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Esmonde Higgins and the lost history of Australian adult education

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When the Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE) was established in 1960, Australia was locked into a global conflict between capitalism and communism, known as the Cold War. With anti-communism at fever pitch, AAAE's founders who were fighting to retain some influence with Australian universities and with government funding authorities needed an origin story which would appeal to these prejudices. Not surprisingly, therefore, histories of 'the profession' produced in the first decades largely dismissed the role of the many radical adult educators and left-wing organisations which had been instrumental in extending adult education to the working class in the first half of the twentieth century. One of the main sources for these early histories was a memoir of David Stewart, founder of the Workers Education Association, written in 1957 by a university adult educator, Esmonde McDonald Higgins. In this paper, I tell a different story, through a close examination of Higgins' own role in this early history, to show how 1960s 'official' adult education lost touch with its own roots in radical working class politics, roots which are only now re-emerging, through the study of popular education and social movement learning.

Key words: *Adult education history, Australian Association of Adult Education (AAE), Workers Education Association (WEA), radical adult education, popular education, communism*

Introduction

The Australian Association for Adult Education (AAAE) was formed in 1960, at a meeting of professional adult educators, mainly drawn from university adult education departments and the Workers Education Association (WEA) branches in some states. Today, AAAE has become Adult Learning Australia (ALA), representing the organisations which comprise a recognised 'sector' of the Australian education system, known as Adult Community Education (ACE), and the professional adult educators who work in and with ACE 'providers'. The most recent 'environmental scan' of the ACE sector estimates there are 2500 providers in this sector, providing accredited and non-accredited courses including personal enrichment/interest learning, adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy, digital and other foundation skills and …. formal vocational education and training." (Adult Learning Australia 2020).

The ACE sector, as defined by ALA, has a history. Some providers, such as the WEAs, trace their origins back to the early twentieth century (Dymock 2001; Morris 2013). Even before then, the Sydney Working Men's College, the Mechanics Institutes, Railway Institutes and Schools of Arts were forerunners to today's vocational education and training providers (Candy & Laurent 1994). But the history of today's ACE providers is not the whole story. Rather, ACE and ALA which represents it, is the outcome of a long history during which the more 'mainstream' forebears of today's providers vied with other, more radical institutions for the allegiance and interest of adult learners. Sixty years ago, when the AAAE formed, the Cold War and the bitter anti-communism of those times had cut a swathe through the field of adult education, casting many of the most progressive providers and practitioners of earlier decades into oblivion. As a consequence, late 20th century adult education lost many historic links it once had with progressive social movements. Today, those links are re-emerging, through the study

of social movement learning, known in the Global South as popular education (Kane 2001; Hall *et.al.* 2012). But few social movement educators in today's Australia know anything about their profession's radical past (Boughton 1997a). This paper contributes to filling that gap, through a detailed investigation into the life of Esmonde Macdonald Higgins, a leading university adult educator of the 1940s and 1950s.

For most of its history, the 'adults' in adult education were workers, but the histories which the post-1960 adult education professionals studied about the origins of their field largely ignored the rich sources of organised working class (i.e. labour) history. Instead, they featured the work of a few 'great men', mostly not workers at all, but university academics, business leaders, military officers and churchmen. The Scottish-born carpenter David Stewart (1883-1954), who was General Secretary of the NSW WEA from its inception in 1913 until his death in 1954, is a rare exception, and the account of his life and work which Higgins wrote in the 1950s became the main source for most studies subsequently undertaken into the origins of Australian adult education (e.g. Whitelock 1974). But who was Higgins?

Higgin's own life (1897-1960) illuminates another side to adult education's 'origin story'. It shows that, prior to 1960, the profession was embroiled in a decades-long bitter intellectual and political struggle over what would count as 'real' adult education. For the first twenty years of his adult life, Higgins was one of the radical 'zealots' and 'propagandists' that Stewart, his WEA colleagues, and the founders of the 1960s AAAE condemned. But by the time he wrote his memoir of Stewart in 1957, 'Hig', as his friends knew him, had changed sides. He was thus the perfect candidate to construct an adult education 'origin story' which dismissed the educational work of radical socialists as an annoying side-plot to the 'main game' of liberal education and ignored the role they had played since the late nineteenth century as a driving force in adult education's development. Higgins' sanitised history helped calm the fears of those in power, who might otherwise have baulked at supporting the new 'profession', given some of its radical origins. At the same time, it gave its author a chance to settle accounts with his past comrades, the leadership of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), who twenty-five years earlier had dumped him from his post as the country's paramount communist educator.

Universities and the WEA

The early history of the WEA was chronicled by David Stewart himself, in articles published in 1947 in the NSW WEA journal, Australian Highway. At the time, the NSW WEA was locked in a dispute with the CPA-led left wing of the labour movement, a dispute which broke out five years earlier, at the height of WW2, but whose origins lay in two decades or more of political and intellectual conflict. Higgins became a protagonist in the 1940s dispute, usually referred to as the 'B40 Affair', from his base in Newcastle, where he had been Sydney University's Director of Tutorial Classes since 1941. No wonder, then, that his memoir, commissioned by the WEA when Stewart died in 1954, did nothing to contradict its founder's recollections of those 'early days'. From Higgins' memoir, the same version of the story found its way into Whitelock's classic history (Whitelock 1974), and was still being recycled in the 1990s (e.g. Phillips 1993).

However, the WEA's first classes were not the beginnings this century of working class adult education programs. There was already a vital, independent, working class and socialist education movement flourishing in Australia in the last decade of the nineteenth century, a movement which continued to expand up to and during the WW1. It included among its principal 'providers' the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), the International Workers of the World (IWW), the Plebs Leagues, and the Labour Colleges, along with a host of other small socialist parties and associations (Boughton 1997a; 1997b; Boughton, Welton & Taksa 2004). Much of this work, along with many of the activist educators who had sustained it, continued through the educational activities of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), founded in 1920. This movement saw the WEA as a direct challenge to its independence, designed to win workers to an alternative non-socialist theory about the best ways to achieve change. A vigorous struggle was then fought, both within and outside the WEA and its union affiliates, as the activists of this independent socialist tradition challenged the WEA's promotion of "class collaboration" in the name of "national development" and "social efficiency" (Taksa 1997; 2003).

Sydney University first moved to formalise an educational relationship with the working class movement in 1905, when its Extension Board, which was responsible for adult education, invited representation from the NSW Labour Council and began offering short annual lectures and

courses by notable academics to Labour Council delegates at Sydney's Trades Hall (Markey 1994, p. 147). In 1909, the UK Report, Oxford and Working Class Education, became available in Australia, and a young economics lecturer on the Board, R.F. Irvine, "successfully moved a motion to appoint a committee to consider the adoption of such a scheme ... this committee recommended that tutorial classes (the Oxford model) should be conducted by the University concurrently with extension lectures." (Taksa 1996). The next year the British WEA's National President, Temple, a "fledgling archbishop" as Whitelock called him, travelled the country lecturing on topics such as Education and Democracy, promoting the view that the workers needed "what only the universities can give" (quoted Whitelock 1974, p.175). Whether or not the workers agreed, some university men did. They affiliated to the British Association and corresponded with Temple on his return.

The next initiative to establish this 'worker's organisation' came from Dr. James Barrett, a member of the Melbourne University Senate, and Peter Board, the NSW Director General of Education, who invited British WEA leader Albert Mansbridge to Australia. He arrived in August 1913, in the middle of the great British strike wave of 1912-14. His oratory about working class education had strong appeal among some workers and their organisations, but perhaps more to the point were his claims that:

> *Without education the masses would drift hither, thither, cooperating not with the forces which build but with those which destroy (quoted Whitelock 1974, p. 176).*

Mansbridge had already written to Stewart, who organised to become his union's delegate to the Labour Council's Education Committee. Peter Board then provided an Education Department grant to the Committee, while Mansbridge's "magic aura of Oxbridge approval" helped win over the University Senate. Whitelock, no friend of the WEA's critics, wrote:

> *Mansbridge's message .... appealed to the universities and the establishment because it substituted definition for the muddle of extension, it might de-fuse industrial unrest, and it soothed sore consciences. (Whitelock 1974, p. 177; my emphasis)*

G.V. (Gerry) Portus, another of official adult education's 'founding fathers', wrote in his autobiography:

> *There were the queerest ideas (within the universities) about what the movement (i.e. the WEA) might accomplish. A professor in Sydney after quoting to me the old nineteenth century slogan, 'Open a school and close a gaol', immediately paraphrased it as 'Open a tutorial class and stop a strike.' 'For God's sake,' I implored him, 'don't say that in public' (Portus 1954, p.193).*

The WEA, though clearly a movement, was thus neither particularly working class in its leadership, nor particularly educational in its underlying purpose. It could as easily be characterised as a bourgeois political movement, which sought to involve leaders of the trade unions and the political labour movement with a predominantly middle class form of education, directed by university-based intellectuals and senior government officials.

Helen Bourke's study of five key intellectual figures in the WEA (1913 - 1929) adds another dimension:

> *The WEA provided a group of young intellectuals with their first footing on academic life and through its platforms and publications it gave them a public role and a forum for their social theory and criticism. The funding which supported them ... enable(d) the universities to employ these men and so, indirectly, enabled the basic development of the social sciences to which they were all committed....A basic premise of their thinking was that an alternative must be found to the threat of proletarian revolution (Bourke 1981, p. 21-2, 29; my emphasis).*

In another account of the period, Rowse called the WEA's intellectuals "secular evangelists", "ideologues" of liberalism, men who "rationalised the practice of a certain institutional ordering of society, the dominance by a ruling class over subordinated and fragmented classes," and "self-appointed instructors in social efficiency, armed with the new secular doctrine of sociology" (Rowse 1978, pp 6, 31, 37-76).

Solidarity vs. Efficiency, War and Imperialism

Lucy Taksa, a labour historian, points out the connection between the 'social efficiency' theories of the early WEA intellectuals and the scientific management movement in the United States, whose leading theorist was F.W. Taylor (Taksa 1995; 1997). The WEA's offer

to fulfil working class interests and aspirations was in no time at all "subordinated to the principle of non-partisanship adopted from the English Association's constitution", a principle which progressive middle-class intellectuals saw as crucial for the organisation to become a 'common meeting ground to all' (Taksa 1996, quoting the WEA's First Annual Report). In practice, this meant that the WEA refused to abide by fundamental labour movement solidarity principles, the 'closed shop' and 'preference to unionists'. When the NSW Typographical Association's requested that WEA printed matter bear the union label, the WEA argued the 'preference to unionists' principle was 'outside its sphere.' Tutorial classes established in highly unionised industrial towns in NSW were suspended when industrial and political strife escalated during 1915; likewise, classes for women factory workers in Sydney were halted during the war, because the male academics on the University of Sydney Joint Committee's Executive thought circumstances were "inopportune for continued 'organising work specifically among women'....." (Taksa 1996, p.20; see also Rowse 1978, p. 59).

These conflicts reached a peak when some WEA leaders began campaigning openly for political and industrial policies opposed by large sections of the organised working class movement, advocating Taylorist 'scientific management' in the interests of 'national efficiency', and supporting military conscription. The 'national efficiency' movement was launched in the Victorian Railways with the support of leading WEA figures. In a booklet issued by the employers, WEA economics lecturer Irvine argued that the crisis of war called for the inauguration of special organisation 'for the efficient use of all our resources of men and material' in place of the old laissez-faire methods. He advocated American so-called scientific management principles and practices to remedy Australia's inefficiency, its waste of natural and human resources and its need for 'more effectual training of the population'. Through education, he suggested, the prevailing negative attitude to scientific management could be overcome. (R.F. Irvine, 'National Organisation and National Efficiency,' quoted Taksa 1996). In advocating such views, WEA intellectuals sought to increase production for the imperial war effort, but they also hoped their ideas would be adopted by the newly emerging industrial bourgeoisie in post-war Australia. The war provided an opportunity for expanding state planning and regulation capacities and increased manufacturing industry

development which would increase total wealth, obviating the appeal of 'old-fashioned' ideas about class conflict. In effect, the WEA social scientists were striving to become what Italian communist social theorist Antonia Gramsci dubbed the 'organic intellectuals' of the emerging capitalist class (Pizzalato & Holst 2017).

The relationship between the WEA's university-based intellectuals and new progressive groupings in the capitalist class warrants more research, but one particular incident from this time helps re-focus attention on Higgins. Among the speakers at a 1915 WEA Conference on *Trade Unionism in Australia*, was W.C. Cleary, the senior manager of Tooth and Company's large Kent Brewery in inner Sydney. An ex-student of Irvine, Cleary was one of a new breed of managers, who wished to apply the 'new' social sciences to the problems of industrial production. Higgins' personal papers deposited in the Mitchell Library include a letter to him from Cleary, telling how Cleary and Stewart organised classes at the brewery under WEA auspices, where Cleary taught Economics and Economic History to "his men". His letter complained that, as one of the three main speakers at the above conference, he had been challenged by "disrupters from the Plebs League ..... planted in the conference to cause trouble ... *communists* .... jumping in with propaganda about production for use, not profit". (ML MSS 740, Box 1; emphasis added). Militant unionists on the receiving end of scientific management obviously believed that the problem was not so much their own 'prevailing negative attitude', as Irvine called it, as how to "educate the educators"(Boughton 2013). Engage in debate, they certainly did, though not with the polite restraint expected in tutorial classes. More decisively, they advocated militant industrial action to prevent the introduction of these methods, resulting in NSW's first ever General Strike in 1917 (Taksa 2017).

Such actions expressed more powerfully than any rational argument the growing appeal of the new theories and strategies of industrial unionism promoted by, among others, Bill Earsman, a metal worker who had been a union delegate in the Victorian Railways when Irvine began promoting his theories. A follower of VSP founder Tom Mann and one-time organiser of its Socialist Sunday School, Earsman had like Mann embraced the theories promoted by the International Workers of the World (IWW), known as the Wobblies (Burgmann 1995). In 1917 and 1919, Earsman helped found the Victorian and NSW Labour Colleges,

to promote an alternative theory of social change to that promoted by the WEA's social scientists. Then, in 1920, he wrote a pamphlet, extraordinary for the times, called *The Proletariat and Education. The Necessity for Labor Colleges*, in which he proclaimed:

> *The universities of today, like the early capitalists, are recognising that too long they have kept aloof from the working-class, and so now they are cooing in the ear of labor to come and get educated. The universities have come alive to the danger of labor. They see it marching on and upward, and are anxious to be in the good grace of the ever-advancing army. Consequently, they have approached with the suggestion of giving assistance in adult education.... (but) the University is also a class institution which is used for the purpose of bolstering up the system that exists and as a recruiting ground for obtaining more officers for the capitalists" (Earsman 1920, pp 9, 13-14).*

In October that same year, Earsman was elected the first General Secretary of the newly formed Communist Party of Australia (CPA) (Macintyre 1998).

The 1916-17 conscription dispute provided more grist for the independents' mill. Meredith Atkinson, the newly appointed WEA President from Oxford, saw no contradiction between that role and his Presidency of the Universal Service League, which, in opposition to the majority of the labour movement, campaigned throughout the country in favour of conscription for overseas military service. Like scientific management, this was also not an issue simply for polite debate, as Sam Aarons, a future CPA leader discovered, when he, along with many others, was "batoned down by police and soldiers during a 2000 - strong (anti-conscription) march to Parliament House, Melbourne in 1916" (Aarons 1993, p.2).

In his biography of Stewart, Higgins acknowledged the damage Atkinson's actions did to the WEA's working class support:

> *From then on there was a permanent body of opposition to the WEA in many unions, even in those which continued to be affiliated ... The Labor Council was persuaded to set up a Labor College, to battle with the WEA under the banner of 'Independent Working Class Education.' Although the WEA continued to win*

> *affiliations and class enrolments, it never fully regained its position in the trade union movement.... (Higgins n.d.)*

Atkinson moved to Melbourne and eventually withdrew altogether to return to England, having, in Bourke's words, "alienated his colleagues" by his "preoccupations with status, tenure and personal entitlements" (Bourke 1981, p.55); but also, perhaps, because leadership of a workers' education organisation was hardly the place for a man who believed, as he told the Anglican Social Questions Committee in 1918, that "the masses are entirely unfit to build up a new social order" (Quoted ibid., p. 74).

Enter Esmonde Higgins, Stage Left

It is now time to introduce Higgins himself into the story he was telling, something he chose not to do for his adult education audience of the 1950s. Higgins, we can now reveal, had been playing his own not-insignificant role in the heady events of these earlier times. Born in 1897, "son of a staunchly Baptist Melbourne accountant," young Esmonde proved himself a rebel while completing his leaving certificate at the prestigious Scotch College, writing an article for the Victorian Socialist Party's paper, Socialist. This was the same paper which greeted the WEA when it attempted to extend its influence to Melbourne as "a gigantic conspiracy of benevolence." The paper's editors were the radical clergyman Frederick Sinclaire and the socialist poet Marie Pitt. Sinclaire later helped Earsman, Guido Barrachi and others set up the Victorian Labour College (Walker 1976). At Melbourne University, where Higgins went to study Arts, he continued his journey to the left. In a talk he later gave to the Melbourne University Labour Club, Higgins' recalled the time his friend Barachhi published an article in the university student paper which began by saying that the war (WW1) was not 'our affair'. According to Higgins:

> *...there were howls for his blood. With Menzies as judge, he was given a lynch trial one moonlight evening and tossed into the University lake by an infuriated crowd from the Colleges (From an Antediluvian. Higgins papers, ML MSS 740).*

Menzies the right wing college student became, of course, the ultra-conservative and anti-communist Australian Prime Minister, who was in power when David Stewart and the WEA was published in 1957.

Despite his anti-conscription stance, Higgins enlisted to fight, leaving for France at the end of 1917. At the end of the war, he left the Army Education Scheme to which he had been posted. Funded by his uncle, Justice Higgins, he went up to Oxford to pursue his studies (Irving 2012). By 1920, his socialist tendencies had matured into a full-blown commitment to revolutionary Marxism, and he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), becoming a full-time functionary in its Labour Research Department. Among his closest London friends were Harry and Marjorie Pollitt, leading British communists. As Higgins was moving to the left in Britain, so was the WEA in NSW, but it was only temporary. Higgins' memoir of Stewart recorded that in 1923 the WEA even cooperated with Workers International Relief (one of the Comintern's fraternal organisations) in a series of lectures on international relations. However, the contradictions could not be overcome, and in 1925, when the Association organised a conference on *How To Make the WEA More Effective as an Instrument of Working Class Education*, it "degenerated," according to Higgins, in his 1950s persona, "into a debate between adherents of the Plebs League, which had been formed to spread the doctrine of Independent Working Class Education, and the WEA" (Higgins, n.d.).

The irony of this account is that Higgins had returned to Australia the previous year a committed communist, to take over important aspects of the CPA's educational work, including the Labour Research and Information Bureau which operated out of Trades Hall. His return had been organised by Christian Jollie Smith, socialist feminist barrister and a founding member of the CPA, who was a school friend of Higgins' sister Nettie, and one-time lover of Bill Earsman (Damousi 1988; Boughton 2020b). So, whether or not Higgins himself was one of the "disrupters" at the above Conference, he would certainly have been egging them on, perhaps in his role as editor of *Workers' Weekly*, the CPA's newspaper. Among his other duties, he and his partner Joy Barrington ran the Young Comrades Club, a version of the old VSP Socialist Sunday School for children, causing the NSW Minister for Justice to threaten its organisers with imprisonment, for aiming "to build up a race of criminals and disloyalists" (Johnson 1990).

By 1928, Higgins standing in the Communist Party was high. He was editor of the party paper, and in charge of 'Agit-Prop', Agitation and Propaganda, the term that parties in the international communist

movement used to describe the 'Department' which ran both their own media - newspapers, leaflets, books and pamphlets – as well as their educational classes and research sections. Higgins' contribution to the CPA's education work included producing the first Party Training Manual. He was also chosen that year to lead the CPA's Delegation to Moscow for the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, from which he returned carrying 1000 pounds to top up the CPA's coffers (Irving 2012; Macintyre 1998, pp.123,148).

By the end of the decade, the battle lines were clearly drawn between the CPA leadership and the WEA intellectuals, over what each considered to be 'real' workers' education. Among the communists were many men and women who for decades had been committed to the 'independent' tradition, and their views were shared by many in the trade unions and sections of the ALP, as well as in a multitude of socialist and radical working class organisations. On the other side were ALP parliamentarians, some of the more conservative union officials and delegates, like Stewart himself, progressive industrialists like Cleary, and the academic social scientists. For the next three decades, the field of adult education was dominated by the struggle between these two traditions for hegemony (Boughton 1997b).

Communists in the WEA

Lloyd Ross was a son of R.S. Ross, who helped Tom Mann found the Victorian Socialist Party. A few years younger than Higgins, Ross also studied at Melbourne University. Prior to 1935, when he became NSW Branch Secretary of the Australian Railways Union (ARU), he was a university adult educator, holding positions between 1924 and 1935 as a tutor-organiser at the University of Otago Dunedin in New Zealand, as the Newcastle District Tutor for Sydney University's Department of Tutorial Classes, and as Assistant Director of Tutorial Classes under Portus and Duncan in Sydney. In this latter period, he also edited Australian Highway. While his brother Edgar and his colleague Esmonde Higgins were, during this time, both CPA members, Ross did not join up, at least publicly, until 1935. He left the party in the wake of the 1939 upheavals caused by the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (see below) and in November 1943, became Director of Public Relations in the Chifley's Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction. After the war, he was active in the anti-communist Industrial Groups set up in the ALP and

the trade unions to counter the growing hegemony of the communists. (Morris 1992; Rowse 1981; Macintyre 1998). Higgins(n.d.), Whitelock (1974) and Morris (1992) all wrote of Ross' interventions into adult education debates in the 1930s, but none acknowledged his associations with the CPA. At least the latter two could claim they did not know.

Ross, in fact, was only one of several WEA figures with such associations. Lloyd's brother Edgar, also involved in adult education and the WEA, joined the CPA a little earlier. In Melbourne during WW1, Edgar worked on a paper edited by Meredith Atkinson (Ross, E. 1982, p.15). In 1925, he moved back to Broken Hill, where his father had organised for the VSP, and worked on the local newspaper, the *Barrier Daily Truth*. "Even before I joined the Party," he wrote in his memoirs, "I was giving lectures to such bodies as the YMCA on 'The Case for Communism'" (ibid, p.56). Though he worked closely in Broken Hill with the communists, he did not initially become a CPA member, because, according to his own account:

> *... I was suspect as an intellectual, and was sneered at because of my activities in the Workers Educational Association of which I occupied the positions of president and secretary.... (ibid, p.50)*

He was allowed to join the party when he went to work on the Miner's Union paper, *Common Cause*. Bill Gollan was another Broken Hill WEA tutor who joined the CPA in this period. Educated at Sydney University in the 1920s, Gollan moved to 'the Hill' as a High School teacher in 1929 and began lecturing part-time for the WEA. Edgar Ross, who became his close friend, arranged for Gollan's WEA lectures on the Russian revolution and socialism to be published in the *Barrier Truth*. Gollan continued as a WEA lecturer when he moved to Goulburn, where he was also in the ALP. In the early 1930s, he moved to Sydney, and became active in the Educational Workers League, a communist-led grouping within the NSW teacher's union which aimed "to introduce proletarian politics into the Federation." He became a CPA member in 1935, the same year as Lloyd Ross. He continued lecturing for the WEA when he moved to Cessnock in 1936, where he also resumed activity in the ALP, as part of the CPA's policy at the time to "find positions in the Labor party and influence its policy." He also knew Lloyd Ross well; "he was, in a sense, a leader of the left among the lecturers." In Cessnock, the WEA was an important point of contact for Gollan with the miners and

their union in the northern coalfields. Through his work for the WEA, as well as in Spanish Relief, the MAWAF and his own union, Gollan won significant support among workers, enough to become "the main spokesman for the Labor Party in the northern coalfields", and to lead the ALP delegation from that region to the 1940 NSW ALP Conference (Gollan 1980).

The Un-making of a Communist

As Ross moved from the WEA into the CPA's innermost circles - the Central Committee minutes of March 1939 record an extensive discussion of the educational work he and other communists had undertaken in the ARU - his friend Higgins was heading in the opposite direction. Internal disputes among the communist leadership from 1929-31 led to Higgins being removed from all his posts (Macintyre 1998). The bitterness these early disputes aroused on both sides would haunt the communists for many years to come. Nevertheless, he remained an active member, joining the ranks of the unemployed for several years, working on relief on road gangs. Like the good communist he still was, he relished the chance to work directly with the rank and file of the unemployed workers movement, of whom he was later to recall:

> *It was largely those who had learned political practice in the CP inspired unemployed movement who blossomed out as trade union officials in the metal trades and building trades from 1935. So with the seamen and watersiders (Quoted Roe 1977).*

He also helped edit *Red Leader*, the weekly newspaper of the CPA-led Militant Minority Movement. Eventually, he gained some lecturing work with the WEA in Asquith, taking a class on the Communist Manifesto. In 1936, one of Higgins' old connections found him full-time work in adult education, and he moved to Launceston to take up a post as the Staff Tutor for the University of Tasmania's Department of Tutorial Classes. Roe (1977) says that he left the CPA at this time, but letters in Higgins' papers in the Mitchell Library suggest otherwise. One addressed to the Tasmanian party organisation from "CC Secretariat per JBM" (presumably J.B. Miles), dated 19 March 1936, reads:

> *the bearer Cde. E. Higgins ... (is) going to Tasmania to work as a tutor for the WEA. Can't appear openly as a PM. (i.e. Party*

> *member. BB), but will be able, per contacts with T.U., L.P. (Labor Party) etc., to assist growth of united front work and bring people towards party. You cannot instruct him but neither can he instruct you. He will attract workers to the WEA, well and good: but don't let the WEA overshadow party classes. He can, if essential, report direct to us even without consulting you, or at least, only your secretariat (Higgins papers, ML MSS 740).*

In 1937, Higgins wrote to his sister Nettie, about a peace conference they had both attended in Melbourne. He was scathing about some delegates, describing them as "university liberals being the wise-heads, carefully drawing attention to the implications of the other's arguments but still pretending to be in agreement". Always self-critical, he also scoffed at his own "pious hopes that liberalism can detach people from prejudices and make action possible." "The real lesson of the congress," he concludes, "is to hang on to straight Leninist anti-militarism." In the next breath, however, he dismisses this as "out of the picture." In Tasmania, he says, he "feel(s) just as impelled as ever to try the liberal racket, because there is simply no other way to get a hearing for anything." He finishes up with a telling statement, an unwitting prediction of his own eventual apostasy:

> *And the more I succeed in becoming academic, the more I'll get into that most pestiferous of all liberal moods - that of 'seeing good in every manifestation of effort' and ending up with no beliefs of my own. (Extract of letter reproduced in Roe, 1977, pp 20-21):*

Higgins left Tasmania in 1938 for New Zealand, to take up a job as a tutor at Auckland University. Thereupon, the right wing ALP Tasmanian government "took steps to strengthen its control over WEA matters lest there be another such appointment" (Roe 1977, p. 13). This marked the beginning of a series of interventions into the WEA by state governments to prevent the communists gaining any further footholds in the organisation, interventions which by the mid 1940s, a number of key leaders of the adult education 'establishment' had begun to support. Before the decade was out, Higgins himself was to become one of them.

Higgins returned to Australia in 1941, to take up a position as the Newcastle Staff Tutor for Sydney University's Department of Tutorial Classes. The country was at war, and Menzies as Prime Minister

had declared the CPA an illegal organisation, driving its leadership underground. Some of his colleagues, Lloyd Ross included, had publicly broken with the CPA, for its failure to condemn the Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 and Stalin's subsequent invasion of Finland. Higgins had allowed his membership to lapse since he too was clearly disillusioned with the direction the international movement had taken. Nevertheless, he agreed to preside at a meeting that year in Newcastle on Aid for the Soviet Union, at which Katherine Susannah Prichard, noted communist novelist, was speaking (ML MSS 5765, Box 2). Within the space of 18 months, he was caught up in a major dispute between the CPA and the WEA, the so-called B40 Affair (Morris 2013). Although Stewart, Higgins and their allies in university adult education insisted this was a conflict between 'propaganda' and 'real education', it was in fact, more about control over the NSW ALP and trade unions than about adult education principles. Moreover, some of the personal bitterness this dispute engendered was clearly related to the fact that several of the protagonists were old comrades, with Bill Gollan leading the fray on behalf of the Teachers Federation in Newcastle (Gollan 1948), where, as Higgins reported without mentioning his own role or his highly relevant past, the dispute with the WEA was particularly savage. The struggle in the labour movement of which B40 was one episode eventually led to a major split in the NSW ALP when its increasingly left-wing leadership voted to amalgamate with the Communist Party (Boughton 1997b).

In 1945, Higgins returned to Sydney, to work in the Department of Tutorial Classes there, and in 1950, became its Assistant Director. Having left the CPA, he was now confirmed in his opposition, writing in 1951, the year Menzies legislated once again to make the Communist Party illegal:

> *I've come actively to dislike practically all that the Communist Party stands for. If I must have a label, I'm a sort of a Fabian with an over-plus attachment to democratic methods (Quoted Roe 1977)*

Nevertheless, he refused publicly to cooperate with the Commonwealth's new internal security police force, A.S.I.O., who approached him to inform, as many other ex-communists had, on their former comrades (Irving 2004). In 1954, he completed his Master's degree, and in 1957 completed his memoir of Stewart. He died three years later, in 1960, the year in which the AAAE formed.

Conclusion

Lascelles Wilson, one of the 'great men' of 1960s adult education, wrote an obituary to Higgins in March 1961 (Wilson 1961) which, without a trace of irony, told readers that R.G. Menzies, still then the Prime Minister, was among Higgins' fellow undergraduates who had been his 'stimuli' at university. He explained away Hig's joining the communist movement as youthful idealism and significantly understated the length of time he had been an actual party member. The 'real' life of Higgins, it seems, whom he applauds for his "relentless intellectual honesty", began with "his return, in truth his entry, into academic life". Whereupon follows the most telling comment of all:

> *Thus, the last twenty-five years of his life were spent, to its great gain, in adult education.*

Then what, we must now ask, was he doing for the first twenty years of his working life? Was this not adult education also, directed toward a different end? From the point of view of social movement learning, Higgins may well be said to have done his most effective work as an adult educator in the earlier part of his life, working for the communist movement; rather than in later years, spent in what he himself disparagingly referred to as "the liberal racket."

Wherever one sits in this debate, it should be clear that all educational interventions directed to the working class movement are political and cannot be understood outside the context of their times. For much of the 20th century, the WEA and its partner, university adult education, represented a conscious effort to build a movement among workers which, while it claimed simply to be educational, was much more. Its educational focus 'covered' an ideology about the way forward, about the kind of society which could and should be built. Its ideology based on class collaboration - consensus, we might call it today - was consistent with some traditions in the British labor movement, but not nearly as universal as Higgins in his 1950s persona led his readers to believe.

The sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of adult education's national association provides an occasion to revisit the traditions which formed the field. What should stand on the historical record, but has not - partly because Higgins and those who followed him preferred to celebrate a more passive tendency in the politics of working class education - is

that most, if not all, the progressive changes won by organised labour in Australia involved struggles in which communists and socialists played leading educative roles. Liberalism, on this account, is not as transformative a tradition as its proponents once argued (Boughton 2020a). In the twenty-first century, adult educators who aim to play a more effective role in social change will find, if they look, there is still much to be learned about popular education by studying the experience of past social movements, which Choudry & Vally (2018) rightly call "history's schools".

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