

## Communists and the 1933 campaign that ended frontier massacres in Australia

Padraic Gibson\*

*In August and September of 1933, agitation by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) led trade unions and unemployed workers' organisations to join a national campaign for Aboriginal rights for the first time in history. Police in the Northern Territory were publicly planning a "punitive expedition" to kill Yolngu people, in response to the spearing death of an officer. Public mobilisation stopped the expedition, effectively ending the practice of frontier massacres that had long characterised the colonisation of Australia. Existing histories have emphasised the leading role of missionaries and other middle and upper-class intellectuals, who led humanitarian organisations playing an increasingly influential role in Aboriginal affairs. While acknowledging the significance of these efforts, this article makes a new argument about the central role of communist agitation and the participation of working-class organisations in forcing a complete police retreat. Animating this initiative was a Marxist anti-imperialist politics that appealed to anti-war traditions within the workers' movement.*

**Keywords:** Frontier Wars; Communist Party of Australia; Aboriginal Rights; Anti-Imperialism; Labour Movement; Anti-War Protest

On 1 August, 1933, Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda, a Yolngu leader from the Dhudi Djapu clan, fatally speared a Northern Territory police officer, Constable Albert McColl. McColl was on Dhakiyarr's land on Woodah Island in East Arnhem Land. He was part of a police patrol sent to nearby Caledon Bay, to investigate the killing of a Japanese trepang fisherman by Yolngu<sup>1</sup> people the previous year.<sup>2</sup> At the time he was killed, McColl had four Yolngu women chained by his side, including Djarparri Wirrpanda, Dhakiyarr's wife, in an attempt to force Yolngu on the island to co-operate with the investigation.<sup>3</sup>

At this time in Australian history, at the most senior levels of government, sending police out to massacre Aboriginal people was still considered to be an acceptable policy response to events like the spearing of McColl.<sup>4</sup> An official inquiry had exonerated police responsible for killing scores of Aboriginal people at Coniston in Central Australia in 1928.<sup>5</sup> Now, both the Northern Territory Administration in Darwin and the Department of the Interior they

---

\*The author would like to thank *Labour History's* two anonymous referees.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I refer to Aboriginal people from North-East Arnhem Land as "Yolngu", which is used consistently by local Aboriginal people as a self-referential term, that translates as "human being". The term is also commonly used by researchers to describe people from this area. Mickey Dewar, *The Black War in Arnhem Land* (Darwin: North Australia Research Unit, 1995), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Island Killings 1932-1933* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 22-29.

<sup>3</sup> Egan, *Justice*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1998), 204.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society: Aboriginal Policy and Practice Volume 1* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970), 289.

reported to in Canberra, began to prepare a police-led “punitive expedition” that would ride into Arnhem Land and “teach the natives a lesson”.<sup>6</sup>

The impending massacre was stopped by a campaign for Aboriginal rights that, for the first time in history, included significant involvement from the labour movement. In mid-August, members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in Darwin formed a committee to oppose the proposed police raid and agitate for national action.<sup>7</sup> Church and humanitarian leaders heavily lobbied Prime Minister Joseph Lyons and his Interior Minister John Perkins to repudiate plans for violence. Then, over three weeks from 5 September, unemployed worker activists and trade unionists, largely concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne, came together and made resolutions of protest, demanding an end to the “war of extermination” being waged against Aboriginal people. Women’s groups and other civil society organisations also registered protests.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of dispatching a police party, the government collaborated with missionaries to negotiate the surrender of Dhakiyarr and other Yolngu responsible for recent killings.<sup>9</sup> The brutal treatment of these prisoners, and the farcical nature of court proceedings which condemned them to death, launched another wave of protest which led to the High Court of Australia quashing Dhakiyarr’s conviction and ordering his release in November 1934.<sup>10</sup> Brutal injustice of course continued. Dhakiyarr himself disappeared after he was released from prison and was most likely murdered by police.<sup>11</sup> The Australian government had, however, clearly rejected the legitimacy of exemplary killings of Aboriginal people and was forced to abandon plans to send any police party to Caledon Bay. What is commonly analysed as the period of “frontier warfare”, or what Charles Rowley called “the overt destruction of Aboriginal society by violence... killing by police as an administrative method, condoned by their superiors”,<sup>12</sup> was now over.

In historiography, there are only fleeting references to this historic campaign. When it is discussed, credit for campaign leadership is often solely ascribed to middle and upper-class intellectuals such as clergymen or Adolphus Peter (A.P.) Elkin, the chair of Anthropology at Sydney University.<sup>13</sup> A file in the National Archives, containing many of the letters and

---

<sup>6</sup> “Government Prepares For Punitive Expedition Against Blacks – ‘Lesson Must Be Given’”, *The Herald*, 2 September, 1933, 1.

<sup>7</sup> “Punitive Expedition Against Aborigines,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 25 August, 1933, 3.

<sup>8</sup> There are 56 letters from organisations or other collective bodies containing resolutions of protest or concerns about the proposed punitive expedition held in the file, Caledon Bay Expedition 1933 – Protests, Department of the Interior, series A1, file 1933/7632, National Archives of Australia, ACT. Approximately half of the letters are from labour movement organisations. There are also a number of protests cited in this article that were reported in the press, but are absent from the file.

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 209-12.

<sup>10</sup> Egan, *Justice*, 153-155, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Egan, *Justice*, 192.

<sup>12</sup> Rowley, *Destruction*, 288.

<sup>13</sup> Brief accounts of the campaign are in Andrew McMillan, *An Intruders Guide to East Arnhem Land* (Darwin: Niblock Publishing, 2007), 114-117; Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Island Killings 1932-1933* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 41-43; Mickey Dewar, *The Black War in Arnhem Land* (Darwin: North Australia Research Unit, 1995), 61-62; Rowley,

resolutions of protest sent to the Federal government from August – October 1933, has been a key source utilised by historians writing about these developments.<sup>14</sup> This article draws on extensive research in the CPA archives to make a new argument about the genesis of many of these protests and the nature of the broader campaign, demonstrating the significant role of CPA agitation and the crucial importance of working-class mobilisation in forcing the police retreat.<sup>15</sup> Bound up in this, is an argument about the significance of the Marxist, anti-imperialist politics advocated by the CPA in animating the campaign.

In occasional articles from 1929,<sup>16</sup> and a detailed program for Aboriginal liberation in 1931, writers in the CPA press had theorised frontier massacres of Aboriginal people as a function of Australian imperialism.<sup>17</sup> They argued that the working-class and colonised people were both oppressed by capitalism and that workers in imperialist countries like Australia had a duty to support anti-colonial resistance.<sup>18</sup> Communists also argued that collective working-class action was the key social power capable of forcing transformative change on questions of Aboriginal rights, with the capacity for strike action that could hit the economy and drive broader radicalisation. The campaign in September 1933, which celebrated the spearing of McColl as an inspiring blow for justice,<sup>19</sup> saw the first attempt to actively apply these principles through mobilising party members and supporters in a direct challenge to government.

---

*Destruction*, 290-291; Most substantially, Henry Reynolds provides a six page account that gives some acknowledgement of the participation of the labour movement, but not the CPA, Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 205-210.

<sup>14</sup> Caledon Bay Expedition 1933 – Protests, Department of the Interior, series A1, file 1933/7632, National Archives of Australia, ACT.

<sup>15</sup> Along with the silence on the role of communists in existing histories of the Caledon Bay crisis cited above, histories of both the CPA and the Australian labour movement in this period have also largely missed the significance of this campaign. In a seminal essay on the relationship between trade unions and Aboriginal people, Andrew Markus noted the work of labour movement organisations led by communists in campaigns to free NT Aboriginal prisoners in 1934, including Dhakiarr, and mentions they helped to stop “punitive expeditions,” without providing any account of the 1933 campaign. A short chapter in the book *Radical Sydney* documented significant efforts led by the CPA to stop the execution of Dhakiyarr in 1934, without discussion of the earlier struggle to stop the threatened massacre. My own PhD thesis documented the campaign in detail and this work has been cited in a recent book by socialist historian Jordan Humphries, which provides a short discussion of the campaign as part of an analysis of growing CPA support for Aboriginal rights in the 1930s. Andrew Markus, “Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement”, in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus, eds., *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 145; Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, *Radical Sydney: Places, portraits and unruly episodes* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 204-208; Padraic Gibson, “‘Stop the War on Aborigines’: The Communist Party of Australia and the Fight for Aboriginal Rights, 1920–1935’ (PhD diss., University of Newcastle, 2020), 177-207; Jordan Humphries, *Indigenous Liberation and Socialism* (Melbourne: Red Flag Books, 2023), 119-120.

<sup>16</sup> “The White Man’s Burden,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 22 March, 1929, 4.

<sup>17</sup> “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines - Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 24 September, 1931, 2.

<sup>18</sup> “The Native Races and Imperialism,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 18 September, 1931, 2.

<sup>19</sup> “A study in psychology,” *Northern Voice*, 30 August, 1933, 2.

This article will explore the mechanics and the politics of this campaign. This includes analysis of the relationship between radical worker activists and “imperial humanitarians”<sup>20</sup> such as clergymen and academics. The APNR and much of the clergy agreed with the government that something had to be done to apprehend Yolngu responsible for the killings and accepted assurances that continuing plans for a police expedition to Caledon Bay would focus on making arrests rather than retaliation.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, communists argued that Dhakiyarr’s attack on McColl was legitimate and continued to organise against any police action, correctly assuming that police had their minds set on bloodshed. It was under pressure from these continuing protests, that Perkins held back the police and began collaboration with missionaries on an unarmed “peace party”, that appealed to Yolngu to surrender and face court.<sup>22</sup>

### Spears and shot guns in East Arnhem Land

In the 2004 film *Dhakiyarr vs The King*, Dhakiyarr’s son, Wuyal Wirrpanda, explained that the warrior was defending his family and country by spearing McColl, “he was thinking... who is this man that is going to try and steal this land for himself?”. Many members of Dhakiyarr’s family had been killed in previous massacres and police were still “fighting a war with Black people”.<sup>23</sup> Massacres began in Arnhem Land in the late nineteenth century as Australian pastoral capitalists and mineral prospectors started to push into Yolngu homelands.<sup>24</sup> Yolngu resistance and inhospitable country largely forced the retreat of pastoralists by WWI.<sup>25</sup> Arnhem Land was gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve in 1931, managed by the Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia (MMS) and the Church Missionary Society of Australia (CMS), which established a number of missions, including on Groote Eylandt close to Dhakiyarr’s country.<sup>26</sup> For hundreds of years prior to the coming of Australian settlers, Yolngu had traded with Macassans and other ships sailing from Asia, to harvest the delicacy trepang (sea cucumber).<sup>27</sup> A series of armed clashes between Yolngu and increasingly aggressive Japanese and European trepang crews in the early 1930s was described as a “Black War” in the Australian press.<sup>28</sup> Historian and former NT Administrator,

---

<sup>20</sup> In characterising this political tendency as “imperial humanitarianism,” I follow historian Alison Holland, who emphasised the commitment of these humanitarians to Empire. See Alison Holland, *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade for Aboriginal Rights* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2015), Kindle edition, 244.

<sup>21</sup> See for example, Adolphus P. Elkin to Minister Perkins, 6 September 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>22</sup> “Fed. Govt. Climbs Down On Punitive Expedition”, *Labor Daily*, 30 September, 1933, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Tom Murray, dir., *Dhakiyarr vs the King* (2004: Kanopy Streaming, 2019), streaming video, 57 mins, Kanopy. Peter Read has also interviewed Dhakiyarr’s descendants and written about Dhakiyarr’s actions being rooted in direct experience of previous frontier massacres, accompanied by dispossession. Peter Read, “Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation on the North Eastern Frontier,” *History Australia* 4, no. 1 (February 2007): 09.8-09.11. DOI: 10.2104/ha070009

<sup>24</sup> Dewar, *Black War*, 8; McMillan, *Intruder’s Guide*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Dewar, *Black War*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> McMillan, *Intruder’s Guide*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Dewar, *Black War*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Dewar, *Black War*, ix.

Ted Egan, argued these attacks arose from conflicts over payment of wages and sexual abuse, and were also part of a cycle of violence with police, who continued to conduct patrols in the 1920s and into the 1930s to shoot Yolngu people.<sup>29</sup>

NT police seized on the killing of McColl, immediately taking the initiative to prepare a war party. Colonel R.H. Weddell, a military man serving his ninth year as Administrator of the NT,<sup>30</sup> began liaising with the Interior Ministry in Canberra about the preparations for armed action at Caledon Bay.<sup>31</sup> A telegram sent by Weddell to Canberra on 27 August outlined the plan clearly:

CONSIDER IT ESSENTIAL STRONG PARTY OF TWELVE WHITES TWELVE ABORIGINALS AND ONE COOK BE DISPATCHED... ABOUT WHITES, WILL BE CIVILIANS EXPERIENCED BUSHMEN SWORN IN AS SPECIAL CONSTABLES... STRONG DEMONSTRATIVE FORCE IMPERATIVE AS NATIVES NUMEROUS, HOSTILE AND CUNNING, MANY MURDERS BY THEM DURING LAST SIXTEEN YEARS REMAINING UNPUNISHED. THESE ABORIGINALS ENTIRELY UNIMPRESSED BY THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS... PROPOSE ARMING PARTY WITH TWENTY RIFLES AND 2000 ROUNDS OF AMMUNITION, TWELVE REVOLVERS AND 1000 ROUNDS OF AMMUNITION, TWELVE .450 REVOLVERS AND 1000 ROUNDS OF REVOLVER AMMUNITION AND FOUR SHOT GUNS AND 300 CARTRIDGES. PLEASE OBTAIN AND FORWARD BY MARELLA [a ship] WITHOUT FAIL... IN VIEW OF PAST EXPERIENCE CONSIDER CASUALTIES AMONGST THESE ABORIGINALS INEVITABLE<sup>32</sup>

This aggressive stance enjoyed strong support in Canberra. Leading bureaucrats from the Department of the Interior, agreed with the plans in private correspondence<sup>33</sup> and organised to ship the requested supplies from Defence Department stores to Darwin.<sup>34</sup>

There was also initial enthusiasm for reprisal attacks from Minister Perkins, who indicated to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) that he would back Weddell's proposal in an upcoming Cabinet meeting.<sup>35</sup> The SMH also reported:

The Minister for Territories CWC Marr said that in similar circumstances he would have no hesitation in sending an expedition against one of the New Guinea tribes... Cabinet members with experience of native administration favoured the punitive expedition.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Egan, *Justice*, 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> Egan, *Justice*, 37

<sup>31</sup> Correspondence between the NT Administration and the Department of the Interior in Canberra is provided in, Department of the Interior, Murder of Japanese by Aborigines and Caledon Bay, series A431, file 1947/1434, National Archives of Australia, ACT.

<sup>32</sup> NT Administrator to Department of Interior, 27 August, 1933, series A431, file 1947/1434, NAA.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph A. Carrodus to Herbert C. Brown, 28 August, series A431, file 1947/1434, NAA.

<sup>34</sup> Department of the Interior – Memorandum, 8 September, 1933, series A431, file 47/1434, NAA.

<sup>35</sup> "Aborigines – Punitive Expedition Planned – Bloodshed Inevitable," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September, 1933, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 204.

While eager to assist with Weddell's preparations, however, Carrodus and Brown recognised that any police killings would be politically sensitive.<sup>37</sup> In 1928, following the brutal massacre of Walpiri, Anmatyere and other Aboriginal people at Coniston in Central Australia, there was an unprecedented outcry from missionaries and humanitarian organisations.<sup>38</sup> By 1933 there was substantial attention on scandals involving brutality against Aboriginal people on the Australian frontier, including from the prestigious Anti-Slavery Society in London.<sup>39</sup>

On 13 August, a syndicated press report from Darwin said that "several experienced bushman express themselves ready to enrol in a patrol party... [there is a] strong feeling locally that the Arnheim Land aborigines must be taught a severe lesson".<sup>40</sup> A number of Historians have also pointed to the large volume of press reports carrying calls for retribution to argue that "northern opinion" was fiercely behind the need for exemplary violence.<sup>41</sup> One small but important exception, however, was the CPA branch in Darwin, with members that were very willing to defend Aboriginal people responsible for killing police.

### **Black resistance and the Darwin Reds**

On 16 August 1933, the *Northern Voice*, a roughly produced Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM) newsletter in Darwin, expressed admiration for the Yolngu at Caledon Bay and argued the killing of McColl was justified:

When the police went round to arrest them they realised that if they did not get shot or arrested, they would have to fight... the aborigines should not be blamed for what they did... people are entitled to protect themselves from injustice and oppression.<sup>42</sup>

At the heart of the UWM were CPA members who were struggling to find work during the Depression. The Darwin CPA branch was formed in 1928 by a small group of North Australia Workers' Union (NAWU) activists, then members of the ALP.<sup>43</sup> These early members coalesced around a position argued by the CPA national newspaper *Workers' Weekly*, which called on the NAWU, a union that largely restricted its membership to white people, to

---

<sup>37</sup> Read, "Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation", 09.1-09.3.

<sup>38</sup> Rowley, *Destruction*, 288.

<sup>39</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 199.

<sup>40</sup> For example, "Arnheim Land – Murderous Blacks – Feeling in the North," *The Sunday Mail*, 13 August, 1933, 1; "Murderous Blacks – Death of Police Constable – 'Must be taught a severe lesson'," *Tweed Daily*, 14 August, 1933, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 202; Egan, *Justice*, 37; Read, "Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation", 09.2.

<sup>42</sup> "The Unfortunate Aborigines," *Northern Voice*, 16 August, 1933, 3-4.

<sup>43</sup> An intelligence file on Darwin CPA leader J.B. Waldie notes that Waldie visited Sydney in 1928 to meet with CPA leaders and commenced agitation on behalf of the party on his return. Inspector D.A. Mackiehan to The Director, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Brisbane, February 1932, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation file, John Basil Waldie, series A6126, file 1107, National Archives of Australia.

reject the “colour line” and open its ranks to Aboriginal workers.<sup>44</sup> When the Depression hit, this new CPA branch started organising an Unemployed Workers Movement across boundaries of race and nationality, demanding relief work for all. UWM demonstrations were viciously repressed by police, frequently with batons and sometimes with firearms<sup>45</sup> and many members had spent time in prison.<sup>46</sup> This repression deepened a sense of common struggle with Aboriginal people also suffering at the hands of the police.<sup>47</sup>

On their hunt for intermittent work, some workers in Darwin participating in the UWM had worked alongside, and made friends, with Aboriginal people in remote areas, including around Caledon Bay, strengthening this solidarity. Bill Harney, who would go on to write poems for the Darwin CPA bulletin *The Proletarian*,<sup>48</sup> had extensive experience harvesting trepang off the coast of East Arnhem Land and had married a Yolngu woman at the Groote Eylandt mission in 1927.<sup>49</sup> Joe McGinness, who had his own Aboriginal kinship networks across the Top End and was involved in communist-led demonstrations, took irregular opportunities for work on trepanging expeditions in the same area.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout August, the *Northern Voice* praised the killing of McColl by “aboriginals who had sufficient courage to pit their spears against the 303s of the police, rather than submit to the white man’s domination”.<sup>51</sup> The Yolngu at Caledon Bay had struck a blow against the NT Administration that was also repressing workers and the unemployed in Darwin. They were comrades who required urgent support. Any punitive expedition would result in a massacre like that seen at Coniston and should be resisted:

We call upon all workers and all people who believe in fair play not only to refuse to enlist should volunteers be called for, but to actively endeavour to pursue others to refuse and to put every possible obstacle in the way of the authorities in order that we may not have another butchering expedition.<sup>52</sup>

The article announced the formation of a committee to “conduct a campaign against the proposed expedition” and urged all readers to “give it their whole-hearted support”.<sup>53</sup> This initiative was led by CPA member Charles Priest. Priest had joined the Party two years

---

<sup>44</sup> “At Darwin – The Color Line – A Reactionary Policy,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 13 April, 1928, 4.

<sup>45</sup> “Fight for Shelter: N.T. Workless Hold Hospital Against Police Bullets,” *Red Leader*, 15 January, 1932, 8.

<sup>46</sup> See for example: “Editorial,” *Northern Voice*, 29 March, 1933, 1; “Basher Comes a Cropper” and “Open Confession,” *Northern Voice*, 19 April, 1933, 1.

<sup>47</sup> “Revival of the Chain Gangs,” *Northern Voice*, 11 July, 1933, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Moorandanni, “Duty,” *The Proletarian*, 16 September, 1934, 4. Charles Priest explained that Harney wrote this under a pseudonym in Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections* (Benalla: Self-published 1986), 8.

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Kennedy, “Harney, William Edward (Bill) (1895–1962),” in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1996, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/harney-william-edward-bill-10428/text18485>.

<sup>50</sup> Joe McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1991), 21-23.

<sup>51</sup> “A study in psychology,” *Northern Voice*, 30 August, 1933, 2.

<sup>52</sup> “The Unfortunate Aboriginals,” 3-4.

<sup>53</sup> “The Unfortunate Aboriginals,” 4.

previously, while hungry, homeless, and unemployed in Adelaide.<sup>54</sup> His gravitation towards revolutionary politics in the throes of intense hardship was one mirrored by many others. The party grew ten-fold between 1928-1934, as many unemployed workers were impressed by the communists leading militant street demonstrations for relief work and against evictions.<sup>55</sup> Also influential on Priest's outlook was a 12-month period spent working on Melville Island, off the coast of Darwin in 1929, where he lived with Tiwi people and left feeling a sense of duty to champion Black rights.<sup>56</sup>

Late in 1932 Priest travelled from Darwin to Sydney specifically to develop skills in the production of revolutionary press, volunteering every day in the *Workers' Weekly* office.<sup>57</sup> When he returned in July 1933, after a brief stint in prison for riding the train without a ticket,<sup>58</sup> Priest was promptly voted in as the new editor of *Northern Voice*:<sup>59</sup>

I welcomed the opportunity (to edit *Northern Voice*) for two reasons. Firstly, because I was a dedicated communist and believe that I could put out party propaganda better than anyone else in Darwin and, secondly, because I was anxious to help the aborigines.<sup>60</sup>

During his time in Sydney, Priest would have encountered efforts by CPA writers and speakers to theorise the oppression of Aboriginal people within a Marxist, anti-imperialist framework.<sup>61</sup> Since its inception in 1920, the CPA had been committed to principles outlined by the Communist International (Comintern), founded in the wake of the Russian Revolution. The Comintern sought to unite revolutionary workers in the imperialist heartlands of Europe with the widespread anti-colonial rebellions that swept the world following WW1. Workers in imperialist countries were instructed to support the armed resistance of national liberation movements fighting back against colonial rule. Demanding self-determination for colonised people was seen as crucial both for weakening the power of imperialist states and overcoming the racist nationalism that was hegemonic in imperialist countries, stifling the development of an internationalist, revolutionary consciousness.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Charles Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections: Improving my Education* (Benella, Self-published, 1986), 11.

<sup>55</sup> Alastair Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 53, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Priest, *Still Further Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 2; Charles Priest, *Northern Territory Recollections* (Benella: Self-published, 1986), 21-71.

<sup>57</sup> Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections*, 37-38.

<sup>58</sup> "Round About," *The Northern Standard*, 11 July, 1933, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Priest, *Further Northern Territory Recollections*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Priest, *Still Further*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> "Australian Aborigines," *World Survey*, 1 January, 1933; "J Mahoney lectures on Imperialism in the Northern Territory," *Red Leader*, 15 February, 1933, 8.

<sup>62</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Terms of Admission to the Communist International", Second Congress of the Communist International (1920), Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x01.htm>.



For much of the 1920s, the CPA attempted to popularise support for peoples oppressed by the British Empire, with a particularly notable campaign against British and Australian military action against the Chinese revolution in 1925-6. However, it was not until the early 1930s that the Party began to recognise the resistance of Aboriginal people as a significant anti-colonial struggle.<sup>63</sup> Before this, the CPA press was largely silent on the question of Aboriginal rights, sometimes reporting on atrocities but also occasionally reproducing the racist idea, then hegemonic in Australia, that Aboriginal people were a “dying race”.<sup>64</sup> This attitude reflected a broader weakness within the anti-imperialist Marxist tradition globally, which had failed to develop critical analyses of the situation facing minority Indigenous populations in Anglosphere settler-colonies like Australia.<sup>65</sup>

German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Karl Kautsky, the world’s premier Marxist theorist prior to WWI, had drawn a distinction between “exploitation colonies” that socialists should oppose, and “work colonies” or “settlement colonies” such as the USA, Australia, Chile and Canada, that were praised as beacons of democracy and progress.<sup>66</sup> Within the Comintern in the 1920s, a far more sophisticated and consistently militant analysis of colonialism developed and there was some important theorisation of the relationship between Indigenous struggles and socialist revolution in the settler-colonies of Algeria<sup>67</sup> and South Africa<sup>68</sup> where the Indigenous population was an overwhelming majority of the working class, and similarly in some places in South America. However, in Canada, the United States and New Zealand, communist parties largely remained silent on the question of Indigenous rights through the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>69</sup>

In Australia, however, things began to shift in the late 1920s, as communists drew on Marxist theory to respond to sharp questions about racism posed for radical workers in struggle. Following discussions at the Comintern executive in 1927, the CPA began to argue that Australia operated as an independent imperialist power, not just a vassal of Britain.<sup>70</sup> In this context came analysis that the Australian state was practicing forms of colonial rule and calls to support Indigenous self-determination, first for “New Guinea Natives” and then

---

<sup>63</sup> Frank Farrell, *International Socialism & Australian Labour: The Left in Australia, 1919-1939* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1981), 107-111.

<sup>64</sup> Farrell, *International Socialism*, 45.

<sup>65</sup> Oleksa Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism and the Communist International”, *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism, Second Edition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-91206-6\_140-1 4-5; Both the weaknesses in analyses of settler-colonialism within the early Marxist tradition and communist theoretical innovation in Australia from the late 1920s are analysed in my PhD thesis, Gibson, “Stop the War on Aborigines”, 25-177.

<sup>66</sup> Kautsky, *Socialism and Colonial Policy*, 1909, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1907/colonial/4-work.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> For example, Leon Trotsky, “Report on France: The Colonial Question”, in John Riddell (ed.), *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 1000-1001.

<sup>68</sup> Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism”, 4-8.

<sup>69</sup> Drachewych, “Settler Colonialism”, 4-8; Oleksa Drachewych, “Race, the Comintern, and Communist Parties in British Dominions, 1920-1943”, in Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (eds.), *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Questions*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 260-261.

<sup>70</sup> Gibson, “Stop the War on Aborigines”, 86-94.

Aboriginal people.<sup>71</sup> With the rapid growth of the Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM) from the late 1920s, and an explosion in CPA membership, more party members came into contact with Aboriginal people standing up for their rights. Along with the activism in Darwin described above, there were Aboriginal people active in the UWM in Sydney, country NSW and Qld, challenging the racist practice of denying mainstream unemployment benefits to Black unemployed.<sup>72</sup>

In September 1931, CPA leader Herbert Moxon published a detailed program for Aboriginal liberation which called for self-determination, abolition of the draconian “Protection” regime and return of stolen lands to Aboriginal people.<sup>73</sup> Moxon criticised the failure of CPA to support the NSW-based Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association, who had waged a significant fight for self-determination before being driven underground in 1928.<sup>74</sup> His program put massacres on the frontier in the context of a continuing drive to “totally exterminate the race so that the crimes of British and Australian imperialists may be covered up”. This program was particularly dynamic and innovative in the way it advanced a vision for self-determination, support for development of Indigenous culture and return of land, not just in areas remote from colonial settlement like the NT, but also in south-east Australia where dispossession had been thorough going and the Aboriginal population was a tiny minority.

Moxon fell out of favour with the CPA leadership and was expelled early in early 1932.<sup>75</sup> Throughout 1932 and 1933, the CPA published articles and passed occasional conference resolutions, which made rhetorical calls for action for Aboriginal rights based on a more simplified version of Moxon’s analysis.<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere, I have explored the initial failure of the CPA to engage with the breadth of Moxon’s vision, particularly the party’s apparent blind spot on the issue of Aboriginal oppression and struggle in south-east Australia. This was related both to a lingering paternalism and a seeming inability to recognise both the possibility and significance of resistance by Indigenous people living as a tiny minority in the heartlands of Australian capitalism.<sup>77</sup> In areas such as Arnhem Land, however, remote from industrial centres, with overwhelming Indigenous majorities and ongoing resistance to colonial encroachment, communists could more readily recognise commonalities with

---

<sup>71</sup> “On Imperialism – the Right to Independence,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 20 January, 1928, 2; “The White Man’s Burden,” 4.

<sup>72</sup> “With the Workers in the Country – Bourke,” *Red Leader*, 4 September, 1931, 8; “Unity Against Dole Regulations,” *Red Leader*, 31 May, 1933, 8; R.W., “Aborigines and the Dole – Dubbo Unemployed,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 1 July, 1932, 4.

<sup>73</sup> “Communist Party’s Fight for Aborigines”.

<sup>74</sup> John Maynard, “The men only worked when necessary, we called no man master, and we had no King”, *Queensland Journal of Labour History*, 26 (March 2018), 50.

<sup>75</sup> Beris Penrose, “Hebert Moxon, a Victim of the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the Communist Party”, *Labour History*, no. 70 (May 1996), 110.

<sup>76</sup> “From 1,000,000 to 60,000 Aborigines - League Against Imperialism Conference,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 13 May, 1932, 3; “Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia,” *Workers’ Weekly*, 6 January, 1933, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Gibson, “Stop the War on Aborigines”, 217-223; Pdraic Gibson, “Egon Kisch and Black Australia”, in Evan Smith, Jayne Persian and Vashti Jane Fox (eds.), *Histories of Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Australia*, (London: Routledge, 2022), 70-75.

liberation struggles taking place across the world, that they were already supporting, aimed at defeating armed imperial forces and asserting territorial independence. By 1933, as outlined above, the Darwin CPA branch also already had some experience using principled anti-racist politics to help navigate the particular challenges posed by capitalist development in Australia's far north. Led by the initiative of Charles Priest in Darwin in August 1933, the CPA as a national organisation shifted for the first time towards concerted campaigning for Aboriginal rights.

### **Anatomy of a campaign**

The six-week campaign that stopped the proposed punitive expedition into Arnhem Land had three phases. Firstly, there were initial efforts from the CPA-led committee in Darwin and some concerned humanitarians across Australia, to build an awareness about the seriousness of the situation, publicly refute the case for retaliatory violence and encourage early protests. Secondly, in early September, following the publication of the detailed proposal by Col. Weddell for an expedition of "special constables", there was a serious wave of protest letters and other lobbying efforts, largely from church groups and the APNR, that resulted in Prime Minister Lyons publicly denying that a massacre had ever been contemplated. These denials took place despite the fact that Col. Weddell's requests for a large shipment of guns and ammunition had been approved and plans continued to be made for a heavily armed police party, ready for combat, to enter East Arnhem land and "apprehend the murderers". Finally, there was an intensification of protest activity, from 6 September through until the end of the month, largely by working-class organisations, that rejected the legitimacy of any armed police operation and successfully forced these plans to be abandoned entirely.

Reflecting on the work of the Darwin committee, Priest wrote in his autobiography there was "a great deal of effort" by "a few fair-minded citizens" in Darwin to stop the punitive expedition, crediting appeals to supporters in capital cities with "creating such an uproar in the southern states that the proposed punitive expedition had to be abandoned".<sup>78</sup> A cryptic reference in the *Northern Voice* to an "astounding letter" that was "obtained from a reliable source", then "duplicated and sent to public bodies all over the Commonwealth" could indicate that correspondence outlining some of the explicit plans being made for police violence was leaked as part of the campaign.<sup>79</sup>

There are no records of how widely Priest and the Darwin committee circulated their appeals for action. However, an account in his autobiography of another round of agitation-by-letter later in 1933, in response to police brutality against Aboriginal people at Borroloola, provides some indication of who might have been on his mailing list in August:

---

<sup>78</sup> Priest, *Still Further*, 1, 9.

<sup>79</sup> "That Punitive Expedition," *Northern Voice*, 27 September, 1933, 4.

I posted about 50 to prominent citizens in the southern states, these included bishops, editors of leading newspapers, prominent politicians, and well-known academic figures whom I knew to be of a liberal turn of mind.<sup>80</sup>

This list is a reasonable survey of the social forces which made up a particular bloc of opinion, characterised as “imperial humanitarianism” by historian Alison Holland. Holland cites the overarching ideological commitment of these forces to Australia’s role in the British Empire and a belief this carried with it paternalistic responsibilities for humane treatment and uplift of “subject races”.<sup>81</sup> Clergymen and academics held leadership roles in a growing number of organisations concerned with reform, such as the Victorian Aboriginal Group (VAG) in Melbourne.<sup>82</sup> The most prominent of these organisations was the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR), based in Sydney.<sup>83</sup> The APNR was led by William Morley, a Congregational minister and A.P. Elkin, an Anglican clergyman and Chair of Anthropology at the University of Sydney.<sup>84</sup>

Judging by correspondence on file in the National Archives, it seems the initial response to calls from Darwin for protests was modest. On 17 August, the communist controlled League Against Imperialism (LAI) wrote to Perkins, citing a 14 August telegram from Darwin to warn of the proposed “punitive expedition” and make an “emphatic protest”.<sup>85</sup> The only other organisation to raise concerns at this early stage was the Australian Aboriginal Amelioration Association in Perth, a humanitarian group, which had telegraphed the Minister on 15 August, “respectfully urging... precautions [are] taken against the possibility of a repetition of shootings accompanying similar expeditions in the past”.<sup>86</sup> The fact that the Secretary of this group, Norman Morley, shared a surname with his father William Morley from the APNR, confused Henry Reynolds, who attributed the first initiative in the “campaign of protest” to the APNR.<sup>87</sup> There is, however, no correspondence on file from the APNR on this issue until a lettergram on 4 September.<sup>88</sup>

On 25 August, the *Workers’ Weekly* published the first article outside of Darwin that called for action to stop the planned attack:

A committee has been set up in Darwin to fight against the sending of a punitive expedition, and it appeals to all workers, anti-imperialists and those opposed to the

---

<sup>80</sup> Priest, *Still Further*, 4.

<sup>81</sup> Holland, *Just Relations*, 244.

<sup>82</sup> Bain Attwood, “Victorian Aboriginal Group,” *eMelbourne: the city past and present*, 2018, <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01548b.htm>.

<sup>83</sup> Rowley, *Destruction*, 289-294.

<sup>84</sup> Tigger Wise, *The Self-Made Anthropologist: A Life of A.P. Elkin* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 80-83.

<sup>85</sup> League Against Imperialism (Australian Section) to Prime Minister Lyons, 17 August, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>86</sup> Australian Aborigines’ Amelioration Association, Letter to Prime Minister Lyons, 15 August, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>87</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 205.

<sup>88</sup> W Morley (APNR Secretary), Lettergram to the Honourable J.A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior, 4 September 4, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

consistent killing of the Australian native to protest to the Federal government, and build the struggle for self-determination of this exploited and suppressed race.<sup>89</sup>

As will be discussed further below, however, it was not until two weeks later, when there was more focussed agitation by the CPA leadership, that workers' organisations really started to move.

When the APNR did enter public debate, they had a major impact. Their protest lettergram was one of a host flooding into Perkins' office, largely from church bodies at this stage, including the Church Missionary Society (CMS) that had responsibility for the Groote Eylandt Mission.<sup>90</sup> Some London based humanitarian groups, including the Anti-Slavery Society, also lodged protests at the Australian High Commission in the first week of September. These came after details first hit the press of the explicit request by Weddell for a large party of heavily armed "special constables" to be sent to Caledon Bay, with "inevitable" Aboriginal casualties. On 2 September, Perkins told reporters he had authorised the dispatch of equipment requested by Weddell.<sup>91</sup> Major papers reported that it was "almost certain" a punitive expedition would soon leave Darwin, saying a decision by Federal Cabinet on the matter was imminent.<sup>92</sup>

By 5 September, however, Prime Minister Lyons was on the phone to church leaders and the High Commission in London, denying that a "punitive expedition" had ever been contemplated. Reynolds argues that:

By the end of the first week of September, the government gave way before an unprecedented and unexpected torrent of protest from all over the country and from overseas as well... after Forrest River and Coniston, many Australians were determined that those awful and shameful events would not be repeated.<sup>93</sup>

This swift and impressive impact on the posture of the government towards retaliatory violence is testament to the recent growth in the prestige of the APNR, missionary groups and other humanitarians in public debate about Aboriginal affairs. However, all of these groups agreed, as the Council of Churches in Adelaide put it, that "steps should be taken to bring the murderers of McColl to justice."<sup>94</sup> Some initial proposals about how to do this still left the Yolngu at Caledon Bay and surrounds vulnerable to hostile police action. Elkin, for example, did not oppose an "arresting party" being sent to Arnhem Land, urging instead that "all possible measures" be taken to "ensure that any party sent out... does not become punitive in nature", potentially by allowing a missionary to lead the party.<sup>95</sup> The Adelaide News reported CMS Secretary Rev. J. B. Montgomerie saying, "punitive expeditions are

---

<sup>89</sup> "Punitive Expedition Against Aborigines," *Workers' Weekly*, 25 August, 1933, 3.

<sup>90</sup> "Numerous Protests," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1933, 13.

<sup>91</sup> "Native Killers," *The Sun*, 2 September, 1933, 3

<sup>92</sup> "Aborigines – Punitive Expedition Planned," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September, 1933, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 204.

<sup>94</sup> Council of Churches in South Australia to the Prime Minister, September 4, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>95</sup> A. P. Elkin to Minister for the Interior, 6 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

alright if they are headed by people who understand the Natives, but not otherwise”,<sup>96</sup> and correspondence from a CMS missionaries on Groote Eylandt said the “Caledon Bay natives” would remain dangerous until “controlled by police”.<sup>97</sup> A resolution from the CMS Victorian Branch, however, was more strident in defence of the Yolngu, and first put forward the suggestion that missionaries could travel alone to investigate and negotiate with tribal elders “in this way the situation could be cleared up with a minimum amount of trouble”.<sup>98</sup>

Following Lyons’ assurance that no “punitive expedition” was planned, some imperial humanitarian organisations appeared satisfied. The VAG, for example, wrote a conciliatory letter to Perkins to on 8 September, not mentioning police but criticising “irresponsible” press coverage of the crisis.<sup>99</sup> Despite claims by Lyons and Perkins that any “arresting party” would strive to avoid “bloodshed”, however, on 8 September Perkins told the press that Col. Weddell would be “given a free hand to do whatever is necessary”.<sup>100</sup> Internal correspondence from Police Constable Morey, who continued to confidently prepare for an expedition, made it clear police wanted to see combat:

It will be vitally necessary for the Police Party to be able to bear losses and casualties and yet be numerically adequate to carry on the operation to its finalisation... Whose blood will stain Arnhem Land, whether black or white, or both, only the future will tell.<sup>101</sup>

It was in this context that the initiative of the CPA, and the resulting protests from the labour movement, became decisive for successfully forcing a complete police retreat.

Before looking at the mechanics of the CPA initiative, it is important to explore the fundamental differences in the nature of opposition to frontier violence provided by communists, as compared with the imperial humanitarian organisations. Imperial humanitarians sought to refine the methods of Australian colonialism, improving the treatment of “subject races”, both Aboriginal people and the peoples of New Guinea and surrounding islands.<sup>102</sup> The superiority of settler society and the right of the Australian state to dominate Indigenous people was never in question.<sup>103</sup> Instead, both church and humanitarian groups sought to ensure this treatment was in line with responsibilities agreed

---

<sup>96</sup> “Murder by Natives,” *News*, 4 September, 1933, 1.

<sup>97</sup> “Groote Eylandt,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September, 11.

<sup>98</sup> Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania, Victorian Branch to Prime Minister Lyons, 5 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632.

<sup>99</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Group to Minister Perkins, 8 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632.

<sup>100</sup> “Alsations and Guns – Plans for Attack on N.T. Abos,” *Labor Daily*, 9 September, 1933, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Constable E.H. Morey to the Interior Minister, 5 October 1933, series A431, file 1947/1434, NAA.

<sup>102</sup> Rowley, *Destruction*, 294.

<sup>103</sup> The Congregational Union of Victoria for example, argued that “the prestige of the government and the claim for the moral and intellectual superiority of the white race” would be “properly upheld” by adopting methods of apprehending the “murderers” of McColl by means other than a “punitive expedition”. Congregational Union of Victoria to Minister Perkins, 11 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

to under the League of Nations mandate and principles of “British justice”<sup>104</sup> or “Christian standards”.<sup>105</sup> In their letters to Perkins, opposition to the impending massacre was often framed in terms that expressed sympathy with the “difficult” position of the government.<sup>106</sup> In the more detailed submissions made by the APNR and the National Missionary Council, the planned slaughter was not only portrayed as unjust, but also as counter-productive to the longer term goal of establishing a stable pattern of relations in Arnhem Land, with Aboriginal people accepting the legitimacy of colonial law.<sup>107</sup>

The commentary of many church leaders through the crisis drew on their experience of missionary work, heavily integrated into the apparatus of the state, as the source of their authority on the matters at hand. The APNR aspired to this level of integration<sup>108</sup> and in the coming years, Elkin’s Anthropology Department at Sydney University became the official training ground for field officers tasked with overseeing the Commonwealth Protection regime in both northern Australia and New Guinea.<sup>109</sup>

The CPA, in contrast, opposed the punitive expedition on an explicitly anti-imperialist basis. The party wanted an end to the Protection regime and asserted the rights of Aboriginal people to self-determination and territorial independence.<sup>110</sup> Communists and the organisations they influenced argued the spearing of McColl was justified and called for a strict policy of non-interference in Arnhem Land.<sup>111</sup>

The second difference between these two wings of the campaign was the methods used to protest. In the extensive file in the National Archives, imperial humanitarian correspondence is almost exclusively written either by individuals on behalf of organisations, or after a meeting of the board or executive committee.<sup>112</sup> Letters from communist-influenced organisations were often written following resolutions taken by meetings of rank-and-file members in workplaces and community halls. The labour movement helped to give the campaign against the punitive expedition a popular quality, calling working-class people together to take action for Aboriginal rights. Ignoring humanitarian opinion would undoubtedly have been a serious embarrassment for the Lyons

---

<sup>104</sup> Association for the Protection of Native Races to Prime Minister Lyons, 5 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>105</sup> Tasmanian State Council of Churches to the Prime Minister Lyons, 8 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>106</sup> Aborigines Friends Society to Minister Perkins, 5 September, 1933 series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA; A.P. Elkin to Minister Perkins, 3 October, 1933, Personal Archives of Professor A P Elkin, P130, Series 12, Item 144, Sydney University Archives.

<sup>107</sup> A. P. Elkin to Minister Perkins, 6 September, 1933; J Burton, National Missionary Council of Australia to Minister Perkins, 6 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>108</sup> A. P. Elkin to Minister Perkins, October 3, 1933.

<sup>109</sup> Rowley, *Destruction*, 329.

<sup>110</sup> “Who is to Blame for NT Murders?,” *Workers’ Voice*, 8 September, 1, 4.

<sup>111</sup> For example, Victorian Council Against War to Minister for the Interior, 19 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA; Northcote Unemployed Association to Minister Perkins, 12 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>112</sup> A.P. Elkin to Minister Perkins, 6 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA; National Missionary Society of Australia to Minister Perkins, 6 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

government, potentially playing out on the international diplomatic stage due to the watchful eye of London-based organisations. Piled on top of this, were threats by radical workers of further protest action, and an uncompromising position against any use of police, creating a new and uncertain source of pressure on the government. The *Workers' Weekly* threatened that "workers' organisations will fight this meditated wholesale slaughter of the Aborigines".<sup>113</sup> The Victorian Council of War was one of a number of organisations that pledged "active measures" to stop the expedition.<sup>114</sup> Commonwealth Investigation Branch reports from this period demonstrate a particular anxiety about communist calls for industrial action in support of anti-war activism, even while they expressed scepticism about the CPAs capacity to carry through such threats.<sup>115</sup> This was an important element influencing Perkins eventual decision co-operate with the missionaries on a "peace party" – deploying police would have created momentum and built legitimacy behind a communist-led anti-war organising drive.

### **"We regard the expedition to be an act of war"**

On 2 September, just prior to the flood of protest resolutions starting to hit Perkins' office, the Sydney-based Political Committee of the CPA had "Punitive Expedition on Aborigines" on its agenda. The minutes cited correspondence from comrades in Darwin and resolved to make a "tremendous drive in relation to this question... Anti-war movement can take up question of punitive expedition, which amounts to war on the natives".<sup>116</sup> In the following weeks, all of the press organs controlled by the CPA carried appeals for protests and analysis of developments. Following Lyons' claim that no retaliatory violence was planned, the party press argued that the proposed police expedition was prepared for combat and would use any excuse to perpetrate a massacre.<sup>117</sup>

In 1933, as discussed above, the membership of the CPA was mostly concentrated amongst unemployed workers fighting hard against destitution. The call for solidarity with the Yolngu was readily taken up by organisations fighting for the rights of the unemployed. Recently, communists and members of the ALP had overcome earlier sectarian divisions to more readily co-operate in unemployed committees.<sup>118</sup> The Punchbowl Unemployed and Distress Association was the first of many such organisations to take a stand, writing on 6 September that a members' meeting the previous night had "given the issue serious consideration", condemning the planned expedition and insisting the Yolngu were "were defending what

---

<sup>113</sup> "WAR! Against Aborigines," *Workers' Weekly*, 8 September, 1933, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Victorian Council Against War to Minister Perkins, 6 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>115</sup> [Communism]: Communism and anti-war movement - [correspondence, reports on communist activities], Attorney-General's Department, series A467, file SF42/321, National Archives of Australia, ACT.

<sup>116</sup> Minutes of the CPA Political Committee, 2 September, 1933, Microfilm of documents related to the CPA, 1920-1940, Roll FM4-10419, File 495-94-106, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

<sup>117</sup> "Stop this Murder," *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11; "Who is to Blame for NT Murders," 1.

<sup>118</sup> "The Dole Workers Struggle for Better Conditions," *Workers' Weekly*, 24 July, 1933, 4.



was rightfully theirs”.<sup>119</sup> The Victorian Dole Workers’ and Relief Council protest resolution similarly emphasised that “the natives have been forced into the position of defending their own interests and are in no sense the aggressors”.<sup>120</sup> Lyons’ assurances that no massacre was planned did not stop protests by unemployed workers against the sending of police, contributing substantially to what Reynold’s described as a “crescendo” of resolutions sent to Canberra by the third week of September.<sup>121</sup>

Correspondence from unemployed organisations is more frequent in the National Archives file, but the fact that established trade unions began to join the campaign, often influenced by the anti-imperialist position of the CPA, lent it considerably greater social weight. In 1933, the CPA was on the cusp of developing a real position of influence within Australian unions, leading a mass, cross-union rank-and-file organisation called the Militant Minority Movement that had thousands of members. CPA member Bill Orr was elected to the leadership of the powerful Miners’ Union at the end of 1933, the first of numerous party members elected as union leaders in the 1930s.<sup>122</sup> One of the main ways CPA activists were able to influence union policy in this period was through collaboration with ALP and other socialist activists in campaigning organisations around particular social issues. In August and September 1933, the party was having real success applying this “united front” strategy by organising Councils Against War (CAWs).

The social scars of mass casualties in WW1 were still raw and strong currents of opposition to war ran deep in the union movement. In the 1920s, even as a very small organisation, the CPA had managed to win union support for anti-imperialist campaigns such as the “Hands of China” campaign, discussed above. Now, with Hitler taking power in Germany, and widespread anxiety across the working-class about the growing threat of another World War, some Labor Party and trade union leaders and branches were receptive to CPA overtures to join the CAWs. On 1 August 1933, as part of an “international day of action against war”, the Victorian Council Against War (VCAW) successfully co-ordinated eighteen suburban meetings across Melbourne, some with the support of prominent Labor leaders.<sup>123</sup>

When the CPA leadership pushed a call to action against the punitive expedition through national CAW structures in early September, the VCAW was quickly able to mobilise support. On 6 September, the VCAW executive telegraphed a “vigorous protest against the proposed punitive expedition” to the Department of the Interior, promising to “actively oppose such measures”.<sup>124</sup> On the same night, a mass meeting of the Amalgamated Postal Workers Union in Victoria sent a similar resolution of protest after “very serious

---

<sup>119</sup> Punchbowl Unemployed and Distress Association to Minister Perkins, 6 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>120</sup> Victorian Dole and Relief Workers Council Brunswick Branch to Minister Perkins, 14 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>121</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 209.

<sup>122</sup> Tom O’Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism* (Sydney: Stained Wattle Press, 1985), 38-39, 44.

<sup>123</sup> “Cause of War,” *Central Queensland Herald*, 14 September, 1933, 54; “Anti-War Campaign – Meeting at Collingwood,” *The Age*, 2 August 1933, 12.

<sup>124</sup> Victorian Council Against War to Minister of the Interior, 6 September, 1933.

consideration... although the natives have been guilty in killing other people, they have acted within their own code of laws".<sup>125</sup> This was perhaps the first resolution supporting Aboriginal resistance carried by a mass trade union meeting in Australian history. More unions followed, culminating in a protest resolution carried at the Victorian Trades Hall, the peak body for all unions in the state.<sup>126</sup>

The NSW CAW executive included the state secretaries of the Australian Railways Union, the Miners' Federation and the Federated Iron Workers Union, along with the President of the Assistant Teachers Association. This body wired a protest to Perkins on 8 September that said, "we consider this expedition to be a war against the Aborigines and accordingly demand that the project be dropped".<sup>127</sup> A few days later, a "large body of Waterside Workers" held a special meeting that also demanded the government stop the "war on Aborigines".<sup>128</sup> A protest by the Coal Lumpers Union was further endorsed by the NSW Labour Council, the peak body for all unions in the state, demanding "aboriginals be endowed with full powers" to enforce the boundaries of "any aboriginal sanctuary".<sup>129</sup>

Labor Party branches also sent protests to Perkins. There was often a direct correlation between branches that took a stand, and the participation of those branches in the CAW movement.<sup>130</sup> Labor statements were frequently more moderate and utilised the rhetoric of imperial humanitarianism.<sup>131</sup> There were, however, also some clear expressions of anti-imperialism, with the *Labor Daily*, for example, carrying an article that put the punitive expedition in the context of "imperialist nations throughout history spread[ing] death and destruction among native races... keep off the blacks' preserve – and take what's coming to you if you disobey!"<sup>132</sup>

In Victoria, the VCAW called a major public meeting for 13 September. This helped to push some humanitarian organisations to take a stronger stand. Helen Baillie, a prominent member of the VAG (which, as noted above, had been conciliatory towards Minister Perkins the previous week), represented the group on the platform of the protest meeting.<sup>133</sup> CPA leader Percy Laidler acted as chairperson and approximately 500 people were in

---

<sup>125</sup> Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union of Australia (Victorian Branch) to Minister Perkins, 6 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>126</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council to Prime Minister Lyons, 12 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>127</sup> N.S.W State Council Against War Minister Perkins, 8 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>128</sup> "Against War on Aborigines," *Workers' Weekly*, 15 September, 1933, 2.

<sup>129</sup> "Punitive Action Opposed – Native Sanctuary Plan," *Labor Daily*, 16 September, 5.

<sup>130</sup> For example, both the Lakemba and Clovelly ALP (NSW) branches in Sydney were active in the CAW and also wrote resolutions of protest to Perkins found in series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA; "The Campaign for National Congress Against Imperialist War and Intervention," *Workers' Weekly*, 30 June, 1933, 4.

<sup>131</sup> Clovelly Branch ALP to Minister Perkins, 12 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>132</sup> The Idler, "Blacks Rights," *Labor Daily*, 5 September, 1933, 4.

<sup>133</sup> "Groote Island Mission - The Proposed Expedition - Meeting of Protest," *The Age*, 14 September, 1933, 10.

attendance.<sup>134</sup> This meeting provided a direct response to the letters Perkins' had been sending in reply to protests, insisting the government had been misunderstood and the proposed police expedition was not a "punitive" one. A clear case was made against *any* police expedition to arrest Yolngu. The meeting resolution, "passed unanimously," read:

This meeting of Citizens strongly protests against the sending of any armed expedition that may be used against the blacks of the Northern Territory, and demands for them complete freedom to control their own affairs without any outside interference, and without encroachment, commercial or governmental, on their reserves. We regard the expedition as being an act of war against a defenceless people, and as such to be abhorred by all opponents of war.<sup>135</sup>

Frank Brennan, Attorney-General in the Labor Scullin Government until December 1931,<sup>136</sup> told the meeting:

Any killing by blacks of members of an armed expedition which might be sent against them... would be justifiable homicide, because the tribes would know the expedition would be armed, that it would try to take some of their number as hostages, and was out to teach them a lesson.<sup>137</sup>

In mid-September, the CPA press began to explicitly differentiate between the strategy of mobilising workers to stop any police action and the more conciliatory approach of imperial humanitarians. A detailed feature, the *Australian Labor Defender* insisted the police could be stopped:

We organise the workers to fight for exploited natives. We point out the futility of relying on liberal organisations, which raise a feeble protest during an outrage, and then finish up by making a similar statement to that made by the Rev. W. Burton, of the Methodist Missionary Society... "We are indignant, but if the Government desires to save face, we cannot do anything." This gentleman does not realise what can be done by the organised working class.<sup>138</sup>

On the same day as the Melbourne public meeting, the APNR sent a telegram to Perkins which said it reaffirmed protest against an "armed expedition", while suggesting that if police were deployed:

---

<sup>134</sup> H.E. Thonemann to Minister Perkins re 'Council Against War' public meeting, 15 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>135</sup> "Groote Island Mission - The Proposed Expedition - Meeting of Protest," *The Age*, 14 September, 1933, 10.

<sup>136</sup> Kevin Ryan, "Brennan, Francis (Frank) (1873-1950)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1979, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brennan-francis-frank-5347>.

<sup>137</sup> "Meeting's Protest - Mr. Brennan on Rights of Blacks," *The Argus*, 14 September, 1933, 10.

<sup>138</sup> "Stop this Murder," *Australian Labor Defender*, September 1933, 11.

[Our] association urges only experienced senior constables be sent and rifles be disallowed, shotguns being sufficient to detain and arrest natives. This is based on advice to us by senior officers.<sup>139</sup>

Right until the end of September, Perkins continued to entertain the possibility of such an “arresting party”. On 27 September, Constable Morey and two other officers joined Constable Hall on Groote Eylandt, where had been stationed since McColl’s death “protecting” the Mission.<sup>140</sup> Perkins held back from reinforcing Morey or ordering arrests, however, as protests continued.

On 30 September, came a decisive breakthrough. Perkins announced support for a plan with the CMS, for a “peace party” of missionaries, with no arms or police escort, to travel into the region and try to negotiate a surrender of the Yolngu responsible.<sup>141</sup> The *Labor Daily* stated triumphantly, “The wave of public resentment against the Federal Government’s plans to send a heavily armed expedition to Arnheim Land... has borne fruit. The Government has been forced by sheer weight of public opinion to climb down.”<sup>142</sup>

Morey complained to Canberra that his honour “would never recover from such an ignominy if this operation is taken from the police in the hands of missionaries”. In the same letter, however, he was clear police still believed that combat with Yolngu, and casualties, would be necessary to capture the “murderers”.<sup>143</sup> Perkins knew that any police operation would be heavily scrutinised and would likely lead to violence he could no longer defend. Police were denied their expedition to avenge McColl.

## Conclusion

On 20 September, a “gang of doleworkers” on Bestic Street in Brighton-Le-Sands, suburban south-Sydney, met at their job site and sent correspondence to Perkins, “protesting against and demanding the withdrawal of the punitive expedition”.<sup>144</sup> This archived protest, typed out and hand signed by Job Secretary Edward Gay, following a meeting on a relief work project that would have barely paid the workers enough money to eat, illustrates well the central theme of this article. Most historians have emphasised the efforts of clergymen and academics in ending the period of open warfare against Aboriginal people on the frontier. However, the newfound sense of solidarity with Aboriginal resistance amongst fighting organisations in the Australian working class was a social force that also decisively influenced developments.

This solidarity was made possible through agitation guided by a new analysis, developed in the pages of the CPA press, that articulated a common interest between Aboriginal people

---

<sup>139</sup> “Groote Eylandt,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September, 1933, 11.

<sup>140</sup> Egan, *Justice*, 44-45.

<sup>141</sup> Egan, *Justice*, 42-43.

<sup>142</sup> “Fed. Govt. Climbs Down on Punitive Expedition,” *Labor Daily*, 30 September, 1933, 7.

<sup>143</sup> Constable E.H. Morey to Minister Perkins, 5 October, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

<sup>144</sup> Edward Gay (Secretary Job Committee, Gang of Dole Workers) to Minister Perkins, 20 September, 1933, series A1, file 1933/7632, NAA.

on the Australian frontier and the workers' movement in the cities. The CPA argued that Aboriginal people were victims of imperialism and appealed to an existing, deeply felt anti-war sentiment that stretched well beyond the ranks of the party. Opposition to police had become much more widespread in the Depression, as police attacked picket lines and street demonstrations, contributing to the sense of common struggle. The growth of a CPA branch in Darwin, with organic connections into frontier areas and a willingness to take a stand against the racist ideas dominant in Darwin, including in the local NAWU, provided a powerful source of connection to developments and inspiration to take up the fight nationally.

Reynolds argues that outpouring of public sentiment to ensure "the punitive expedition did not ride into Yolngu country", constituted "a decisive moment in the history of Aboriginal-European relations".<sup>145</sup> The entirely novel entry of the workers' movement into the national policy debate on Aboriginal affairs played an important role in creating this turning point. This influence was even more marked in 1934. In April, news hit the press that the "peace party" had been successful in convincing many Yolngu, including Dhakiyarr, to travel to Darwin, where they were promptly taken into police cells and bashed. This triggered another round of CPA-led campaigning, on a far larger scale, calling for the immediate release of Aboriginal prisoners held in Darwin and respect for Aboriginal law and self-determination. When Dhakiyarr was sentenced to death by the NT Supreme Court, on 6 August, 1934, Charles Priest was in the court room and immediately wrote a pamphlet exposing the trial as a sham and calling for national protests. Over the following three weeks there were two major public meetings and a street protest, reportedly 3000 strong, in Sydney alone.<sup>146</sup> The government was forced to grant Dhakiyarr an appeal and he was subsequently acquitted, only to go missing, suspected killed by police.

The likely execution of Dhakiyarr, illustrates the depths of racist brutality that continued to confront Aboriginal people, regardless of the end of frontier massacres. Genocidal dynamics intensified through forced programs of assimilation and extrajudicial killings of Aboriginal people continued, and indeed still take place today at the hands of police and vigilantes. Despite this being recognised by the CPA, the frenetic campaigning driven through the labour movement seen in 1933-34 was not repeated on the same scale for some years. The campaign had, however, demonstrated that solidarity was possible and effective, laying down connections and traditions that had a major impact on struggles for Aboriginal rights throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1935, there were campaigning relationships between radical worker activists and the Australian Aborigines League in Melbourne, formed by William Cooper and others, in part to capitalise on momentum from the Dhakiyarr campaign. These links became crucial for sustaining the historic walk-off from Cummeragunga station in 1939 and similar connections grew across the continent.<sup>147</sup> From the Pilbara strike in 1946,<sup>148</sup> through the formation of the Federal Council for Advancement

---

<sup>145</sup> Reynolds, *This Whispering*, 215.

<sup>146</sup> Gibson, "Stop the War on Aborigines," 256.

<sup>147</sup> Gibson, "Egon Kisch and Black Australia," 76.

<sup>148</sup> Anne Scrimgeour, *On Red Earth Walking: The Pilbara Aboriginal Strike, Western Australia 1946-1949* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2020).

of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the 1950s,<sup>149</sup> to the Black power movement of the early 1970s,<sup>150</sup> trade union solidarity helped to make real gains against a relentless system of racist oppression. Communist initiative remained important for building this solidarity,<sup>151</sup> guided by a vision for human liberation that united working-class and anti-colonial resistance.

**Padraic Gibson** is an Historian based at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney. His research is currently focussed on socialist and trade union support for Aboriginal rights in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australia.

---

<sup>149</sup> Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 277.

<sup>150</sup> Kevin Cook and Heather Goodall, *Making Change Happen: Black and White Activists talk to Kevin Cook about Aboriginal, Union and Liberation Politics* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013), 25-61.

<sup>151</sup> Bob Boughton, "The Communist Party of Australia's Involvement in the Struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Rights", Australian Society for the Study of Labour History Conference, Proceedings, Wollongong NSW, 1999, 37-46.