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The Life Story of
L. L. SHARKEY
Fighter For Freedom

by

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L. L. SHARKEY
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"One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would
triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake."

—Browning, "To Asolando."

"So well thy words become thee as thy wounds,
They smack of honour both."

—Shakespeare, "Macbeth."

* * *

Back from the 1948 conference of the Indian Communist Party, L. L. Sharkey wrote in the Tribune about the Calcutta rickshawmen:

"Imagine a mountain of fat British imperialist being dragged at a trot in the blazing Indian sun by a skinny human beast of burden weighing perhaps nine stone. They eat up the unfortunate man's life in order to save their parasitical carcasses from the exertion of walking a couple of blocks or of buying a horse.

"It is truly a revolting sight and at once a cure for illusions about the 'common humanity' of the master and the slave, the exploiter and the exploited. These poor doomed creatures beseege one to ride in their rickshaws and looked dumbfounded at my reply: 'It is against my 'religion' to use a fellow man as a horse.' Apparently they had not heard of such a 'religion' before despite all the 'missions' in India."

Australia has been an officially Christian country since her foundation in 1788, but she, also, has heard all too little of such a "religion."

To free the workers from a system which treats them not as humans but as profit-producing animals, to help build a society in which they shall be, in his own words "free, equal, prosperous and at peace with the whole world" is the task to which Laurence Louis Sharkey has devoted his life.

He was born in August, 1898, on a farm near Orange, N.S.W. Of Irish descent he imbibed a strong, anti-imperialist tradition from parents and grandparents.

Sharkey has always written and spoken with particular admiration of the Irish people and their struggles.

He is fond of quoting Karl Marx's comment that of all the many nations and peoples assailed by British imperialism the Irish alone had never given in.

But Sharkey never allowed his sympathy with Ireland to shrivel into narrow nationalist fanaticism. It expanded into a warm and generous sympathy for all small nations oppressed by big ones and into hatred aimed not at Britain but at the imperialism which afflicted the British as well as the Irish people.

"The English Republic met shipwreck in Ireland," Marx wrote.

The Sharkeys were poor and Lance had to leave school at the age of 14 to help support his family as well as he could from the wretchedly low pay he received as a coachmaker's apprentice in Orange.

In between jobs at this trade he swung a pick and shovel, ringbarked trees and did other work on farms and in the bush.

Soon after the war he left for Sydney, but only to be caught in the great post-war depression in which many thousands were unemployed.

This crisis of the economic system was reflected by a crisis in the mind of the young lad from the bush. A few years earlier his political activities had begun when he distributed anti-conscription leaflets in the great referenda.

Now he sought in politics the solution of a world problem which had become very personal to himself, his family and his fellow workers.

After attending Mass on a Sunday he would go on to the IWW platform in the Domain, but though he liked IWW enthusiasm he saw that fighting spirit by itself wasn't enough to shape a new social order free from unemployment.

He turned to the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin and found there what he sought—the facts about what was happening and a practical program for setting it right.

He mastered the theory of Dialectical Materialism, "the world-outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party," the fighting philosophy which, in the Marxist phrase, not only explains the world but shows how to change it.

It wasn't easy. As Marx wrote: "Science has no royal road, and only those who are not afraid of tiring themselves by climbing its steep pathways have a chance of attaining the clear light of its summits."

For L. L. Sharkey the path to the summit was strewn with rocks which only a lion-heart could have surmounted.

He educated himself in the public library, where he would go every day after searching for work until about 10 in the morning. Any spare pennies he had went into books and pamphlets. He read, in due course, the whole works of Karl Marx together with an enormous range of studies varying from the principles of agriculture to church history.

His studies have continued ever since, and what he reads he remembers and applies.

Once he had studied it, a possessor of Sharkey's passionate faith in humanity could hardly have failed to adopt the one philosophy which gives man his right place and due dignity in nature.

Never could he have been content with philosophical systems which make man the creature and plaything of uncontrollable, unknowable supernatural powers.

Lance Sharkey's philosophy shows that man can not merely control his own economic system, can not merely master the machine and free himself from capitalism's golden chains but can pass on to the mastery and the remaking of nature itself.

Sharkey's intense enthusiasm for this philosophy of liberation was reflected in his compilation of extracts from the great materialist philosophers and in lectures which by their clarity and warmth in exposition always drew big crowds of Marx School students.

No theme recurs so frequently in Sharkey's multitudinous writings as the importance of the human personality and the urgency of liberating it from capitalism's miseries and frustrations.

In *The WEA Exposed* (1944), Sharkey quotes Stalin:

"We built a Socialist society. We built this society in order that the human personality might feel really free. We built it for the sake of real personal liberty."

"Marx said that capitalism reduced the worker to 'a fragment of a man'," says Sharkey in the same work.

"In the Soviet Union, the first Socialist society, the worker is rescued from this. The workers flock to the Bolshoi theatre in Moscow, to the opera, the ballet and Shakespearean drama . . . The youth study part of the time in the factory and part of the time at school and all take part in sport and physical culture, developing healthy strong bodies as well as educated minds and tastes to become the perfect 'human personality'."

Stalin's statement that "of all the valuable capital the world possesses the most valuable and most decisive is its people" is constantly on the lips of Lance Sharkey.

He sees every political problem in terms of human personalities and how it affects them. Why the urgency, for example, with which Sharkey puts forward the Communist Party's appeal for a united front between the Communists and the Labor Party rank and file?

"Because a Labor Party leadership joined with the capitalist class in attacks on Communists, 31,123 young Australian men and women were killed," wrote Sharkey in 1946 (*Labor Betrayed*).

"That Labor Party was the German Social Democratic Party which, attacking the Communists and refusing working class unity, opened the road to power for Hitler and the Nazis.

"The 31,123 young Australians were part of the 15 millions killed, tortured, gassed and burnt by the Fascist beasts in the war."

Not to satisfy some abstract political theory has Sharkey issued his persistent calls for the unity of the workers. No—it's because lack of it cost fifteen million lives and thirty thousand of what Sharkey, as opposed to Menzies, calls Australia's most valuable capital

Such an outlook on life put Sharkey out of the Roman Catholic church but bound him in closer bonds than ever to Catholic workers despite all the efforts of the priestly caste to thrust him away from them.

"The overwhelming majority of Catholic workers are among the most loyal supporters and fighters of the Labour movement, and it is with them that the Communists want to establish the closest comradely relations in the common struggle against the exploiters," wrote Sharkey in his Reply to Father Ryan (1943).

"Despite Father Ryan, the 'outstretched hand' is, and will ever remain, a cardinal feature of the Communists' policy towards Catholic workers because the unity of the workers is the weapon by which we can proceed to achieve the liberation of all the toilers."

And it isn't only to Catholic workers but to all other workers and all friends of the working class and of human freedom that Lance Sharkey extends the outstretched hand of comradeship.

Only towards the enemies of humanity, the torturers and murderers of millions, the wielders of blackjacks and waddies against strikers, the perpetrators of world wars has Sharkey addressed sentences of furious and undying hatred.

Equipping himself with the sword and shield of Marxism, Sharkey passed straight into the front ranks of the Australian fighters for workers' emancipation.

There he has stayed ever since, a fact which distinguishes him from other prominent Leftists of the time.

H. L. Denford, R. A. King, E. J. Holloway, E. J. Ward, even J. A. Beasley — these are the names, believe it or not, which appear prominently among the (verbal) assailants of capitalism in the early twenties.

Why didn't Sharkey tread the same primrose path to comfortable berths and prominent ministerial posts? Because he lacked ability? Nobody, least of all his opponents, would say so.

Being the man he is, Sharkey never really had the option. "Of course," wrote Marx to Siegfried Meyer, "if one chose to be an ox one could turn one's back on the agonies of mankind and look after one's own skin".

Sharkey couldn't do that any more than his great teacher. The injustice to Sacco and Vanzetti, the American democratic martyrs, affected him as powerfully as Australian workers' sufferings, and he threw himself into the campaign for their release with the same energy.

Organising protest marches of Sydney unemployed and standing up to police batons, he just as staunchly championed China's oppressed millions, as the Hands Off China Committee records would show. No downtrodden section of the human race, however small or far removed from Australia, has lacked the support of Sharkey's pen and voice in his 30 years of struggle for the liberties of all.

In these early years, too, Sharkey had his first opportunity of entering the trade union movement, and quickly shone out in the Miscellaneous Workers' Union battles for some of the worst-exploited toilers. Sharkey was its Vice-President and Labor Council representative for some years. As its industrial advocate he won for the lift-drivers their first increase in years.

So it wasn't without a background of practical experience that he later wrote his booklet *The Trade Unions*, a standard work for progressive unionists today.

So widely is it read that bosses' efforts to suggest, by mangled quotations, that it is a blueprint for "undermining" free unions avail little. Tens of thousands of unionists know that the book is a call not to weaken but to strengthen the trusted citadels of the working class and safeguard them from the bourgeoisie's ceaseless attacks both from without and within.

It combats bourgeois efforts to belittle tradé unions, to crib and confine them within capitalist limits. Sharkey shows how working class ideology raises the perspective of the trade unions and gives them a vital, active role in the great transition to a working class society.

As a member of the Australian Journalists' Association, Sharkey is still an active unionist.

The going wasn't easy for militants in the Communist Party of those years. As the cases of Trotsky, Tito, Browder and others show, Communist parties have no charter of infallibility. Without constant vigilance, the capitalists' ideology can infiltrate into the foremost ranks of their opponents, and this happened to the Australian Party leadership in the "prosperous" years of 1924 to 1929.

The leadership wanted to play down the fight against the capitalists. Sharkey and his supporters and colleagues, Miles and Dixon, opposed this. When the leadership rejected the Communist International's warning of a coming depression and its call to wage a fiercer fight against capitalism, Sharkey appealed against the Australian Party bureaucracy to the leaders of world Socialism. They upheld him.

The 1929 Party Congress supported Sharkey and elected a new Central Committee. The way was clear for the Party to take the lead in the fight on behalf of the locked-out northern miners, the oppressed workers, the 200,000 unemployed who, by March 1930, slaved in "relief" camps or tramped the roads.

The dead hand of Sir Otto Niemeyer clutched at the workers' throats and was followed by the sharper claws of Colonel Eric Campbell's New Guard. Ten years earlier than most Australians, Sharkey and his closest colleagues saw and understood the menace of Fascism to his native land.

The monopolists and their slave-writers or "pen-coolies" (Sharkey's phrase) say that Communists despise and hate democracy. Lance Sharkey's speeches, writings and, better still, his actions especially over the past 10 years, are one of the best proofs that they lie.

In *The Communist Party Speaks* (1939) Sharkey wrote:

"Democracy. Marx and Engels taught, is the most suitable battleground wherein the final battles of the class struggle can be fought out between the capitalists and the workers.

"It gives the workers the opportunity of free speech, of propaganda and agitation. It presents the opportunity to build vast mass organisations, such as trade unions, to conduct strikes and other actions of the workers against the capitalists.

"Lenin has reinforced this teaching on democracy and pointed out that democracy is needed before and after the workers' victory in order that they can organise and educate themselves sufficiently for the task of winning power and then building Communist society. The task now is to expose the limitations of capitalist democracy; to expose it in reality as capitalist dictatorship; to oppose to it the slogan of Soviet democracy, at the same time struggling to maintain the legal existence of the Labour movement and the democratic rights already won by the masses."

Again in *The WEA Exposed*, he quotes Lenin: "The proletariat cannot be victorious except through democracy; that is by introducing complete democracy and by combining every step of its struggle with democratic demands formulated in the most determined manner."

Believing this, Lance Sharkey and his supporters couldn't fail to take up the challenge thrown out by the Colonel's thugs.

It became routine for Sharkey to return home bruised and bleeding; he was thrown off election-stumps and platforms and became the target for missiles and blows, but he came back for more, and nobody ever heard him call for police protection.

He didn't get any medals for all this; wounds and scars were his only decorations. But these small-scale battles against native Fascism were just as vital for Australian liberties as the anti-Fascist war of 10 years later.

Sharkey was the outstanding strategist as well as the leading front-rank fighter in the workers' resistance to the New Guard. He organised the Workers' Defence Corps which routed the Fascists and drove them from the streets.

When Sharkey went to Moscow in 1935 Fascism and the drive to a second world war had become the chief dangers facing the world.

He heard Dimitrov in a famous speech outline the People's Front strategy which democrats all over the

world were eventually able to use against Fascism with brilliant success. At this conference he was accorded the highest honor which could fall to a proletarian leader — election to the then leading organisation of the world Socialist movement, the Executive Committee of the Communist International.

Back in Australia, Sharkey threw himself into the battle against the Lyons and Menzies Governments which sought by appeasement of Fascism, the despatch of pig-iron to Japan and other craven Munich deals to persuade the robbers to admit them to a junior partnership in the coming assault on the Soviet Union.

The Communist Party, of which Sharkey was now president, continued the exposure of Menzies after the outbreak of "war" with Germany. It pointed out that Menzies' aim in the "war" which even the boss press came to call a "phoney," had nothing to do with anti-Fascism or the safety of Australia.

Menzies turned savagely on those whom he correctly recognised as the main revealers of his political treachery. His ban on the Communist Party and its press was accompanied by Gestapo-like midnight raids on homes and the seizure of literature. With Attorney General Hughes, that "monstrous gnome" of Australian politics, he proclaimed the end of Communism in Australia.

Within a few days the first illegal Tribune appeared in the factories. It was followed by the first illegal Communist Review. Editor of both papers and director of the Party's underground struggle against the dictatorship was L. L. Sharkey.

With Menzies hurled from power and legality restored to the Party, Sharkey reported:

" . . . Nor did the most intensive searching by the political police result in the discovering of the printeries or the detection of the illegal apparatus . . . During the period in which the ban remained on the party and its press, the circulation of the Communist Review was about trebled and that of the Tribune almost doubled, despite the fact that the latter's mass circulation was now confined to N.S.W."

Party membership under illegality approximately trebled.

With the ending of the war, the Communist Party's main task became to mobilise the people to preserve world peace.

Earlier than most Australians, Sharkey saw in the rise of Wall Street, spurred on by looming capitalist crisis, the new threat to Australian independence and world peace.

With his colleagues he saw that the Asian democratic movements were marked out as the first victims of Wall Street's designs and that Australia's own future as a democratic state was bound up with the achievement of Asian freedom.

Combining old-style "yellow peril" propaganda with the newer "Red menace" hysteria, the Australian reactionaries yelled for war against resurgent Asia.

Sharkey answered them fearlessly in the Communist Review:

"The Communist Party declares that Australia can live in friendship and peace with free, democratic Asian nations, and that a precondition for this is that we support their demand and struggle for national independence."

Among his favorite quotations are Marx's statements that no nation which oppresses another can itself be free and that Labor "cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

"Our Party must stand ready, as in the past, to render all possible aid to our misused brothers in the colonial countries," he wrote again.

In March, 1948, he attended the Indian Communist Party's Calcutta conference. He found that his Tribune articles criticising opportunist deviations had been of help to the Indians, and when he passed through Singapore on his way home Malayan Communists were eager to confer with him.

At the 15th Congress of the ACP he was unanimously elected General Secretary.

Soon after his return to Australia the Malayan people, deprived of liberty by Whitehall decree, their already-pitiful living standards further slashed by rising

food prices and lowered wages, rose in revolt against imperialism.

The imperialists blamed it all on Sharkey. Nothing but "instructions" brought by him could have seduced the happy Malays into revolt against their imperialist benefactors, they suggested.

Sharkey replied: "I certainly told them that a struggle for national independence, to prevent the old colonial slavery from being imposed on them, was justified and would be supported by the whole of progressive mankind.

"Such questions as when they should start an armed insurrection or whether they should start one at all . . . are a matter for the Malaysians and one in which they are much more experienced than I am, as they had a very rich experience in their heroic struggle with the Japanese occupiers.

"Those who oppose Australian intervention in Malaya have far more regard for the good name of this fair land than those who would turn us into the hangmen of the Malayan people."

From then on Sharkey was a marked man. Collins House had £25 millions invested in Malaya. It was only a question of how and when it would strike.

The "Liberals" howled like hyenas at Sharkey over their radio-sessions and in Parliament, with Lang playing the jackal as ever.

It was openly stated that the American Government had told Chifley to tighten up his "security" services. Sir Percy Sillitoe, leading British spy, arrived for conferences with Chifley. On March 2, 1949, formation of the Australian Security Service of secret under-cover agents to spy and pimp on democrats was announced.

On March 5 the Daily Telegraph rang Sharkey with some urgent questions which it demanded must be answered on the spot.

Admirers of Sharkey who don't know him very well are still inclined to think he "fell for a trap."

It would need a slightly more subtle trap than this one to deceive a seasoned campaigner.

The reporter's insistence that the loaded questions must be answered over the phone that very night (no, he couldn't wait till the morning for a considered, written statement); the inference that the Telegraph, closed to Sharkey for years, couldn't delay even another 24 hours to place his views before the public; the

flattering promise that everything would be published as given out — early indeed would Editor Penton need to rise to trap L. L. Sharkey with such snares. The duck-destroying Mrs. Bond's overtures to her intended victims were only slightly less subtle.

But Sharkey saw how the affair could be turned to the advantage of the greatest cause in the world — peace.

Marxism teaches those who believe in it to avoid useless risks, but it also teaches them to take necessary risks without flinching. The man who had for 30 years cheerfully taken necessary risks for the workers wasn't the one to draw back now.

A peace statement circulated in hundreds of thousands of copies in the warmongers' own press! A call to peace beaten out by the very wardrums themselves! Patriots have sacrificed their liberty for lesser objectives.

So this message went out to Australia and the world:

"If Soviet forces in pursuit of aggressors entered Australia, Australian workers would welcome them.

"Australian workers would welcome Soviet forces pursuing aggressors as the workers welcomed them throughout Europe when the Red troops liberated the people from the power of the Nazis.

"Invasion of Australia by forces of the Soviet Union seems very remote and hypothetical to me.

"I believe the Soviet Union will go to war only if she is attacked and if she is attacked I cannot see Australia being invaded by Soviet troops.

"The job of the Communists is to struggle to prevent war and to educate the mass of people against the idea of war.

"The Communist Party also wants to bring the working class to power; but if fascists in Australia use force to prevent the workers gaining that power, Communists will advise the workers to meet force with force."

Even when faced with the certainty of jail Sharkey never regretted his bargain. "I have no feeling of guilt for what I did. I am confident history will justify me," he told the judge.

Right up to the moment of his imprisonment Lance Sharkey carried on at his job, cheerful and confident as ever. He told his friends that anybody who fought for the working class, or for humanity, must be prepared for persecution.

"If I should have bad luck tomorrow," he said at an eve-of-trial gathering of his comrades, "all I can say is 'Carry on the fight'."

That is what his Party is now doing because its members know they fight now not only for a principle but for the liberty of a personal friend, a leader worthy of the great company of Stalin, Thaelmann, Dimitrov, Thorez and Mao Tse-tung.

When he stood in the dock, to be sentenced, a detective who had been detailed to dredge back into Sharkey's past had to admit that no previous convictions had been recorded and nothing whatever discreditable was known about him.

Considering that for years an army of spies, official and self-appointed, had been following him about for the precise purpose of unearthing something discreditable, this was praise indeed.

It was an admission, by his enemies, that the man whom the judge now sentenced to the maximum jail term in his power was a citizen of the highest moral principle.

"The Communists," he wrote in the Tribune, "do not repudiate moral principles, but on the contrary demand that these be practised."

He quoted Marx's Inaugural Address to the First International, where Marx declared that it was "the duty of the working class to vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice which ought to govern the relations of individuals as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations."

"What morality is there in slum landlordism or the open or tacit recognition of prostitution?" Sharkey asked Father Ryan.

"Capitalism has no morals, and it is this unmoral society that, in reality, the Dr. Ryans objectively defend in their savage opposition to Socialism."

In his pamphlet Reply to Father Ryan, Sharkey asks what grander, what nobler moral ideal can man have than this one given by the Soviet novelist Ostrovsky:

"Man's dearest possession is life and since it is given to him to live but once he must so live as to feel no torturing regrets for years without purpose; so live as not to be seared with the shame of a cowardly and trivial past; so live that, dying, he can say: 'All my life and all my strength were given to the finest cause in the world, the liberation of mankind.'"

"That surely, is one of the noblest and most unselfish ideals ever placed before the human race."

It is the ideal which governs every action of L. L. Sharkey.

That isn't to say he doesn't enjoy the recreations of a normal Australian.

Not because he despises the healthy pleasures of life has Sharkey followed a manner of life which has cut him off from them almost entirely.

Not because he has no use for the Australian sun, but so that it might shine on a free, prosperous and peaceful people does he lie today in a prison cell.

Not happiness itself, but the happiness that can tolerate others' misery, is what Sharkey despises and rejects as did Eugene Debs when he said: "While there is a 'lower class' I am of it; while there is a 'criminal element' I am in it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

What type of man does the working class seek to lead it in the struggle for liberation in which it is the standard-bearer for humanity as a whole?

In the Soviet elections of 1937 J. V. Stalin offered a word of advice.

"The electors, the people," he said, "must demand that their deputies should remain political figures of the Lenin type; that as public figures they should be as clear and definite as Lenin was, that they should be fearless in battle and as merciless towards the enemies of the people as Lenin was; that they should be free from all panic, from any semblance of panic when things begin to get complicated and some danger or other looms on the horizon, as Lenin was; that they should be as wise and deliberate in deciding complex problems requiring a comprehensive orientation and a comprehensive weighing of all pros and cons as Lenin was; that they should be as upright and honest as Lenin was; that they should love their people as Lenin did."

Such a man, such a leader is L. L. Sharkey.

Of such Communists did Karl Marx write: "The brotherhood of man on their lips is not a phrase but a truth and from their faces, hardened by affliction, the whole beauty of mankind looks upon us".

* * *

Mr. Great-Heart: But here was great odds, three against one.

Mr. Valiant-for-the-Truth: It is true; but little or more are nothing to him that has the truth on his side.

—The Pilgrim's Progress.