

Cybèle Locke

*Comrade: Bill Andersen—A Communist, Working-Class Life*

Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2022, 412pp

## A Striking History

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It was with a mix of excitement and trepidation that I started reading Cybèle Locke's *Comrade* soon after its publication in late 2022. Excitement because Locke's reputation as a rigorous historical researcher precedes her and this had been a long, heartfelt project on her part; trepidation because Bill Andersen had been a difficult character to deal with through much of my earlier political life. From my earliest activist days in the Progressive Youth Movement and Resistance Bookshop, through to the Springbok Tour, and then the fraught divisions within the unemployed workers' movement of the 1980s, Andersen had been on the opposite side of many of the debates and struggles in which I was involved. As well as ideological factors, his position as a dominant and dominating male union leader was alienating in the extreme to those of us on the feminist and socialist Left looking for new ways to organise, ones which didn't tug the forelock at all times to older white men.

Yet within a few pages of starting the book, I was captivated. Locke is a very good writer and the text flows as smoothly as one could hope for in any academic history. The particulars of Andersen's early life and family history and the wartime drivers of his move to communism make for gripping reading, and that's before we even get started on the details

of his subsequent union and party activities. These activities are deeply contextualised in the external political and economic environment of his times, from the post-war 1940s through to the early 2000s. Andersen died in 2005 at a time when he was still working for the National Distribution Union (NDU) at the age of 81.

As part of her research for *Comrade*, Locke carried out 40 oral history interviews with people who had been part of Andersen's life. The list of those interviewed is interesting in and of itself. She also drew on many archival sources, including Andersen's unpublished memoir, his personal papers, and the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) files she was permitted to access. The records of Andersen's engagement with the Socialist Unity Party (SUP) were denied to her on the grounds that the work involved in declassifying the 22 volumes would take up far too much SIS time and resources. The photos used to illustrate Andersen's life are thoughtfully selected. I was particularly struck by one that shows a young Andersen shirtless on the yardarm of the sailing barque *Pamir* in 1942, as a newly minted member of the New Zealand Seaman's Union and the Merchant Navy. This was certainly a side of Andersen—and of the Merchant Navy—that I had never glimpsed before.

I am not proposing to methodically summarise the book's content here. My hope is that anyone with an interest in trade union and radical Left history will feel inspired to discover *Comrade* for themselves, if they haven't already. However, what I would like to explore briefly are two broad themes that *Comrade* develops about party membership and about political and union organising that I believe are still relevant today, despite hugely changing times and contexts.

The first theme I wish to explore is about the role of the party. Andersen joined the Communist Party of New Zealand (CPNZ) in 1946. He remained a member until breaking away to help form the new pro-Soviet SUP in 1966, while the CPNZ continued to follow a pro-Chinese Maoist position. In 1990, Andersen was part of a further split, when he resigned from the SUP because of its close relationship with the Rogernomics-era Labour Party and he became President of the newly-formed Socialist Party

of Aotearoa (SPA). *Comrade* is in part a history of the sectarianism and fragmentation of communist and socialist parties and factions over the period of Andersen's life. It is also a story about the ways in which the existence of a party can magnify and strengthen the organisation not only of trade unions, but also of other social change movements. These links are often not clearly drawn when some of our Left histories are shared—I suspect in part because people feel uneasy about revealing their communist pasts. It is with this in mind that I congratulate Locke for making the connection between party membership and organisational capacity so clear throughout this narrative.

Through most of Andersen's political life, the party (whichever one it was at the time) played a number of critical roles. It provided regular education and training workshops, the research and publication of numerous resources (including the party newspaper), and—above all—it offered a place where people sharing a strong common set of beliefs and a vision for a better future beyond capitalism could come together to analyse, strategise, and plan. Choices were made in these spaces about which position to take in what union or movement; what tactics should be used in which campaign; and where human and material resources should be placed as a priority. The social as well as political aspects of party life meant that the kind of isolation many on the radical Left feel today simply didn't occur. Andersen's story is a personification of the relationality of political life on the Left in those days. He used his base in the party to achieve positions and power for himself and his comrades, and the organisations they worked for, in ways that simply would not have been possible had they been acting as random individuals. As Locke writes:

Always publicly identifying as a communist, Bill dedicated his life to building a mass working-class movement, from inside trade unions, to advance a communist dream. Trade unionists should have 'a knowledge of scientific socialism', Bill wrote in his memoir. A unionist or union leader can be as militant as a 'bull with a bum full of pepper' but unless he/she understands the ... need for a socialist

strategy, then she/he will not be in a position to take the struggle ‘all the way’.<sup>1</sup>

Being a party member brought with it class consciousness, a clear knowledge of the role of capitalism, and the importance of organised struggle with and for those directly oppressed by it.

Party membership also brought a structural awareness of the colonial/imperialist nature of New Zealand history and a condemnation of racism. *Comrade* details many of the ways in which Andersen, and those alongside him in union and party, supported tangata whenua, including implementing a union Green Ban in support of the 1977-1978 Ngāti Whātua occupation at Takaparawhau (Bastion Point). At the same time, the book also demonstrates in vivid detail the post-Springbok Tour rumpus in 1982, when proponents of Māori sovereignty based at the Polynesian Resource Centre (PRC) at the Auckland Trade Union Centre (TUC) came hard up against the beliefs of many traditional unionists based there. People even came to blows at one TUC board meeting. The stoush only ended when the PRC and the anti-apartheid Halt All Racist Tours (HART) organisation that supported them were evicted from the building. However, over the arc of time, this disagreement can perhaps be viewed as a less than fortunate episode in amongst Andersen’s and his comrades’ long history of genuine support for tangata whenua within and outside union structures, including backing for Ngāti te Ata in their 1990 dispute with NZ Steel at Waiuku and the early formation of a rūnanga within the NDU.

Reading *Comrade* is also a striking reminder of how publicly vilified and privately surveilled the Cold War years were for anyone openly identifying as communist, particularly if they were in any kind of public position. The 22 files withheld from Locke are one indicator of the intensity of the state’s focus on a union leader of Andersen’s stature and his membership of successive communist parties. The hatred spread by politicians and media towards communist leaders and members was intense, from the time of

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1 Cybèle Locke, *Comrade: Bill Andersen—A Communist, Working-Class Life* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2022), 328.

the 1951 waterfront dispute through to Muldoon's ongoing red-baiting of Andersen and other unionists. Locke also reminds us that the SUP was the excuse the National Government used to introduce the SIS Bill in 1977, which expanded state powers to acquire information about individuals under warrants issued by any Minister.

These factors and others raise some interesting questions for those of us wrestling with what it means to be part of the radical Left in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2023. For example, we might ask: how much have we lost with the disappearance of most socialist and communist party formations (small as they were), apart from a few tiny remnants? Despite the factionalism and disintegration of the sectarian Left, are there things that we can learn from the successes and failures of these parties, which may help us build new organisations relevant to this time? Furthermore, was there more to communist and union tautoko for Māori struggles than people give credit for now? Should we look more closely and sympathetically at earlier Left and union efforts to ground their work in an understanding of colonisation and its impacts without assuming a one-sided history constituted primarily of racism and ignorance? And, finally, how much does a mix of ignorance of what 'communism' and 'socialism' constitute and an outright fear or hatred of 'communism', impact Left activism today? Should those of us who hold some of this history do more to engage with younger union and movement activists in exploring this older history, learning from the past and from a mutual interrogation across generations with a view to consciously strengthening our mahi now?

Alongside the role of the party, *Comrade* also raises important questions about the dynamics of union organising today. Concomitant with telling Andersen's story, Locke provides a highly detailed history of union action and organising in Aotearoa New Zealand over the second half of the 20th century. In some Left circles at present, I find it disconcerting that it can be almost fashionable to attack some unions, or unionism in general, on particulars, in a way that appears to be quietly accepted, without much debate or engagement with their history or significance now or in the past. I fear this loss of historical perspective and understanding of the role of

unions, and I hope that *Comrade* will help in some small way to close this gap.

Andersen's role as a unionist raises a number of interesting questions on the role of the party which I believe are still pertinent today. These questions include: without the benefit of communist parties and their historical role in the education and training of those who move on to take leadership roles, is this type of education being adequately provided by current union leadership, particularly in the tough world of private-sector unionism? Alongside this question, we can ask: how much thought do unionists of today put into ensuring a balance between transactional bargaining with its necessary focus on meeting the day-to-day needs of workers and the equally vital goal of building workers' power to expose, confront, and move beyond capitalism and colonisation? Moreover, can unions ever regain the strength they have had in the past to position themselves as a major force in politics, capable of providing an effective progressive counterweight to the drift to the centre of 'Left' parliamentary parties? And on a broader note, we need to ask: What more can be done to ensure that the role of union organiser is fulfilled not only by ideologically-driven university graduates, useful though they all are, but also by people from working-class backgrounds, and from Māori, Pasifika, and migrant communities? Ultimately, without the discipline of a party, are there other ways in which unions might help lift their organisers' and delegates' capacity in line with some of the best aspects of what parties offered? Such activities included a chance to discuss and study together; the opportunity to test opinions in sharp debates with trusted comrades grounded in both theory and praxis; and the inculcation of a deep understanding of those most valuable organising principles: humility and solidarity.

One of the many things I hadn't realised until reading this book was Andersen's commitment to both reform and revolution throughout his union and political life. He endeavoured to hold these in balance with each other, acknowledging the need to work for the best possible outcomes for people in the short-term, while holding on to a vision of a peaceful transition to socialism. It was a balance I didn't particularly appreciate at

the times our paths crossed, as he was on the conservative side of almost all our strategic differences. It was only much later in life that he began to seek some forms of unity across old factional lines, including through initiatives led by the Workers Institute for Scientific-Socialist Education (WISSE), established in 1989 by Andersen and others as a ‘residential socialist school’.<sup>2</sup>

I wonder now what more I might have learned had I been more open to engaging with Andersen in those last few, less sectarian, years of his life, but *Comrade* has in many ways allowed for a retrospective engagement. At the conclusion of her preface, Locke writes: ‘Please regard this book as a conversation opener, not an end point’.<sup>3</sup> It is in this spirit that I share some questions that the life and times of Bill Andersen raise for me today, alongside gratitude to Locke for taking on the task of allowing us access to this vital strand of our own radical Left and union history.

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2 Locke, *Comrade*, 262.

3 Locke, *Comrade*, 6.