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Mervyn Percy Copley 1914 – 1978

Merv Copley was born in Western Australia in 1914. On leaving school he joined the Public Service in that state, becoming a clerk of Petty Sessions and serving as secretary to two Royal Commissions. Disturbed by the poverty and injustices he saw on a daily basis during the Great Depression, he became interested in Socialism and gave up a promising career to become an organiser for the Clerks Union. After he joined the Communist Party of Australia he moved to Sydney, then to Newcastle in 1948 where he worked as an organiser for the Clerks Union and latter as a tally clerk on the waterfront.

Merv was an activist all his adult life. He was an honorary research officer for Newcastle Trades Hall Council for many years amassing a huge amount of statistical and other material along the way. One of the many campaigns in which he took a leading role was in the struggle to reduce air pollution in Newcastle during the 1950s. At this time it was so bad that it was a real danger to people's health. His booklet 'Eliminate that Smoke', published in 1957, made a significant contribution to the campaign which eventually forced the NSW Government to strengthen legislation regarding air and water pollution despite prolonged opposition from BHP and other big polluters.

In all his campaigns, Merv was assisted by his partner, Janet. Both of them helped organise International Women's Day and May Day celebrations in Newcastle during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. In a letter to Vera Deacon in 1993, Janet Copley described how they worked together:

"I gathered a lot of material for him from Trade Union Offices. About 4 pm on Fridays I took the shopping trolley to the Trades Hall and visited the Trades Hall Council, the Water Board, and The Seamen's Union office etc, and picked up the daily papers and Hansards they had finished with and brought them home for Merv to dissect them. We worked during meal time with Merv clipping the various papers and Janet with a lead pencil in her hand recording the dates and the paper or book from which they had been out."

Some of the ephemeral material, such as pamphlets, leaflets and election material, which Merv and Janet collected would otherwise have vanished completely. It has now found a permanent home in the Archives of the University of Newcastle.

Ross Edmonds
July 2010

Sources

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BACKGROUND RESEARCH MATERIAL:

Being the background writings, correspondence, and research material for the Copley diaries and for 'Small Boy in a Sunburnt Country'.

C392 Copley Folder 1932 – 1960

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