

Jim

SIX THINGS WE LEARNT FROM JIM SHARP

October 2017

Yorkshire-born, Brisbane Communist Jim Sharp died on 6th October 2017 aged eighty five years. Everyone who knew Jim will have stories about the struggles that they engaged in together – opposing wars from Indo-China to Iraq, street marches against the Petersen regime, shoulder-to-shoulder with the first peoples, for a livable city.

Here, the focus will be on six of the lessons that Jim articulated from his workplace activism as an industrial butcher.

One: no matter how militant, anyone who thinks that a fair day's pay is possible under the rule of capital has not got to first base. If Jim had a refrain that was it: there's no such thing as a fair day's pay, which he hammered home against the ACTU slogan during the Worst Choices campaign. Out of that effort, Jim saw the need to get across Marx's concept of surplus-value to explain why every worker must be exploited under capitalism. From that experience came www.surplusvalue.org.au

Two: the correct handling of scabs. Jim was very insistent that term be used correctly. Namely that scabs were those who were part of the workforce and of the decision to strike but went against that decision by accepting work, whilst strike-breakers were those who came in from outside the workforce to break the strike. Some of the strikes in the meat industry went on for weeks. Sometimes, blokes cracked under the worries about feeding the kids and paying the mortgage. These were not scum brought in to break the strike, but long-term employees. When the dispute was settled, how did you deal with the latter? The danger was that if the Union excluded them forever, it handed the boss a permanent fifth-column. Of course, the Union could not pretend that the scabs had not broken solidarity. The solution was to send them to Coventry for a few months. You spoke to them only to extent necessary to uphold safety. Then, slowly, you re-established friendly exchanges. The result, without fail, was that the erstwhile scab joined the ranks of the most committed unionists.

Three: take every occasion to highlight the moral gulf between the Union and the bosses. A top official had been stealing union funds. After being dumped from office, many of the rank-and-file wanted to expel him from the Union. In those days, without a Union ticket, he could not have worked in the industry. The Reds argued against expulsion. They insisted that the crook should never be allowed to hold any position again, not even as a delegate in a shop committee. However, they opposed his expulsion. Depriving any worker of the means to earn a livelihood is the hallmark of capitalism. Opposing expulsion was one more way to drive that message home. Jim's side won a ballot of all the members.

Four: show that workers can manage their industry by taking control of production. The bosses thought they could intensify labour if they replaced the boning tables with chain lines on which the carcasses passed from one boner to

the next. The men could see that the plan was unworkable from the bosses point of view. Following orders did indeed result in a lower output. Months later, the management came crawling to the job committee for help. The unionists agreed – but in return for a raft of improvements in their conditions. The Reds also pointed up the political lesson: workers do not need bosses. On contrary, capital is useless without the experience and wisdom accumulated in social labour.

Five: the members would always stop if the union or the works committee called them out. But they would stay out only if the leadership could convince them that the issue ‘had legs’, as Jim liked to put it. The Reds put that experience into practice in convincing the abattoirs to ‘Stop Work to Stop the War’ in 1970-71 Moratoria.

Six: skill is strength. Lots of industrial butchers aspired to be ‘gun boners’ – the fastest on the floor. Some of them supposed that success depended on muscle. They never learned that the deciding factor was not brute strength but the skill in how keenly you sharpened your knives. Jim extended this fact from the shop floor to his politics. Militancy becomes self-defeating if it remains mindless. Without the cutting-edge analysis provided by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao, how could you even begin to grasp why there can never be a fair day’s pay under capitalism?

Jim put every argument through the grinder of what he called his ‘class materialism’.

To gain the full import of these six lessons, we need to sketch the compass of Jim’s life. His mother died in childbirth leaving him to the care of his Gran. He’d left school to earn a few pence by the time he was eight years old, and so was in effect illiterate for his working life. Made redundant, and with support from his comrades, he set about educating himself. One of the first books he read was Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844. The difficulties he faced in comprehending some of its finer points, he said, were as nothing compared with how its passages ‘spoke to me’ as an alienated wage-slave. About this time, Jim began to write, starting with political Haiku, before publishing a collection of poems in 2010, *Left Side*. www.surplusvalue.org.au PLUS URL DETAILS There is no better way to empathise with the trajectory of his struggles than from reading ‘Handheld tools’: