

SHERIDAN, TOM. *Division of Labour. Industrial Relations in the Chifley Years, 1945–49*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1989. x, 404 pp. £ 30.00.

It took Sheridan a decade to produce this detailed study of five years of Australian history. That is sufficient to make some general historians jealous of such an apparent luxury. However, the time and level of specialization were well-justified by the end product. *Division of Labour* is well written (with the one exception of his invention of the word “militance”) and painstakingly researched. It also examines a crucial formative period for Australian history in general, and Australian labour history especially, for the following reasons. First, in the five years from 1945 to 1949 the foundations of a modern industrialized economy and a multi-cultural society were laid by government policies for rapid expansion of Australia’s manufacturing base and mass immigration programs. Secondly, with the continuation of the wartime Australian Labor Party (ALP) government until 1949, Australia experienced the longest period of ALP rule until 1991. Thirdly, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) by 1945 reached a peak of membership (23,000) and influence in unions, including those in the metal trades, stevedoring, the maritime industry, road and rail transport, and coal mining, which occupied key positions in the economy. Fourthly, the formal organization of Catholic and right-wing forces against CPA influence in the labour movement began in 1945, leading to the disastrous ALP split of 1955. Finally, the great coal strike of 1949 saw open confrontation between the CPA and the ALP government, and the government’s use of troops to break the strike. The ALP lost the elections soon afterwards, to remain out of power for twenty-three years.

There were high hopes amongst the people for reform and prosperity, after the material denial of the war years, and the success of the ALP in managing the war effort in partnership with the unions. The CPA, which had cooperated enthusiastically with the war effort in industry through its strong influence in key manufacturing, transport and mining unions, emerged from the war with enormous prestige, and an intention initially to continue its cooperation with the ALP movement to achieve material gains for the workers, including an expanded welfare system. This was consistent with the support of international communism for people’s democracies.

However, the post-war ALP government suffered attack from the right and left. A combination of conservative political parties in parliament, organized interest groups (especially doctors and banks), and the High Court succeeded in emasculating most of the ALP government’s reform measures, including a national health service, bank nationalization, and an attempt to alter the constitution by referendum in order to control prices. Amongst the unions, those in the metal trades, stevedoring, mining and the maritime industry, where CPA influence was strong, launched major industrial campaigns for wages, the forty-hour week, and other conditions, because the government attempted to slow wages growth so as to contain inflation which might threaten economic expansion. As a result, strikes and lockouts reached high levels. By 1949 the CPA competed with the ALP for leadership of the working class, as a result of disappointments with reform and the

government's industrial policy, as well as the Cominform line which saw the world as divided into two camps. Because of the ALP government's support for the American alliance, and the inflow of American capital, the CPA viewed it then as an enemy.

Sheridan examines the industrial relations of the period in this broader context, especially in terms of government economic policy and internal labour movement relations. His essential theme, demonstrated in great detail, is that the government's economic objectives and trade-union industrial objectives, together with the constraints faced by both, were far more important than the competing political motivations of the ALP and CPA in explaining the high level of industrial conflict of the time. After the restraint of wartime conditions, the unions were determined to take advantage of the favourable labour market conditions of full employment and expansion of manufacturing, just as the government and arbitration tribunals were determined to contain growth in labour costs and militant employers in important industries such as steel were determined to maintain a high degree of managerial prerogative.

The high incidence of industrial disputes was commonly linked with the sinister influence of communists in the unions in the 1940s, by an hysterical press and politicians. This perspective heightened with the advent of the cold war. It was apparently confirmed because disputes were concentrated in those industries of strategic economic importance where communist influence was at its greatest in the unions. However, the conspiracy thesis cannot be sustained by close analysis. Mining, stevedoring, the maritime industry and the metal trades were traditional areas of workforce militancy, not only in Australia, for reasons associated with the nature of the work and the structure of industrial relations. From the 1940s all of these industries except the metal trades were subject to extensive technological change which exacerbated existing industrial relations problems. The metal trades by then had become the major pacesetter in gains for the remainder of the union movement, so that it naturally bore the brunt of many disputes. In the post-war context of high expectations and a favourable labour market for unions, communists frequently gained union office and influence in the unions in these industries through their forthright support for militant action, but the situation in each case was far too complex for them to reasonably claim to have initiated such action, although some communists did confuse union office with "control" of membership, in the light of constant accusations of this kind from the press. Union members themselves were clearly able to distinguish between support for communist officials over industrial issues, and support for communist political ideology, for the latter received little electoral support even in areas of communist industrial strength, such as the coalfields. Especially in the circumstances of the late 1940s militancy was by no means monopolized by the communists in these unions. Indeed, on some occasions after the war communists counselled against industrial action for strategic reasons, and some of the opposition which developed against them in unions fed upon resentment over their desire from 1941–1945 to avoid industrial action at any cost for the sake of the war effort.

Sheridan assembles an impressive weight of evidence for a considerable revision of this period of Australian history. Even many communists and former communists have been rather more willing to admit political motivations for their industrial role,

perhaps overestimating the extent to which they did direct the members of “their” unions. On the other hand, no one before Sheridan has so clearly identified the interdependence of the ALP government’s economic and industrial relations policies, such that the government used any subterfuge to delay growth in labour costs, and by 1949 unashamedly “kicked the communist can” to isolate the miners to this end. It was the ALP, more so than the CPA, which turned industrial relations of the period into a political contest for the allegiance of the working class.

*Ray Markey*

GERSTLE, GARY. *Working-class Americanism. The politics of labor in a textile city, 1914–1960.* [Interdisciplinary perspectives on modern history.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1989. xii, 356 pp. Ill. £ 27.50.

In the years after the First World War, the mass mobilization of industrial workers, many of them so-called “new” immigrants, brought the realities of class and class conflict home to the United States. Like their European counterparts, American capitalists and factory managers confronted a working-class social movement that threatened both their own class position but perhaps also America’s ambitions to world power.

Gary Gerstle examines this immigrant working-class mobilization in microcosm, looking at the nexus of immigrants, unionization, ideology, and politics in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, a small New England cotton and woolen town that became a cutting edge of 1930s industrial unionism in the Northeast. Gerstle charts the growth of the textile industry in Woonsocket from the 1840s, the immigration from Quebec of the town’s largely French-Canadian workforce (whom labor statistician Carroll Wright described as “the Chinese of the Eastern States”) (p. 23), and the influx, after 1905, of French and Franco-Belgian radicals who, escaping the blacklist in their own countries, gravitated into skilled trades in Woonsocket where they played a leading political role. By the 1930s, the city’s Independent Textile Union (ITU), which the latter founded, embodied an imported vision of social democracy and socialist transformation that united the French-Canadian majority around a class-based program transcending the provincial confines of *la survivance*, the impulse for cultural preservation that had formed the cultural centerpiece of French-Canadian group life.

With Popular Front inspiration, Woonsocket’s radicals won political success by adapting the “language of Americanism”, the *lingua franca* of American politics, toward their own ends. The language of Americanism proved a convenient umbrella under which to gather the disparate elements of Woonsocket’s working class. Gerstle finds that, rather than a fundamentally conservative force, Americanism was contested ideological terrain, a complex and contradictory set of values and symbols composed of nationalist, democratic, progressive, and traditionalist elements that lent themselves toward a variety of political applications, including a radical social vision.