SEARCH FOUNDATION

LEST WE FORGET:

Acknowledging Anti-War and Anti-Militarist Activism in Australia

Bob Makinson

COVER: 'Guernica' by Pablo Picasso, painted in 1937, is one of the most famous and effective anti-war paintings in history. It was his response to the obliteration by the German and Italian fascist air forces of the town of Guernica, in the Basque country of northern Spain, during the Spanish Civil War. This image is of a tapestry adaptation of the painting by Atelier J. de la Baume-Durrbach, which hangs in the United Nations Building in New York.

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Foreword

The SEARCH Foundation exists to nurture socialist and broader progressive ideas. To learn from the struggles of the past, and to apply those lessons to the urgent challenges of the present. That is precisely what Bob Makinson offers in the pages that follow.

This pamphlet began as two spoken acknowledgements—one to a gathering of SEARCH peace activists in Sydney, another to the broader 'Peace is Union Business' conference in Melbourne. Bob has since woven them into a single, compelling narrative. It is at once a memorial, a political education, and a quiet call to action.

Too often, the Australian peace movement suffers from a kind of historical amnesia. We know the major events—the conscription referenda, the Vietnam moratoriums, the Palm Sunday rallies—but we have forgotten many of the people who made that history possible. We have forgotten the Quakers and WILPF members who built the earliest anti-war formations. We have forgotten the wharfies who refused to load pig iron for Japan's wars. We have forgotten the mothers of Save Our Sons, and the mutineers of the First World War, and the nuclear disarmament activists who built suburban peace organisations in the darkest years of the Cold War.

Bob reminds us of these forebears, not as museum pieces, but as sources of courage and strategy. He does not romanticise them. He acknowledges their blind spots, their dogmatisms, their defeats. But he insists that we are custodians of a tradition, and that we dishonour it if we fail to learn from both its victories and its mistakes.

That tradition speaks directly to our present moment. War danger is acute. Australia is being dragged deeper into great-power rivalries. And the peace movement, for all its passion, remains fragmented.

That is why the SEARCH Foundation is asking a crucial question: is the time right for a broad national coalition for peace? Not a replacement for existing groups, but a common vehicle capable of shifting public debate and enabling political action.

This pamphlet does not answer that question for us. But it provides something indispensable—a clear-eyed sense of where we have come from, and what we carry with us. I commend it to you.

Read it. Discuss it. And then let us talk about what comes next.

Adam Rorris
President, SEARCH Foundation

Lest we forget:

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Bob Makinson

The following paper is a synthesis of two opening 'Acknowledgement' talks given in 2025, one to a meeting of SEARCH Foundation peace activists in Sydney, and another at a broader 'Peace is Union Business' conference in Melbourne. Those talks had two purposes. First, to acknowledge and commemorate those who resisted war and militarism before us. Second, to think about what their experience offers us today, as we face a new period of acute war danger.

The names of these anti-war activists are rarely on official memorials, and they were never honoured by a pro-war establishment. But their names live in memories and in the records of the movements and organisations of which they were part. Hardly any are named here, there are just too many, but there are rich histories yet to be written.

I write as someone who came of age politically in the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposing the Vietnam War, and as a former member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA 1920–1991). I acknowledge how much I owe to comrades of various parties, and of none, only a few of whom I have had the privilege to know.

BM, April 2026.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners, their custodianship of land and culture, their living traditions, and the First Nations presence in all of the different places on unceded lands, from which we come.

I am from Sydney. In the early days of that colony, from 1792 to 1804, some Cadigal people, survivors of the smallpox epidemic of 1789, joined with their Bidjigal and other Dharug kin from a bit further out, under the military leadership of Pemulwuy. They were part of the first military actions – the first resistance war – after the European arrival. It was an anti-colonial war, the first of many in this country, all of them still denied by the same political and cultural vested interests who tell us which aspects of war and peace may and may not be remembered, and how we may and may not commemorate them. They want us to forget that the Australian Wars ever happened, and to obliterate any memory or interpretation of that history other than their own.

Interestingly, those First Nations fighters of the Sydney area were alert to the political dynamics of the newcomers, and were prepared to utilise them.

They were receptive to some escaped convicts, both English and Irish (and some of those were recent veterans of the Irish uprising of 1798), and they had nuanced non-hostile interactions with some of the other colonists. Collaboration across the lines arises from common interests.

With all respect to those First Nations resisters, I'd also like to acknowledge and honour some other people in our collective history, people with particular relevance for us today trying to find the means to prevent the accelerating slide to war and to change the global system that drives war, neocolonialism, and militarism.

In the words of the song, 'we are travelling in the footsteps of the ones who've gone before'. We need to acknowledge our forebears more than we do, to draw from the courage and experience and insights of past peace activists and organisations both here and overseas, and recognise that we too are custodians of a tradition, and trustees of a cause.

Lest we forget.

1890 – 1914

The earliest organised 'peace' formations prepared to swim against the colonial tide in Australia emerged in the 1890s and early 1900s. They were not all, or even mostly, left-wing or labour movement groups in any clear political sense. The peace movement has always been more than the Left.

So, I'd like to acknowledge two of the early organisations active for peace that are still with us today.

I acknowledge the Society of Friends, the Quakers, who had been religious dissenters in Britain, and advocates of both peace in Europe and the abolition of slavery. They were active anti-militarists, and advocates for the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which were parallel treaties to the now better-known Geneva Conventions. The Quakers, in small numbers, had something of a national presence across eastern Australia by the late 19th century, and were significant players in the period leading up to the First World War. There is good material on their website about the peace movement of that period, as well as contemporary anti-militarism resources, including a new report on Australia's role in the arms trade.

And I'd like to acknowledge WILPF, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, founded in 1915 overseas, and from 1920 in Australia. WILPF has been a constant presence in the peace movement down to the present day. They too have been consistent peace activists for over a century and produce good resources.

Australia has, as we all know, a track record of subcontracting its mercenary services, and the lives of its youth, for the benefit of our imperial sponsors. Australians fought in the Māori Wars in New Zealand in the 19th Century. But the first grand adventure was in the Second Boer War of 1899 to 1902, where about 25,000 Australians fought for the British Empire in South Africa. This war saw the British become only the second nation in modern history to use concentration camps – the first being the Spanish in Cuba.

I acknowledge the Australian opponents of involvement in the Boer War, including the relatively respectable Peace and Humanity Society formed in Victoria in 1900, and the Anti-War League in Sydney. Opponents of that war also ranged across a wide mix of republicans and Australian nationalists (many of them Irish, many of them racists), and small radical socialist nuclei influenced by the Second International's anti-war and anti-militarist stance.

That overseas socialist influence was strengthened in the following years by the growth of unionism, and by the seven-year whirlwind presence in Australia of the British trade unionist Tom Mann, from 1902 to 1909. Tom Mann was initially active in the Victorian ALP but later he co-founded the Victorian Socialist Party, and later still was a foundation member of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

His focus in Australia was on industrial issues and labour movement political representation, but he also preached anti-militarism, and was heard.

In the international dimension we should also acknowledge Friedrich Engels, who in 1887 – a whole quarter of a century before the outbreak of the First World War – made one of the most far-sighted predictions in the whole socialist canon. It is worth quoting at length:

> *"And, finally, the only war left for Prussia-Germany to wage will be a world war, a world war moreover of an extent and violence hitherto unimagined. Eight to ten million soldiers will be at each other's throats and in the process they will strip Europe barer than a swarm of locusts. The depredations of the Thirty Years' War compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent; famine, disease, the universal lapse into barbarism, both of the armies and the people, in the wake of acute misery, irretrievable dislocation of our artificial system of trade, industry and credit, ending in universal bankruptcy, collapse of the old states and their conventional political wisdom to the point where crowns will roll into the gutters by the dozen, and no one will be around to pick them up; the absolute impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will emerge as victor from the battle. Only one consequence is absolutely certain: universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class."*

This remarkable prediction came appallingly true – except for the very last item. That remains unfinished business!

I acknowledge two other socialists of the time who in similarly stark terms correctly characterised the ultimate choice that faced the world then, and now. Karl Kautsky coined the phrase 'Socialism or Barbarism' in 1892; and Rosa Luxembourg gave it new life in her anti-war tract 'The Junius Pamphlet' of 1915. It became a watchword of several socialist currents. Socialism, or barbarism.

1914 – 1918

It can be argued that the fundamental event of the 20th century was not the Russian Revolution, but the catastrophic event that preceded it: the First World War. Engels' prediction was proved, in horrible detail. Some 40 million dead (plus 50–100 million more in the associated famines and the Spanish Flu epidemic).

How much human potential the world lost, in that useless war, a war for the benefit only of class elites in competing empires.

This was the war that proved the socialist thesis that capitalism, even when globally triumphant, inevitably leads to war, and is the enemy of humanity. It was the war that also blew apart the labour and socialist movements of the day along

Melbourne answers 'No' to Prime Minister Billy Hughes' attempt to introduce military conscription for the First World War.

their lines of weakness – subordination to national capitalist interests and their version of patriotism. It was the war that completely reshaped Europe right at the pinnacle of its global supremacy, and saw the collapse of thousand-year-old power blocs into new political forms, including the first serious attempt at a socialist state.

The phrase 'Lest we forget' holds a very different meaning for us than it does for the chauvinists, who still, a century on, viciously persecute any account of that war other than their own. And so, I acknowledge the truth-tellers of recent years, relentlessly hounded for challenging that myth – some have lost their jobs and careers through doing so.

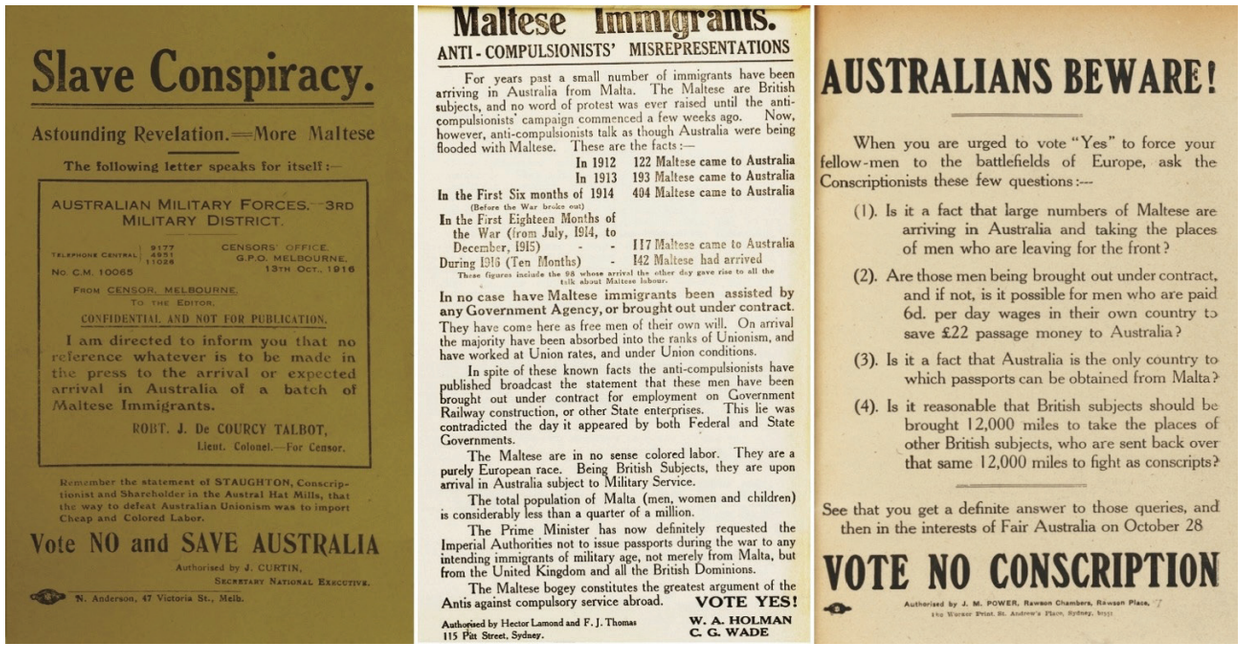
We should acknowledge and never forget all the millions needlessly dead from that most useless of all wars, and the lessons that they left behind.

I acknowledge the war-resisters and conscientious objectors of the First World War, whose lives were blighted by their stand for principle.

I acknowledge Vida Goldstein and the radical pacifist Women's Peace Army, formed in Melbourne in 1915.

I acknowledge all those who in Australia worked and voted to defeat the two Conscription Referenda of 1916 and 1917.

I acknowledge the mutineers in the Australian Imperial Force, in training camps at Casula in 1915 and in France in 1917, and in multiple active-service units on the Western Front in 1918. They had had a gutful, and had the courage to say, 'no more'. As did many more mutineers in the British, French, German, Austrian, Italian, and Russian armies in the same conflict, many of whom were shot for doing so.



Slave Conspiracy.

Astounding Revelation.—More Maltese

The following letter speaks for itself:—

AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES.—3RD MILITARY DISTRICT.

TELEPHONE CENTRAL 9177 4851 11026

CENSORS' OFFICE. G.P.O. MELBOURNE. 13TH OCT., 1916

No. C.M. 10065

FROM CENSOR, MELBOURNE. TO THE EDITOR.

CONFIDENTIAL AND NOT FOR PUBLICATION.

I am directed to inform you that no reference whatever is to be made in the press to the arrival or expected arrival in Australia of a batch of Maltese Immigrants.

ROBT. J. De COURCY TALBOT, Lieut. Colonel.—For Censor.

Remember the statement of STAUGHTON, Conscriptionist and Shareholder in the Austral Hat Mills, that the way to defeat Australian Unionism was to import Cheap and Colored Labor.

Vote NO and SAVE AUSTRALIA

Authorised by J. CURTIN, SECRETARY NATIONAL EXECUTIVE.

N. Anderson, 47 Victoria St., Melb.

Maltese Immigrants.

ANTI-COMPULSIONISTS' MISREPRESENTATIONS

For years past a small number of immigrants have been arriving in Australia from Malta. The Maltese are British subjects, and no word of protest was ever raised until the anti-compulsionists' campaign commenced a few weeks ago. Now, however, anti-compulsionists talk as though Australia were being flooded with Maltese. These are the facts:—

In 1912	122 Maltese came to Australia
In 1913	193 Maltese came to Australia
In the First Six months of 1914 (Before the War broke out)	404 Maltese came to Australia
In the First Eighteen Months of the War (from July, 1914, to December, 1915)	117 Maltese came to Australia
During 1916 (Ten Months)	142 Maltese had arrived

These figures include the 98 whose arrival the other day gave rise to all the talk about Maltese labour.

In no case have Maltese immigrants been assisted by any Government Agency, or brought out under contract. They have come here as free men of their own will. On arrival the majority have been absorbed into the ranks of Unionism, and have worked at Union rates, and under Union conditions.

In spite of these known facts the anti-compulsionists have published broadcast the statement that these men have been brought out under contract for employment on Government Railway construction, or other State enterprises. This lie was contradicted the day it appeared by both Federal and State Governments.

The Maltese are in no sense colored labor. They are a purely European race. Being British Subjects, they are upon arrival in Australia subject to Military Service.

The total population of Malta (men, women and children) is considerably less than a quarter of a million.

The Prime Minister has now definitely requested the Imperial Authorities not to issue passports during the war to any intending immigrants of military age, not merely from Malta, but from the United Kingdom and all the British Dominions.

The Maltese bogey constitutes the greatest argument of the Antis against compulsory service abroad.

VOTE YES!

W. A. HOLMAN
C. G. WADE

Authorised by Hector Lamond and F. J. Thomas 115 Pitt Street, Sydney.

AUSTRALIANS BEWARE!

When you are urged to vote "Yes" to force your fellow-men to the battlefields of Europe, ask the Conscriptionists these few questions:—

(1). Is it a fact that large numbers of Maltese are arriving in Australia and taking the places of men who are leaving for the front?

(2). Are those men being brought out under contract, and if not, is it possible for men who are paid 6d. per day wages in their own country to save £22 passage money to Australia?

(3). Is it a fact that Australia is the only country to which passports can be obtained from Malta?

(4). Is it reasonable that British subjects should be brought 12,000 miles to take the places of other British subjects, who are sent back over that same 12,000 miles to fight as conscripts?

See that you get a definite answer to those queries, and then in the interests of Fair Australia on October 28

VOTE NO CONSCRIPTION

Authorised by J. M. POWER, Rawson Chambers, Rawson Place, 180 Worker Print. St. Andrew's Place, Sydney.

In the 1916 and 1917 referenda on conscription, both the Yes and No sides made unashamed use of racist arguments and imagery.

I acknowledge the service personnel who returned from the First World War, so many of them traumatised or maimed; I met a few as a boy, 50 years on.

Having seen hell, many of them returned with deep anti-war convictions. I acknowledge all the wrenching conflicts of felt loyalties and life experience that they underwent during the war and afterwards – including, for the veterans who were vocally anti-war, repressive gagging by government and ex-service organisations.

We should all acknowledge the hundreds of Australians, and tens of thousands around the globe, who in the years immediately after the First World War chose to break completely with old loyalties to country, King, religion, and party, and to affirm a new, higher loyalty – to humanity at large, and to the world's working class, across the old barriers of nation and ethnicity. Many tens of thousands of returned soldiers and civilians held a straightforward 'never again' pacifist viewpoint; many others committed to radical social change, in an attempt to cut off the war drive at its roots. Their decision shaped the politics of the rest of the century.

We should acknowledge and share their hard-won understanding that aggressive war is intrinsic to capitalism in the real world, and that it is working people who always pay the price, in blood, treasure, and trauma. And that a fundamental, central task of socialists is to oppose all attempts by imperialist and capitalist countries to wage war. That was bred in the bone of internationalist socialists from 1870 on, and reaffirmed in blood by the First World War.

1919 – 1945

It is a military adage that the lessons of the last war are an unreliable guide to the next, and the same is true in political struggle. And so, most of those immovably anti-war pacifists, and socialists, soon found that after all things were more complicated. There were multiple ethno-national wars in the wake of the World War, in eastern Europe and elsewhere in the ruins of the old empires. There was extensive war across the territories of the former Russian empire as remnants of the old regime and their overseas allies tried to strangle the new socialist state at birth.

And before long there were new anti-colonial and national liberation wars – relatively few at first, but aggression by Japan against China, and by Italy against Abyssinia (Ethiopia), were early cases with international impact, as was the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39.

Socialists and some progressive unions, here and overseas, worked to frustrate the aggressors in some of these wars, and of course Australian volunteers fought against fascism in Spain.

Within Australia, perhaps the best-remembered union solidarity action of the 1930s was the refusal by Port Kembla wharfies in late 1938 to load pig iron onto the *SS Dalfram*. The *Dalfram* was bound

Returning International Brigaders were welcomed at a Perth railway station in 1939. (Supplied: State Library of Western Australia b2377462_6)

for Japan, and the pig iron would be used for war material in Japan's brutal invasion of China. But union bans on cargoes for Japanese militarism had actually started a year before, in 1937 with the *SS Silksworth* in Newcastle, where both the working conditions of Chinese mariners and the shipment of war materials were at issue. Similar bans continued both before and after the *Dalfram*. Some sources indicate that these solidarity actions also led to direct dialogue between the trade union movement and Chinese-Australians, although the documentation is scanty – but that same line of dialogue is an urgent need today as Australia allows itself to be dragged towards war with China. Solidarity is needed at home as well as overseas.

By the late 1930s, anti-war activists and progressive unions in Australia were navigating a complex political maze, caught between advocating re-armament against pending fascist aggression, and seeking to frustrate both imperial and domestic war-mongering. All while dealing with the cynical zig-zags of Soviet policy.

Hard choices, back then. They only seem straightforward in hindsight.

And before long those activists of the 1930s were completely confounded by history, and found that there were some exceptional circumstances – the global threat of fascist barbarism – that justified a military convergence with some of the capitalist powers after all, as perilous as that road was to be. The great majority of Australian and world socialists worked and fought within that global alliance, at least from June 1941, for the military defeat of fascism, achieved at catastrophic cost.

1946 – 1965

So we should acknowledge the courage and suffering of that anti-fascist generation, and respect the dedication and resilience with which the socialist and labour movement survivors of the Second World War , having won that struggle, almost immediately faced the threat of yet another global war as the victorious Great Powers sought to prevent domestic political upheaval and at the same time engage in a mad scramble to manage a world-wide colonial system that was beginning to crumble.

We can acknowledge and understand the belief of most communists of the 1940s and early 1950s, in the wake of the anti-fascist war, that identified 'peace' wholly and unconditionally not simply with defence of the Soviet Union, but with defence of every twist and turn of Soviet policy – even while we, looking back, know that this was a trap to be avoided. And we must acknowledge that some, many, knew it at the time.

But we must at the same time acknowledge and respect the dedication and creativity with which that post-War generation of communists, ALP socialists, and others, nevertheless built

an active peace movement in Australia under far more adverse political conditions than we face today.

That generation were the first to face the qualitatively new threat to humanity that came with atomic weapons, nuclear weapons. It was the political left and the progressive unions that did more than anyone else to bring the threat of nuclear war into public consciousness.

As part of the international 'peace front' and the Ban The Bomb movement, they kept up a challenge which unquestionably hampered the capitalist war drive of the 1950s and 1960s.

Those activists were constrained by the Cold War and the domestic political repression of the 1950s, and by schisms in the labour movement and dogmatism. They were nevertheless able to build a solid but rather narrowly based movement that could survive and have an influence under those conditions.

They also established a core understanding about nuclear weapons that needs to be stressed again today – that these are genuine weapons of mass destruction, with no purpose other than to kill millions of ordinary people who have never hurt us, and who are just like us.

If you doubt that, read Daniel Ellsberg's 2017 book *The Doomsday Machine – Confessions of a nuclear war planner*.

Daniel Ellsberg was in the 1960s a US Defence consultant, best known for leaking the Pentagon Papers in 1971, which exposed the lies behind the American war in Vietnam. But long before that, he had been a top-level American nuclear war planner.

In 2017, in his nineties, he wrote:

> *"One day in the spring of 1961 … I was shown how our world would end. Not the earth itself … but the destruction of most cities and people in the northern hemisphere … [It] was a single sheet of paper with a simple graph … I had never before seen [a document] marked 'For the President's Eyes Only'. And I never did again."*

The document was an answer to President Kennedy from the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kennedy had asked the military chiefs

> *"If your plans for general war [i.e. a nuclear war] are carried out as planned, how many people will be killed in the Soviet Union and China?"*

The answer, on that simple graph, was an immediate death toll of 275 million people in the Soviet bloc and China. And, by six months later when fallout had kicked in, a total of 375 million. This would represent success. This was the known consequence of the single existing US general nuclear war plan – a total war of extermination. And there was no Plan B.

Ellsberg then commissioned a follow-up question to the JCS, asking for a further estimate of death toll taking in all the other countries – many of them US allies, or declared neutrals in the Cold

The call for a Nuclear Free Pacific became a major goal of the peace movement of the late 1970s and 1980s in both Australia and New Zealand, but its genesis was much earlier, as seen in this image of a Communist Party of Australia contingent in a peace march in College St, Sydney, c. 1960–62. (Image courtesy of Peter Robertson).

War – who would be affected.

Ellsberg relates the answer that came back:

> *"The total death toll as calculated by the Joint Chiefs, from a US first strike aimed at the Soviet Union, its Warsaw Pact satellites, and China, would be roughly six hundred million dead. A hundred holocausts."*

That is without the effect of return strikes by the other side, and before Nuclear Winter was even a concept.

He went on:

> *"I myself at that time was not a critic of the explicit logic of [nuclear] deterrence or its legitimacy … But the planned slaughter of hundreds of millions … exposed a dizzying … insanity at the heart and soul of our nuclear planning apparatus."*

And he concluded (in 2017):

> *"... Most aspects of the US nuclear planning system and force readiness that became known to me half a century ago still exist today, as prone to catastrophe as ever but on a scale, as now known to environmental scientists, looming vastly larger than was understood then."*

So, I acknowledge Daniel Ellsberg, who died a couple of years ago. After he got righteous, he redeemed himself in spades and rendered great service to the peace movement.

And of course, not just the US but every other nuclear-armed power made, and still makes, the same sort of cynical, anti-human calculations, if not all on the same scale. This is still the calculus of the nuclear-armed powers, even if now they envisage 'limited' nuclear exchanges, with death tolls 'only' in the high tens or lower hundreds of millions.

These are not weapons for fighting opposing armies. They are weapons for destroying cities and nations and civilisations.

So here in Australia, let's acknowledge those clear-eyed activists of the Cold War period who understood this threat, even though they hadn't seen the President's memo.

They did not have uniform success. They challenged Australian involvement in the Korean War and the so-called Malayan Emergency, but came nowhere near winning those issues politically.

But it was nevertheless in this period – perhaps the most politically repressive in Australia's history – that a narrowly based but solid and durable peace movement was built, largely around the global threat of general, nuclear war. Trade unions were an integral part of it, among other sectors.

Let's remember and acknowledge the unions and union members – teachers, wharfies, seamen, brickies, and others – who made peace 'union business' in those years. Many, many union champions made that slogan real. Some were prominent leaders, like Sam Lewis of the NSW Teachers Federation. Most were delegates or rank-and-file members who made anti-war activity a natural part of their social and workplace lives.

The phrase itself – Peace is Union Business – was widely taken up in the period of the Vietnam War. But its origin seems to have been in Newcastle in 1959, or at least that was when it first gained real currency. In his 1973 memoir What's Left, lifelong activist Eric Aarons wrote that in 1959

> *"... a big peace conference [in Melbourne] was being organised for the end of the year ... The Boilermaker's Union elected its Assistant Secretary Ray Miller as one of its delegates, but BHP refused him time off to attend",* even though BHP usually gave

delegates time off for union representational purposes.

"BHP said that the peace conference was not union business ... The company's stance made peace union business in a bigger way than we could have hoped for. Miller attended the conference ... and was then suspended by management for being absent without leave ... All the maintenance workers walked out in solidarity ... the strike forced BHP to reinstate Miller, and gave a real boost to ... efforts to establish job organisation in the steelworks."

So let us acknowledge Ray Miller, and the Boilermakers Union, later part of the AMWU.

1966 – 1972

In the early 1960s it was not at all obvious that the Cold War had thawed much, or that conditions were any better for the growth of a peace movement which had only been able to enjoy some 'defensive success', as Alec Robertson put it in a 1970 article reviewing the history of the CPA in the peace movement.

That began to change with the Vietnam War, more properly the Indochina War. Cultural change, generational change, and the near-miss of the Cuban Missile Crisis all came together to erode the credibility of the Cold War mind-set, and the emergence across Australia of a new generation of both activists and leaders of left and progressive organisations helped to change the Australian political and cultural landscape quite suddenly.

As Alec Robertson wrote in 1970:

"... big-scale intervention [i.e. of the US and Australia in Vietnam in 1965] ... *fundamentally changed the situation of the Australian anti-war movement, which thenceforth was operating in a country with a military combat involvement in a clear-cut, imperialist, counter-revolutionary war. The "theoretical" anti-war struggles of the previous 15 years were finished. And because Vietnam also brought with it the spread of dissent, youthful scepticism and radicalisation, and the emergence of significant left groups other than the CPA itself, 1965 also meant that the long night of CPA defencism was ending."*

Alec also acknowledged the relative decline of CPA preponderance in that movement as the other forces grew, but he noted the increase in the quality of the CPA's work and influence as it moved rapidly to an independent stance across the board – that is, independent from the USSR, and from some of its own previous practice – and opened itself to new forces and energy from below.

'Save Our Sons' was a movement of mothers that was an important element of the movement against the Vietnam War.

And Alec dwelt at some length on the complexity facing socialists in encouraging and fostering a broad movement, its evolving organisational forms, its conflicting priorities and slogans, while at the same time trying to avoid the many traps that beset such a movement – and all the while seeking to project a non-dogmatic socialist view of war, militarism and imperialism into a very non-socialist context.

Withdrawal from the war and distancing Australia from the US were arguments that had to be won over time, not simply asserted, in order to build a peace movement capable of forcing change. Australian troops were involved – always a serious complication, especially when so many in the Australian population at that time, and in the unions, were themselves veterans, or children of veterans, of earlier conflicts. "We have to support our troops" remains a potent argument.

So, when the Waterside Workers Federation struck in 1965 to protest the Australian involvement in the war, they were out on their own. And when the then-Seamen's Union of Australia refused to man the munitions ships Boonaroo and Jeparit at various times between 1966 and 1969, they did not get automatic support from other unions, and indeed had to back off themselves on some occasions. In other sectors there was similar limited action. You do what you can; you push the envelope when you can. And each time you push the envelope, you do it in a way that makes room for more people. But it was not until 1969 that a much wider range of individual unions, especially in

Victoria and Queensland, were able to take a strong collective stand.

That uncertainty among unions about how to respond to the war reflected similar differences within the peace movement as a whole, and the wider society. There was uneven receptivity across the Australian population to the anti-war message, and – correspondingly – an uneven transition of peace activist thinking from a defensive mindset into an era of more open possibilities. The radical Left was finally able to more freely argue its general position, that this was an imperialist, counter-revolutionary war, and elaborate what that meant to itself and to find more people listening.

But there was uncertainty about how to best oppose the war with real effect – there were strong advocates for both caution and audacity. Should the main focus be on the barbarity of the US intervention (which became clearer every day for years on end)? Or should it be on the conscription of boys too young to vote, but old enough to kill and be killed? Was it more important to press the whole movement to adopt an analysis of imperialism, or to work within a limited consensus on Australian national self-interest? There was a lot of name-calling within the movement – and a lot of posturing.

The reality of course was that the anti-war movement had to live with and use these differing strategies and tactics and organisational forms, and conflicting priorities and slogans, while at the same time trying to avoid the many political traps. It had to negotiate with itself, and find some level of tolerance for differences, all the while projecting a common set of core values and demands, and keeping a clear eye on the external political environment which was its entire reason for existence – the people yet to be convinced, or yet to be reached. That meant that the radical Left had to decide when to push its full agenda, and when to live within, and genuinely support, movement goals and forms that were less than its ideals.

It was not as though the radical Left had nothing to learn. Its own culture was slow to change. As one activist of the period wrote, "Not everybody wants to go to meetings every week: the idea that democracy consists of interminable meetings is not a democracy for women with children". The broader lesson of that comment is: activists must never forget the people who don't come to meetings, the ones who aren't in the room. We hold the movement in trust for them too.

I acknowledge those hundreds of activists who did nevertheless take years off their lives in endless strategy sessions to find the formulae and compromises that worked.

I acknowledge all those who didn't go to meetings, but who stood up to protest against the Vietnam War. They made the difference.

As the movement did at the time, I acknowledge the conscientious objectors, and the active draft-resisters.

Conscription, and the rapid expansion of the tertiary education sector, with considerable freedom of organisation on campus, were both huge factors in the Vietnam period.

I acknowledge too the mothers who formed the Save Our Sons anti-conscription organisation.

I acknowledge also the military veterans who organised against the Indochina war – a part of the movement that was much larger in the USA than here in Australia, but an important one to bear in mind in the current situation.

Why do we not celebrate the courage and roles of these war resisters every year? Why have we not erected more of our own anti-war memorials and commemorative events?

1973 – 2026

The energy unleashed by the Vietnam struggle defined and invigorated two political generations in Australia, and is not quite exhausted yet.

A new, large generation of young people, many of them with experience of the anti-war protests, moved from the inner cities to the suburbs, or from the cities to regional centres and areas. Many took their politics with them, and this opened possibilities down to the present day, and laid a basis for the peace movement's regional resurgence in the 1980s.

The years from 1972 to 1980 did see a collapse of the ad hoc, largely unstructured broad peace movement alliances of the Vietnam War period. As so often with protest-based movements, we were not good at building for permanence. There was a lot of rebuilding to be done when the acute threat of nuclear war ramped up again in the Reagan period as the US found its bearings after their Vietnam defeat, and a very sharp threat of nuclear war emerged very rapidly. But the movement's slump had been short enough that we didn't quite have to start again from scratch, and I'd like to acknowledge that hard core of experienced peace activists across many organisations who pulled things together again within a short span of years and built an even bigger and broader alliance.

And other things had been happening that helped the movement to regroup. For one thing, the campuses were still active, although the student movement and its Left had taken some severe hits. But on-campus and off, two new movements had emerged, unleashing a lot of growth-oriented energy: the second-wave feminist movement, and the parallel environment movement (especially, in Australia, the anti-uranium mining movement).

So, let's acknowledge all those movements and their activists, because what became a huge nuclear disarmament mobilisation by the mid-1980s could not have occurred without them.

Massive Palm Sunday rallies for peace and a nuclear free Australia were a feature of the movement in the early 1980s – this image is of the Palm Sunday march in Hobart on 31st March 1985. These marches were built on sustained local organising in suburbs and regional towns across the country.

And I acknowledge, those in the 'Old Left', and crucially in the slowly dying CPA, who had the guts and insight to reverse their previous vaguely pro-nuclear power policy, to work to unite the energies of those new movements and the more classical peace organisations, and to take on and help win the fight for 'Disarmament East and West' as the movement's dominant line, despite trenchant opposition from the pro-Soviet wing. The resulting broad nuclear disarmament coalition brought hundreds of thousands of people into demonstrations in 1982 – 85 (at peak, an estimated 200,000 people in the Sydney Palm Sunday rallies). Equally importantly, it stimulated the emergence of a wave of semi-autonomous peace organisations in suburbs and regional centres across much of Australia, including in places that had seen no overt left-wing activity since the early 1950s. This left a legacy far more durable than any central demonstration alone could do. It is another key lesson – take the movement to where people are, and can be their own organisers, don't just expect them to come to you all the time.

Now: 2026 – What We Take From This History

So now we are in 2026, after a long period of retreat and fragmentation for the Australian Left. To work with, we have a large social reservoir of anti-war sentiment outside the organised Left and for the most part only loosely (if at all) affiliated to any organisation. We have many small long-term anti-war and nuclear disarmament organisations, all with slightly different focus or missions, all trying to find traction in the new period of acute war danger. We have a very large and vocal base of people outraged by the situation in Gaza, the West Bank, and now the wider Middle East – a base that cuts right across the older peace movement's generation gap, and across some (not all) of the ethnic-origin divides in the community.

Demonstrations, even occasionally very large demonstrations, are possible, as we saw in 2003 on Iraq, and in 2025 on the Gaza War. These will only have real political effect if we are able to follow through with organisation that makes the movement stronger away from such events as well. People go home after a demo, and we have to ask what do they take with them, apart from the experience of the day, good or bad? We are not yet doing enough to help them build organisation in their suburb, their workplace, their school. A strong and durable anti-war movement is more than calling demo after demo.

We need flexible, inclusive organisations embedded in the community and workforce, able to hold open and respectful internal and external discussions about directions and tactics. We need to win unions, faith groups, and other civic organisations to a wide coalition (and for real effect it will not be one that carries a full left-wing agenda).

We need to arrive at clear common goals and demands to governments and political parties, which those who are not yet our supporters can get behind and that hit the lines of political and social weakness in the pro-war front.

Finding the formulae that blend elements of the militant and the broad, in aims and slogans and tactics, is a dynamic and tricky thing. There is room for complex arguments and ideologies to contend (and we have ours and will advance them). But we acknowledge and respect our allies enough not to turn this into competition for small partisan gains, or to impose militancy on those not ready to accept it.

Peace is everybody's business because war is the worst thing possible for working people and for human progress.

Peace is everybody's business because the threat of general and catastrophic war is imminent, and under current policies, Australia is helping it to come about.

That is why the SEARCH Foundation supports the development of a broad national coalition for peace – not to replace existing groups, but to do together what none of us can do alone.

We acknowledge those who went before us on this path, and we will not forget them.

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