for our contribution to town planning. (The R.A.I.A. gave us a Robin Boyd Award for "a notable contribution to the literature of town planning" and the T.C.P.A.A. presented us with the Barret Medal which is usually reserved for such dignitaries as Whitlam, Hamer, Stretton and others.

This is noteworthy because Plan for Melbourne series were published by the Communist Party and the Town Planning Research Group (that published Irregular/Ecoso Exchange) was well known for its "left" character.

In recent years there have been only very few occasions when the C.P.A. has stood candidates at municipal elections. Fitzroy Branch of the Party has been the exception. In addition, Fitzroy Branch is beginning to work out a communist program for their municipality. This is a welcome new development.

Where the Party has stood candidates for State or Federal seats some attention is now being given to relating state and federal issues to the locality in which the candidate is standing. This is also a welcome new development in Victoria. (Exhibit 13)

In Victoria the 1970's have been significant for many reasons :

- \* During this period urban action groups have begun to work out alternative plans (Exhibit 10)
- \* There have been all sorts of protest movements which have involved municipal councillors; for example, the anti-freeway movement.
- \* The N.S.W green bans movement has shown urban action groups the muscle of the trade unions (even though the action has taken place in another state).
- \* The growth of the women's liberation movement meant that new types of local campaigns were initiated; for example, for half-way houses, child care, women's health centres and women's learning centres (Exhibit 11)
- \* There have been all sorts of efforts aimed at bringing local government closer to the people (Exhibit 12)
- \* All these movements are continuing into the 1980's and there is evidence that even more significant movements will be developed.

Already in Victoria, the conservation movements and the Trade Unions, as well as community movements, are finding common grounds for campaigns on very broad fronts.

The key issue in these campaigns is the need to conserve our energy (our petrol consumption) by restructuring our urban areas. (Exhibit 14)

Such movements are uniting the conservation movement, the trade unions and the urban action movement; for example, the movement which has been initiated by the Australian Conservation Foundation around Environmentalists for Full Employment (E.F.F.E.) and the Conservation of Urban Energy Group of the Victorian Conservation Council (Exhibit 15) C.U.E. and E.F.F.E. are providing encouragement to local groups and for groups of trade unionists to work out plans for the future of the locality and of particular industries. These plans cannot be worked out unless there are all sorts of coalitions between the various community and urban action movements, the women's liberation movement, the trade unions and the environmentalists. Some of the linkages may be of a more or less permanent nature, but others may only be of very short duration - aimed at a definite goal to be achieved in a short space of time.

But whether these groupings are permanent or temporary their effectiveness will depend on the extent to which they can lift campaigns up from being merely protest movements to being campaigns which give people a glimpse of a life based on better human relationships.

To date, campaigns in the localities have tended to remain at the protest stage . . . anti-freeway protests without a mention of the sort of life we could envisage if the car was not allowed to dominate our life; anti-power-station campaigns without in some way advocating a new life style of participatory activities which would reduce our dependence on fossil fuel; housing policies which merely look at the economics of housing and ignore the human

needs of those who will make the buildings their homes; child care as if the child's needs are paramount and there are no parental needs; education, health and so on as if these needs can be met in large hospitals or educational institutions; and in most cases on all these issues very little consideration of whether the siting of these facilities will lead to clustering or human activity or not.

In our work in the localities we must strive to become quite precise in presenting alternatives so that the future will not produce the anachronisms of the past, expressed in the prevailing idea that cars are our most prized form of transport, that neighbourhoods are no longer significant; that all dwellings should be for the nuclear family; that there is plenty of fossil fuel; that democracy is merely voting at election time . . . and so on and on.

Alternatives are beginning to take practical form. People are demanding more say on the control of community services; for example the movements around community child care and community health centres. People are also demanding more opportunity to participate in local government decision-making and are debating new forms of democratic control, and, in some instances, trying to make such participation possible. Many other examples could also be cited.

These efforts will remain small and easily co-opted into the conservative stream of established institution unless there is an overall political movement with an overall vision into which these human scale efforts can be dovetailed.

One of the contradictions in championing the small local neighbourhood movement is that these movements can easily deteriorate into parochial campaigns (in the same way as trade union campaigns can deteriorate into reformist campaigns.) An overall vision and links between community groups and the trade unions can offset both parochialism and reformism.

#### WHAT OF THE FUTURE ... .. ?

The main problem confronting the people of Australia; the people of the under-developed countries and the people living in the United States and other so called "developed" countries is the need to stop the squandering of our fossil fuel. In local campaigns this means making immediate plans to re-structure our urban areas so that we are no longer dependent on the car for transport.

The widespread popularity of the anti-fascist movement of the 1940's grew from the constant stream of information which was supplied by such groups as the Left Book Club and other publications. Today there is no such easily identifiable grouping, rather there are many diverse organisations . . . The Movement against Uranium Mining, Friends of the Earth, Australian Conservation Foundation . . . numerous urban action and community control organisations, all sorts of student and unemployed groups . . . each in their own way are taking up the issue of the use of the world's resources.

In the same way, as in the 1940's, the United Front (based on the unity of the labor movement's opposition to fascism) was the core of the broader coalitions of the People's Front, so also in this period it is possible to single out one issue around which there can be united action, not only by the working class organisations but through broad alliances of other strata of the population. This issue is the squandering of the earth resources for the benefit of profit hungry capitalism.



Already there is beginning to develop a variety of campaigns based on the twin objectives of (a) conserving our resources and (b) offering a better life. As communists we know that what really matters in life are the human values, not material wealth, nor status, nor freedom at the expense of others; but a life that sees social values as distinct from economic ones as the prime objectives. How can we use our convictions to inspire others?

Those of us who are working in the localities can face this challenge by working out alternative plans for local areas. In some areas these plans may be worked out by a group of communists; in others by conservationists; or by people involved in the community control movement. There are many different starting points.

For too long town planning and social planning has been left in the hands of the conservative technocrats and the benevolent professionals. Communists have shied away, being afraid lest they be regarded as "utopian dreamers" (as far as town planning goes) or as "lackeys of the Bourgeois" (as far as social planning goes).

---

LIST OF EXHIBITS:

- Exhibit 1 Documents of the Brunswick Children's Centre
  - Exhibit 2 Plans for post-war period
  - Exhibit 3 Dimitrov's Report.
  - Exhibit 4 Tribune, 13th August, 1980 (article by Gwen George )
  - Exhibit 5 Tribune article 2nd July, 1980 (Marge and Mabel)
  - Exhibit 6 Plan for Melbourne, Part 1
  - Exhibit 7 Irregular/Ecoso Exchange File
  - Exhibit 8 Documents of the Radical Ecology Conference
  - Exhibit 9 Plans for Melbourne, Parts 2 and 3
  - Exhibit 10 C.A.N. Report and Report on Geelong
  - Exhibit 11 Copies of Ripple and Community Child Care Manual
  - Exhibit 12 Documents of the Community Consultation of M.C.C.
  - Exhibit 13 Article about Roger Wilson in Kensington News
  - Exhibit 14 Nunawading leaflet and Local Plans Booklet
  - Exhibit 15 Leaflets from E.F.F.E. and "Seeds for Change" from C.U.E.
-