

A Social History of the Workers Sports Federation in Victoria c 1934-39

Drew Cottle

Workers' sports movements of Europe and the Soviet Union have recently generated a growing body of critical historical study. Despite the interest in the relationship between class and sport the workers' sports movement of Australia awaits analysis. This article will focus on workers' sports in the Australian Communist Party in the 1930s. The questions it will examine are: why did the Communist Party participate in the workers' sports movement? How important was the movement to the Communist Party?

Workers Sports Federation

The Workers Sports Federation (WSF) was a cultural expression of the Communist Party born of the 1930s Great Depression. Its exact origins are unknown.¹ It was probably formed in Sydney during the last years of the Party's sectarian 'Third Period' 1928-34.² How inspirational the inter-war workers sports movement of the Soviet Union, Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy and England with their tens of thousands of participants in separate competitions and festivals, were in the creation of an Australian expression of cannot be determined³. The Communist Party paper, *Worker's Weekly*, carried three references to the mass organisations of the WSF in Europe and the Soviet Union before the Sydney WSF was formed.

In the early 1930s the Communist Party's membership was no more than 1100, the majority of whom were located in New South Wales and Victoria. The Communist Party itself was immersed in sectarian political agitation and struggle on the questions of unemployment, evictions and the 'social fascism of the Australian Labor Party'. In an island continent of vast distances, limited industrial development and with a small population gripped by economic depression the Communist Party attempted to address immediate political and economic questions.⁴ Although the achievements of socialist worker sports may have been known by the

Party's leadership emulation was not seen as primary to the work of Australian communists.

It might be concluded that the formation of an Australian expression of worker sports was a Party response to the conditions of mass unemployment created by the Depression in Sydney. Communist activists within the Unemployed Workers' Movement established the WSF. It was a loose, informal association of mainly young and middle aged working class men, numbering between 30 and 40. While most were labourers there were several clerks, a musician and an SP bookie.⁵ Boxing, wrestling, running and rugby league were their preferred sports. Football and sprinting were illegally enjoyed on the fields of Centennial Park. Boxing and wrestling were practised, 'at a cramped gymnasium on Wentworth Avenue just off Oxford Street in Surry Hills'. The gym became the unofficial WSF headquarters in 1932. A former New Zealand lightweight boxer, 'Charlie Purdey and the professional wrestlers, Jimmy Mitsos and Alick Lukes put on WSF exhibitions, to raise money and morale'.

Those who took part in these WSF activities did so with a political purpose. They became the frontline defence in Party demonstrations, marches and anti-eviction occupations in the period, 1930-3⁶. Their sport and politics had foreseeable consequences. 'Several WSF members including Alex Makarov, a capable wrestler were arrested, tried and gaoled' after a tumultuous anti-eviction struggle at Bankstown in June 1931.⁷ Such political commitment meant that the Sydney WSF could only ever be transitory and impermanent.

In August 1933 Jimmy Mitsos (alias 'Jimmy George'), a Greek and a leading WSF organiser, was sent by the Party to Melbourne to establish a Victorian section of the WSF. Audrey Blake states that 'George with the support of the Young Communist League had great early success'. For example, the WSF in Footscray gained 400 members in two months. Blake believed that the lack of experienced leadership created great difficulties within the WSF and its branches quickly collapsed.⁸ Leadership apart, the rapid growth and sudden decline of the Victorian WSF may have more to do with changes in Communist Party policy. The sectarianism of the Third Period with its emphasis on class war and its depiction of the ALP as social fascists was discarded for the need to build a broad 'united front' against war and fascism.⁹ Interestingly 'Jimmy George' returned to Sydney in October 1934.

The long inspiring and ultimately successful struggle of the Wonthaggi

coal miners in Gippsland Victoria may have also provided the example of how the Party could build a wide and popular following within the working class based on their immediate needs.¹⁰ Strikebound Wonthaggi saw coalminers and their families organise a food co-operative, a creche, a barber's shop and teams of rabbiters and anglers. According to Alex Opie 'impromptu football matches between groups of miners and townsfolk did help to maintain solidarity'. This may explain why Alex Opie the teenage son of a radical storekeeper and a product of the Socialist Sunday Schools and a member of the Young Communist League (YCL) was approached by Ken Miller, the newly elected leader of the YCL, with plans to revive the WSF in late 1933.¹¹

Opie with Miller, Malcolm Good, Gil and Eric Ogden, Archie Free, Charles Silver, Danny Garland, Bryan Oke, Patricia Devanny and Alf Lorbach formed the new WSF Committee. They were advised and encouraged in this venture by their Party seniors, Ralph Gibson and Alfie Watt.¹²

The Victoria WSF abandoned the class war rhetoric and its Sydney role of an active service brigade amongst the unemployed. As it consolidated the WSF later organised *inexpensive* Easter and Christmas holidays for Melbourne's working class families to popularise the cause of the united front in the struggle against fascism and bolster Party recruitment.¹³ Relaxed and purposeful sociability in the Victorian countryside rather than the rigours of organised sport as preparation for the class war was the social ethos of the WSF. In the main, (young single middle class men and women) and relatively few working class couples with young children and travelled by train or ferry to the WSF holiday camps at Rosebud, Cowes, Creswick, Daylesford or Healesville.¹⁴ Socialist camping holidays were not pioneered by the WSF. They followed in the tradition of the Young Pioneers established by the Communist Party in the 1920s.¹⁵

WSF Holiday Camps

Notwithstanding its efforts to politically educate the assembled campers, the WSF did provide a popular cheap and organised holiday in picturesque surroundings within a few hours travel from Melbourne. The first holiday camp of the WSF was at Sassafras near Upwey in the Dandenong Ranges at Christmas 1933.¹⁶ Fifteen young people, the majority of whom were Young Communist League members, attended. Thirty young people

travelled to Fossil Beach on the Mornington Peninsular for the WSF Christmas camp in 1934. This camp was a left-bloc of mainly YCL members. Swimming, hiking and singing were the principal pastimes.¹⁷

It was only in the middle years of the 1930s when the worst of the Depression had passed that the WSF in Victoria was able to successfully, if somewhat modestly, promote the United Front. Unlike its European and Soviet namesakes the Victorian WSF was never a mass socialist sporting organisation. It never advanced a Marxist analysis of capitalist sport in Australia. Instead, its political goals were more circumscribed. Its camps upheld the goals of fellowship, internationalism, health and fitness, collective endeavour and communion with nature. In this the Victorian WSF bore similarities to certain interwar British socialist organisations described by John Hargreaves.¹⁸ The four day Easter WSF camp at Healesville in 1935 attracted over 900 people. Although marred by constant heavy rain it was a social and political success. Australian Rules football, netball, table tennis and boxing competitions were organised by Charles Silver and a trained gymnast, Alf Lorbach. Each morning the camp was the scene of mass physical exercises led by Alf and Doreen Lorbach. The camp was divided into single men's, single women's and family sections. The camp's big marquee was christened 'Palais de SUSSO',¹⁹ mocking both the pretensions of the rich and the hard times of the 1930s.

A roster system operated in which each camper spent a half day on food preparation, serving and cleaning up. Sol Marks recalls the difficulty he faced 'when several young women from Richmond rostered for kitchen duties withdrew their labour on the issue that peeling onions would make their hands smell.'²⁰ A vigilance committee ensured that 'there was no cross habitation in the single sections', as Ron Tilley puts it.²¹ Alcohol was banned. If found it was confiscated and was given to the cooks, who were mostly hardened and older Party members.²² A feature of the Healesville and subsequent WSF camps was the brass band competition which the Wonthaggi miners usually won.

Despite the Healesville rain many young workers enthused by the camp's collective spirit and camp fire discussions joined the Communist Party. Several lifelong Communist friendships found their origins in the Healesville mud.²³ After Healesville the growth of the YCL and the WSF activities necessitated the renting of two floors of the Tattersalls Club in Swanston Street at £22 a week.²⁴ In these rented premises the WSF and the

YCL with the YMCA and other church fellowship groups and teams from factories organised the first men's basketball competition in Victoria. The WSF and YCL held Saturday and Sunday night dances firstly at its Tattersalls rooms and later throughout Melbourne's working class suburbs. Harry Stein's involvement in the WSF and YCL ranged from classes in Marxism, a drama group, basketball, cycling and playing drums in a jazz band.²⁵ The YCL and WSF sought to promote physical education in the schools and called for its instruction to future school teachers at Melbourne University.²⁶

Such a concern for the physical education, particularly of working class children, was a consequence of the privations endured during the Depression. It may also have unconsciously reflected a debate about physical culture versus competitive sport in the Soviet Union during the 1920s where narrow specialisation in competitive sports was seen as detrimental to health and promoted commercialism and demoralisation of the masses.²⁷

A leading WSF advocate of physical education at the University of Melbourne was Doreen Lorbach. She ran the WSF gymnasium classes with her husband at the Tattersalls Club during the 1930s. She had been a member of the first women's team to win the right to row on the Yarra river, breaking a long standing taboo. She had been an Australian women's fencing and gymnast champion.²⁸

The 1936 Christmas camp at Lake Jubilee, Daylesford attracted 1300 people²⁹ and 1000 campers attended the 1937 WSF Easter camp at Cowes, Phillips Island.³⁰ The Spanish Civil War was a dominant theme of these WSF camps. A Food for Republican Spain campaign drew in many new WSF supporters. Les and Dorothy Dalton remember that 'talk at the camp was about Spain the need to fight fascism and the fortunes of the Richmond football team'.³¹

Alex Opie thought the 1937 Victoria Park camp at Daylesford, where 1900 people attended as the WSF's greatest success. Eleven special trains took the campers to Daylesford. Nearly 900 people took part in gymnastics, running, tennis, cycling and football and netball competitions.³² Dr Eagle White (a Communist medical student at Melbourne University) led a small team of students, doctors and nurses who provided medical care and supervised camp hygiene. A Women's Committee co-operated in setting up child care and child minding facilities. Such collective initiative impressed the then young Melbourne University student and netballer,

Ruth Crow. Crow thought these 'WSF camp initiatives concerning food, cleanliness and health, and the welfare of children were the forerunners of later community child care centres'.³³ Later, during World War II as a delegate in the Clerk's Union Ruth Crow and other Communist women demanded that creches be established in factories and other places of employment.³⁴

At Daylesford, Ken Miller wrote and published *Outcry*, the WSF daily news sheet (of which Barry Blears has the only known three surviving copies).³⁵ A wall newspaper provided information about sports competitions, political discussion groups and acting classes. Leaders of the WSF and YCL addressed large meetings about the Spanish Civil War, the dangers of fascism, war and economic problems confronting young people in Australia.³⁶ After this camp the sixteen year old Grace Gale joined the YCL. She had only gone to the camp because her cousin Ron Tilley, had paid her tram fare." She worked as a machinist in the Holeproof textile factory at Brunswick and was a member of the works netball team. She explained that in the late 1930s the WSF and Communist delegates in the clothing trade union, (one of whom was Gus Haddon) organised scores of teenaged women into factory netball teams.³⁸ Few of these women joined the Communist Party. Like Alex Opie, Ron Tilley and Sol Marks. Grace Gale emphasised that the Labor Party and the Trades Hall Council was either dismissive or hostile to all WSF activities.³⁹ These bodies saw the WSF as a recruiting ground for the Communist Party and as such a challenge to their authority within the labour movement. Their estimation of the WSF's influence within the working class was greatly exaggerated as few workers actually attended the WSF camps and its other activities.

The relative success of the Daylesford camp and the worsening international situation in Spain, China, Germany and Italy propelled the WSF and YCL into organising a mass meeting in the Princess Theatre, Melbourne to publicise the YCL and WSF political program.⁴⁰ The meeting at the theatre was crowded to capacity. Alex Opie co-ordinated the event. Alf and Doreen Lorbach organised a spectacular gymnastics display. The Communist art students, Nutta Buzacott and Malcolm Good painted huge and colourful WSF and YCL banners. From the platform Audrey Blake who had recently returned from Europe and Ken Miller argued that Australian young people must be united in the struggle against fascism.⁴¹

The remaining WSF camps before the outbreak of war in Europe continued to attract gathering numbers of the young and single middle class and few factory workers. Nineteen hundred attended the Creswick Christmas camp. The campers walked to the site of the Eureka Stockade, hoisted a Eureka flag and swore the digger's oath. Radical popular traditions were revived in the aftermath of Port Kembla Pig Iron Strike and as the war drew near.⁴² The largest WSF camp was in Easter, 1939 at Cowes, Phillip Island. Two thousand, two hundred people travelled to the island by special trains and chartered ferries. For Ruth Crow this camp held the fondest memories:

There were 'streets' of tents and they were named after working class heroes such as Ernst Thalmann and Alexi Stakhanov. The 'streets' were kept clean and some decorated with the Red Flag or the Eureka banner. There was a creche for little children ... a sports ground with sports activity organised all the time or so it seemed ... a camp newspaper ... cycle races ... a big outdoor gymnasium with Roman rings, horizontal bars ... a gym horse ... and Eric Ogden dressed like a British explorer in white shorts and pith helmet was the 'Camp Communicator' announcing coming events, bush walks, discussions. Eric kept the young children hilariously occupied in 'mob' games of chasings, hide-and-seek, the sack race and the wheelbarrow race. His brother Gil, organised the never ending cricket matches. One night there was a huge storm and everyone helped to lash down the marquee. While doing this we sang the Red Flag and the Marseillaise. There was a tremendous co-operative spirit.⁴³

War ended the activities of the WSF. Many of the YCL recruits and WSF had either enlisted like Gil Odgen and Ron Tilley or had moved into a 'reserved' industries.⁴⁴ Alex Opie resigned as secretary of the WSF and found work as a metal tracer at the Commonwealth Aircraft Company.⁴⁵ After the Communist Party was declared illegal in June 1940, the YCL Club was closed. Late in September 1941 a secret meeting of some former YCL members was called by Hurrel and Judah Waten to plan for a WSF Christmas camp. These preparations were abandoned when Japan attacked Pearl Harbour.⁴⁶

A WSF stalward Nancy Irving believed that the reasons for the success of the WSF 'lay in the deprivation at the time through sheer poverty':

The WSF offered a holiday which young working people

could afford. There was at that time a very strong class identification, people had no doubts or misgivings about the class they belonged to and the WSF enabled people when involved in the organisation to feel a sense of class belonging.⁴⁷

Conclusions

While Nancy Irving's belief about the 'success' of the WSF is heart felt and part of her lived experience another conclusion may be drawn. The 'success' of the WSF was always limited historically, sociologically and politically. If its Sydney origins were an expression of the class war of the early 1930s, its Victorian rebirth embraced the cross-class unity of the United Front against Fascism. While WSF camps in Victoria proved increasingly popular from 1935 until 1940 most who attended the camps were primarily young single lower middle-class men and women rather than industrial workers, female or male. The sports engaged in at the camps were part of a 'rational recreation ethic'. They did not seek to change existing Australian sporting codes and traditions. As a front organisation of the CPA during the mid- to late-1930s the WSF was relatively successful in what it did achieve. It would be entirely inappropriate to compare it with the mass worker sports organisations of Europe and the Soviet Union during the inter-war period. The Victorian WSF's only semblance to these organisations was its title.

Notes:

- 1 An extensive one year search through the voluminous Communist Party of Australia records held at the Mitchell Library, the National Library of Australia and the University of Melbourne Archives as well as the papers of prominent and less well known Communist Party members failed to locate a Party directive to establish the WSF.
- 2 See Alastair Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History*, Hoover Institute, Stanford University, 1969, pp. 43-71. A foundation member of the Sydney WSF Jocka Burns thought it (the WSF) 'opened up in 1933 ...' Letter to author, 25 Aug. 1994. During the Depression Jocka Burns was a Communist Party member who sought to organise the itinerant unemployed. A memorable portrait of his service to the working class is found in Frank Huelin, *Keep Moving: An Odyssey*, Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1973. Now a sprightly 82-year-old, Jocka 'still walks five miles a day' and occasionally shows some of the locals (in Yarraville) 'how to defend themselves' at the Yarraville Police and Citizens' Youth Club.
- 3 See Robert F Wheeler, 'Organised Sport and Organised Labour: The Workers Sport Movement', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 13, no.2 Apr. 1978, pp. 191-210; David A Steinberg, 'The Workers' Sport International, 1920-1928', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 13, no. 2, Apr. 1978, pp. 234-51; John Hargreaves, 'Sport and Socialism in Britain', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1992, 9, pp. 131-53; Arnd Kruger and James Riordan, eds, *The Story of Worker Sports*, Human Kinetics,

- Champaign, Illinois, 1996.
- 4 Davidson, *The Communist Party*, pp. 55-65.
 - 5 At least this was the view of Jocka Burns in telephone conversation with the author, 1 Sept. 1994.
 - 6 Burns conversation.
 - 7 Burns conversation.
 - 8 Audrey Blake, on the Development of the Eureka Youth League and its Predecessors, typescript, 1993, Audrey Blake Papers, Mitchell Library, p. 27.
 - 9 Davidson, *The Communist Party*, pp. 72-90; W J Brown, *The Communist Movement and Australia: An Historical Outline — 1890s to 1980s*, Australian Labor Movement History Publications, Sydney, 1986, pp. 63-96.
 - 10 Ralph Gibson, *My Years in the Communist Party*, International Bookshop. Melbourne, 1966, pp. 35-8.
 - 11 Interview with Alex Opie, Newport NSW, 16 Sept. 1994.
 - 12 Interview, Opie.
 - 13 This was a view put forward by both Alex Opie and in a letter from Ruth Crow, North Carlton, Vic., 22 Sept. 1994.
 - 14 Correspondence from Olga Silver, North Fitzroy, North Fitzroy, Vic., 27 Sept. 1994; Sol Marks, Macleod, Vic., 10 Jan. 1995; Bruce Armstrong, Chadstone, Vic., 1 Aug. 1995, Ron Tilley, Laurieton, NSW, 12 Jan. 1995. These correspondents were active WSF members during the period 1935 to 1939.
 - 15 Eric Aarons recalled 'Often during these (Christmas) holidays I met members of the Communist Party, which in turn led to my going on walks or to camps with the Young Pioneers. This was an organisation of children aged up to about fourteen, and at their camps we would go walking, play games, sing and receive a small amount of political education.' See Eric Aarons, *What's Left?* Penguin, Ringwood, 1993, p. 12.
 - 16 Interview, Opie.
 - 17 Interview, Opie.
 - 18 See Hargreaves, 'Sport and Socialism in Britain', p. 141.
 - 19 Interview, Opie. A short article in *Workers' Voice*, 2 May 1934, p. 3 offers a fuller description of the WSF camp. It was probably written by Alex Opie or Charles Silver. Letter from Olga Silver, 27 Sept. 1994.
 - 20 Letter, Marks, 10 Jan. 1995.
 - 21 Letter, Tilley, 12 Jan. 1995.
 - 22 Letter, Crow, 22 Sept. 1994.
 - 23 Letter, Tilley, 12 Jan. 1995.
 - 24 Interview, Opie, 16 Sept. 1994.
 - 25 Harry Stein, *A Glance Over an Old Left Shoulder*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1994, p. 36.
 - 26 Letter, Crow, 22 Sept. 1994.
 - 27 See James Riordan, 'Worker Sport within a Worker State: The Soviet Union', in Krüger and Riordan, *The Story of Worker Sports*, p. 50.
 - 28 Betty Little, 'A Life Devoted to Serving the People', *Vanguard*, 17 June 1998, p. 9.
 - 29 *Workers' Voice*, 3 Feb. 1937, p. 4.
 - 30 *Workers' Voice*, 4 May 1937, p. 3.
 - 31 Interview with Les and Dorothy Dalton, North Carlton, Vic., 3 Oct. 1994.
 - 32 Interview, Opie, 16 Sept. 1994.
 - 33 Letter, Crow, 22 Sept. 1944.
 - 34 See Ruth Crow, 'Child Care and the People's War Against Fascism', *Join Hands*, Winter/Spring, 1983, pp. 3-10 and Joyce Stevens, *Taking the Revolution Home: Women and Work in the Communist Party of Australia, 1920-1945*, Sybylla, Fitzroy, 1987, p. 90.

- 35 Interview with Barry Blears, Surry Hills, 19 Sept. 1994.
- 36 *Workers' Voice*, 3 Feb. and 4 May 1937.
- 37 Telephone conversation with Grace White (nee Gale) 20 Dec. 1994
- 38 Telephone conversation, White, 20 Sept. 1994.
- 39 Telephone conversation, White, 20 Sept. 1994.
- 40 Audrey Blake, *A Proletarian Life*, Kibble Books, Malmsbury, Vic., 1984, pp. 78-9.
- 41 Interview, Opie, 16 Sept. 1994; *Workers' Voice*, 16 Oct. 1938, p. 3.
- 42 *Workers' Voice*, 4 Feb. 1939, p. 5.
- 43 Letter, Crow, 22 Sept. 1994.
- 44 Letters, Tilley, 12 Jan. 1995 and Marks, 10 Jan. 1995.
- 45 Interview, Opie, 16 Sept. 1994.
- 46 Letter, Crow, 22 Sept. 1994.
- 47 Interview with Nancy Irving, Hornsby, 4 May 1995.