

BRISBANE EUREKA YOUTH LEAGUE

By Connie Healy (23/6/2003)

During the long period of its existence the Eureka Youth League played a significant role in some of the most important political struggles in this state. Several generations of youth from all sections of the community enjoyed the mixture of sport, culture and political endeavour and were encouraged to develop an independent viewpoint from that promoted by right-wing governments and a press, frequently biased against any leftwing activities.¹

The Eureka Youth League (EYL) was established in Brisbane in early 1942 following the youth session of the Brisbane Congress for Aid and Friendship to the Soviet Union which took place in the Brisbane City Hall from Friday, 31 October until Sunday, 2 November 1941.² Two young delegates to this Brisbane Congress from the University Student Union and the University Radical Club called a preliminary meeting of young factory workers, students and members of the armed forces. A successful rally was held at which National Fitness girls gave a 'fine display and the Brisbane Excelsior Band and other young artists entertained. 50 young people handed in their names and expressed their support for the idea of forming a Eureka League'.³

EYL CLUBROOMS

Stanley Street, South Brisbane, Stanley Street, Windsor, Desmond Chambers, Adelaide Street, 205 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley, 149 Elizabeth Street (opposite the rear of the Regent theatre)⁴, 11 Wren Street, Bowen Hills, 19 Constance Street, Fortitude Valley

The first meeting was held in the clubrooms in Stanley Street, South Brisbane, opposite the Clarence Hotel (which still stands), an area known as Clarence Corner.⁵ Connie Lovegrove was elected Secretary and Ron Brown, President.⁶ Established under the auspices of the Communist Party, it was to be organizationally independent.⁷

As the membership grew two branches were firmly established, the Northern and Southern Branch. The Clarence Corner branch became known as the Southern Branch. The Northern Branch started as the Stafford/Gordon Park Branch later becoming the Northern Branch. It met at first in a little hall in Stanley Street, Windsor, later at Desmond Chambers in Adelaide Street up the hill towards Wharf Street and then at 205 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley which later became the headquarters of the Section Committee of the Communist Party and then the Peoples Bookshop. When the Northern Branch of the League took over the lease it had previously housed a pet shop. Norm Trembath who joined the League in 1942 aged 15 years remembers that he had the unfortunate job of cleaning the floor which, in his words, was full of 'bird shit'.⁸ Norm also recalls –

George Georges was a member of this branch of the League but he wanted an independent youth organisation. The group that he led considered that the EYL was very much controlled by the

Communist Party. He led this group to set up a breakaway socialist youth club on the south side called the Randells. I don't know what happened to this group or how long it lasted.⁹

The two branches eventually amalgamated by 1948 into one branch, meeting in the clubrooms at 149 Elizabeth Street, Brisbane. By 1949 the League clubrooms at 149 Elizabeth Street were abandoned and an office was established in the Trades Hall. After a time new clubrooms were found at 11 Wren Street, Bowen Hills underneath the home of Dot Raas. In 1964 Jack Hughes, a Communist Party official from New South Wales, visited the EYL Clubrooms at 11 Wren Street, Bowen Hills. He thought the basement clubrooms were unsatisfactory. New rooms were found in George Street, down towards Roma Street which the League occupied for about a year. In August/September 1965, a new League centre opened at 19 Constance Street (off Ann Street) Valley, where films, forums, jazz, debates and folk nights were advertised.¹⁰

WAR EFFORT

The EYL worked actively to support the war effort and was a member of the Queensland Associated Youth Committee. The greatest concentration of military camps existed in Queensland, and the EYL organized an excellent Concert Party that regularly performed for the troops. Their program of 2-1/2 hours duration, included a ballet with trained dancers like Valda Hudson and Janet Gentle (later Henderson), the latter coaching the group. The Keep Fit Group coached by Eva Bacon, which was part of the Concert Party, put on a display on May Day at the Exhibition Grounds. On one occasion it competed in a Brisbane Eisteddford achieving second place after the Queensland National Fitness Council group.

A new band was set up for the dances held twice weekly in the Trades Hall with Harry Prosser as trombonist. As part of the Concert Party, Bill Fleming acted as a ventriloquist and also as part of a comedy team with Jimmy Jiggins (who wrote the scripts). Bill and Jimmy had met as apprentice boilermakers at Evans Deakin, Rocklea. There were a number of singers in the Concert Party such as Jim Osborn who had a fine singing voice, Ernest Emmanuel and Val Rinkovich. Elaine and Pat Mangan who were members of the Toowoomba Branch came to Brisbane in the 1950s and were often singers at League functions.

Lucy Surplus, a member of Northern Branch, was secretary of FOS (Friends of the Services) a section of EYL that organized the despatch of letters and gifts to members of the League in the services. A special paper was produced in November 1944 called *FOS* and its banner read: 'To the Armed Forces from the Friends of Services Clubs of the EYL.'¹¹

The EYL's work in Queensland, as in other States, was eventually officially recognized by the Commonwealth Government as being a direct contribution to the war effort. Kath Bacon¹² thought that the period from 1942 through to 1947 was an easy period for the left where most of the effort went into achieving anti-fascist sentiments.¹³

DANCES -CLUB ACTIVITIES - SPORT

The EYL's wide range of sporting, social and educational activities attracted many young people.¹⁴ Dances were held in the Clubrooms, at the Ritz Ballroom in Macrossan Street just up from the Waterside Workers Union office and in All Saints Hall. The very popular EYL dances two nights a week in the Trades Hall were attended by many service personnel. One member, Les Hudson, sprinter and rugby league player who had represented Queensland,¹⁵ set up an EYL jazz dance band of four or five players who played with great enthusiasm, but with somewhat questionable skill, for all the dances. Dances were later held in the clubrooms at 149 Elizabeth Street and one member recalls that the Port Jackson jazz band played for these in the late 1940s.¹⁶

Boat trips to Lone Pine, hikes and picnics in the bush at Moggill were an essential part of the League's activities. So great was the fear that Australia was facing imminent invasion, on one occasion during the war years, the group, led by an American soldier member, practised guerrilla tactics in the bush! During these years there were also drama, folk dancing, sporting activities such as gymnastics and boxing, education classes and study groups and weekends away.

One that I remember was held at Surfers Paradise. The group went by train to Southport and then went further in a bus. The social life in the EYL was very enjoyable - 'there was a feeling of great camaraderie around the world at that time, there were many songs that were written in those days which we sang ... and there was great enthusiasm.'¹⁷

Brian Moynihan, who became State Secretary of the League in 1958, recalls how he was first attracted to the League by its sporting activities:

My first contact with the EYL was at a camp which I attended with my brother Arthur in 1948... We both joined the League shortly after attending the camp. For me, one of the great attractions of the organization was sport. I played a number of sports. I played table tennis at the league camp and on return to Brisbane I played at the Club rooms. I became a significant Queensland Junior player winning a number of junior and grade competitions in the state. Phil Russell and I were runners up in the Queensland Junior doubles championship in 1951 I think it was. I also played tennis with the EYL team.¹⁸

In 1948-1949 a Brisbane EYL Games Team went to the EYL National Interstate Games in Sydney, at which Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia were represented.¹⁹ On May 12 1949 the EYL Basketball team, won its way to the final of the Queensland Women's Night Basketball Association's B grade Premiership and in 1957 the EYL Men's basketball team won the C Grade Premiership.²⁰

CAMP EUREKA

Camp Eureka was another important aspect of EYL activities and attracted people of all ages – including young people and family groups. The camps were held at a number of venues at Christmas time and sometimes at Easter. Gus Leary, an electrician, who joined the League in 1944, went to the first camp at Main Beach, Southport in 1945 and in 1947 became a member of the Camp Committee responsible for their organization. Camps took place at Southport (1946 and 1947), Kirra Beach, Caloundra (Easter 1947), Moffat's

Beach, Caloundra (1948), at the Cotton Tree, Maroochydore (Xmas,1951), at Callaghan's property at Labrador, Southport (1952), Alexandra Headlands, Mooloolaba (1953), at the property of geologist Dr Jensen in the bush at Caboolture (1954), at Dickie's Beach, Caloundra (1955 and 1961).

One of the biggest and most successful of the Brisbane based camps was held from December 24, 1948 to January 2, 1949. It was held at the Council Reserve at Moffat's Beach Caloundra. There were 25 army tents that housed an estimated 170 to 220 people. EYL Brisbane Branch President James (Jim) Petersen, a BWIU organizer was the camp organizer. Excellent meals were provided by an old shearers' cook, John Johnson, with the help of cooking rosters in the large mess tent. Sporting activities included basketball, football and hockey with various teams contesting the camp premierships. In the evenings there were concerts with songs, dances and plays. EYL lifesaving squads protected bathers near the camp at Moffat's Beach and members of this squad trained daily on the beach and manned a tower made of bush timber to keep a constant lookout for sharks. At an outdoor concert organized for holiday makers visiting the area, £9/14/- was donated to purchase modern lifesaving equipment for the League.²¹

Despite the popularity and success of these camps, the Landsborough Shire Council refused permission for future camps to be held there invoking the anti-communist bogy and the League was forced to have camps on private property owned by supporters for a few years.²²

YOUTH FESTIVALS

The EYL continued the emphasis placed on international cooperation with world youth for peace and justice commenced by the Young Communist League. The League affiliated with the World Federation of Democratic Youth formed in 1945 following a gathering of youth from all over the world. The WFDY sponsored nine youth festivals from 1947 until 1968 in which Australia participated. Australia was expected to send about 30 delegates to these festivals from unions, sporting organizations, the YMCA and the YWCA and any other organizations that would support the concept of peace and friendship. Queensland EYL was represented at six of the nine Youth Festivals. These six were held in Prague (1947), Berlin (1951), Warsaw (1955), Moscow (1957), Vienna (1959), Helsinki (1962).

Some festivals were not without incident. Gordon Fleming, a Brisbane EYL delegate to the Berlin 1951 festival, was involved in a dramatic situation at Innsbruck when British and Australian delegates were held without access to food, water or sanitary facilities. The United States Army, then part of the allied forces in Austria, tried to stop the British and Australian contingents travelling through that country to Berlin. Some of the English delegation were threatened, others assaulted. The contingent finally reached Berlin via Italy and the British controlled zone of Austria.

After the Vienna festival in 1959 industrial and trade union delegates were guests of the Polish delegates. The Queensland delegates were more interested in visiting factories and meeting young Polish workers rather than going into the countryside with a youth group similar to the Boys Scouts. When their repeated requests to do so were not acceded to Owen Ryan recalls that:

Billy Timms demanded that some time be allocated to visiting the wharves and meeting workers. He said: 'I want, and my Union expects me, to see something of the waterfront' because we were in Gdansk, one of the principal ports in Poland. So he actually got his way but he was still not very happy the way it was done. On our return to Australia, we expressed some unhappiness about the

Polish segment of the trip. We were called in by the Party leadership which was I think Ted Bacon and Claude Jones who reprimanded us for our criticism. They said that in the interests of communist internationalism and solidarity we shouldn't be making critical remarks about what we saw in Poland.²³

There was intense interest in attending the festivals and delegates reported back with great enthusiasm. Their influence cannot be underestimated. In the words of one delegate:

It was a really good experience to see masses of youth from all the different countries that were represented that you really felt an international strength in trying to envisage a peaceful future. You certainly felt that you were not alone and that the young people of the world were really committed to that ideal.²⁴

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND POLICE SURVEILLANCE

Not least of EYL members' activities was on the political front. As early as 1946 the EYL produced a program 'A New Deal for Youth' which took up the problems of youth wages and conditions. In 1949 it organized a Youth March to Canberra to lobby politicians of all parties and presented its program of youth demands. The Youth March developed into the nation-wide Youth Charter movement later that year. In 1952, a large delegation attended the Youth Carnival for Peace and Friendship in Sydney and in 1953, with the support of the BWIU (Building Workers Industrial Union), EYL's Brian Moynihan, a carpenter, successfully organized apprentices in the building trades to gain more daytime classes in college. In 1958 the League gave evidence to the Parliamentary Committee in Queensland investigating youth problems where it raised three main points: an acute housing shortage, the fear of atomic war, and the lack of recreational and sporting facilities.²⁵ Unemployment of young people was the focus for the Brisbane Youth Conference organised in 1962 and EYL members joined the Cavalcade for Peace to Canberra the same year. The EYL organized job meetings in support of Trade Union Youth Week in 1964,

The League's membership varied considerably over the years or perhaps the system of reporting was imperfect. One report claimed a membership in Queensland from Brisbane to Cairns in the 1940s of 1000, whilst another said there were 310 members in Queensland with 9 Branches, 4 in country towns in 1944. The estimated membership in 1960 was 50 in Queensland with 30 in North Queensland.²⁶

No doubt the decline in numbers in the latter years was exacerbated by police surveillance which became more severe as the cold war intensified and a well disciplined politicised youth organization was seen as a great threat. In 1949 a member of the Queensland deputation to Canberra on the Youth March which took with them a petition signed by thousands of trade unionists reported that they went to Sydney by train and then went by truck out to Canberra where they lobbied different members of parliament:

We went to Captains Flat first – we were billeted at Captains Flat which is just out of Canberra. It was a mining town and I was billeted there. It must have been just overnight before we went to Canberra. But coming out – because in those days you were followed by the security police – coming out was a bit of a problem because our trucks could only carry a certain number of people and I remember they waited for a while because they could be in trouble for overloading. So they

waited a while because they were under surveillance but they eventually left and nothing happened.’²⁷

The refusal of camping areas for the Christmas and Easter Eureka Camps has already been noted. Although members reported that they were often referred to as ‘the commo lot’ by their sporting opponents, no ill-will was shown towards them. However, it had proved difficult to book Brisbane halls for the Youth Charter Conference in 1949 as the Eureka Youth League had been expelled by the Queensland National Fitness Council’s Associated Youth Committee on the grounds that it was a communist-controlled organization. Both the Anglican All Saints Hall and the Ann Street Presbyterian Church ministers indicated that their halls would not be available.²⁸

EYL FORUM AND CONFERENCE 22/23 JULY 1967

1967 marked the last year of the Eureka Youth League’s existence nationally. In Brisbane a Forum was held on the 22nd July 1967 at the BASF Hall, 331 George Street to discuss whether Socialist ideas had a future with young Australians. The speakers included Brian Laver, presenting a critical viewpoint, Alan Anderson, EYL and executive Plumbers Union member, Ted Reithmuller, recently returned from London who discussed the differences and parallels between the British and Australian youth movements of the left, and Betty Fitzgerald, a former State Secretary of the EYL.²⁹

The following day the 24th Annual State Conference of the Queensland Branch of the EYL was held at Max Julius Hall, 291 St Paul’s Terrace, Fortitude Valley, Vic Slater, the Queensland State Secretary, gave the report. Four delegates were elected to attend the National Congress of the League.³⁰ The EYL was at this time numerically small (only about 50 members) and narrowly based. Yet it was ‘the only solidly based youth organisation of the left with contact (although limited) in the trade unions. It had members in a number of unions such as the Plumbers, Boilermakers, Postal Technicians, bank officers, municipal officers, waterside workers, railways, transport workers, P.S.A, A.E.U and Teachers Unions.’³¹

Following the National EYL congress, the Young Socialist League was established in an attempt by the EYL to remould itself to become more relevant to the upsurge in youth radical activity occurring throughout the world. University of Queensland students impelled this activity in Brisbane. In June 1968 five EYL members were sent from Queensland to the first full meeting of the new National Council of the YSL held in Sydney. The EYL sought alliances with other organisations such as the YSL and FOCO³², which had been established in Brisbane in March 1968.

Alan Anderson became President of FOCO, Brian Laver, from the Student movement, Secretary and Roland Hovey, EYL, Treasurer. The EYL and the YSL were dissolved and their members joined in the activities of FOCO, which took on the character of a Worker/Student alliance. After a spectacular opening in the Brisbane Trades Hall, FOCO succeeded in reaching thousands of youth with its radical political and cultural message. But in June 1969 it was forced out of the Trades Hall, ostensibly for renovations, but

largely ‘as a result of the Labor Day incident engineered by the student section of FOCO but supported by the Young Socialists’. During the Labor Day March -

Young radicals, mostly FOCO members, ...staged a European-style demonstration – red and black flags predominating, chanting slogans, sitting down and then running linked arms at full pace with flags flying....The leader of the Federal Parliamentary Opposition, Mr Whitlam, was harangued by large sections of our group and was undoubtedly embarrassed. [And] there were a few excesses.³³

Sections of the trade union movement were incensed at what appeared to them as -

the irresponsible actions of a group of misguided way-out individuals who abuse the trade unions in the name of civil liberty and the right to dissent by disrupting the Labor Day procession, committing acts of vandalism and subjecting Labor leaders to rude and unwarranted personal attack.³⁴

Membership was depleted as students withdrew from the organization halfway during the year. With an unfavourable press, FOCO was by now somewhat discredited in the labour movement and amongst supporters. It regrouped and resumed activities in November, 1969. But on its opening night at a new venue at Ahepha Hall at 126 Boundary Street, West End, amidst great confusion and near riot, it was closed down by police.³⁵

Not only had FOCO, a pioneering, radical organization, failed within a year and a half of its operation, but both the EYL and the YSL whose members had been absorbed, were unable, or perhaps too overwhelmed and confused by a loss of direction, to re-establish themselves.

¹ I am indebted to former members of the EYL, YSL and FOCO who contributed their ideas and retained enthusiasm for the years they spent as members of these organizations. They are as follows:

Alan Anderson, Lorraine Dyer, Bill Fleming, Janet Henderson, Gus Leary, Jean Leary, Loraine Mabardi, Brian Moynihan, Wally Paterson, Ted Reithmuller, Owen Ryan, Norm Trembath.

² *Courier-Mail*, 31/10/1941 and 1/11/1941, p.3. The Aid to Soviet Congress was organised by the Queensland Trades and Labor Council, whose Secretary at the time was Mr J.W. Roche. It organised the Congress in place of The Australian Russian Society which had been banned by the Queensland Central Executive (QCE) of the Labor Party. Mick Healy, later to become Labor Council Secretary was the Congress organiser. Over 3000 people attended the opening meeting to support closer military, cultural, trade and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. 400 delegates attended from all parts of the state and

speakers also came from interstate. The Labor Prime Minister (Mr John Curtin) sent a message to the Congress.

³ This information about the establishment of the Brisbane EYL is taken from a report written by Florence Lovegrove in the League paper *Forward*. Florence was on the Brisbane Communist Party of Australia Youth Committee which discussed the proposal for organization of the EYL, but was never a participant in the League.

⁴ Advertisement *Queensland Guardian* 10 December 1948

⁵ The clubrooms were almost opposite the Clarence hotel which stood on the corner of Stanley Street and Annerley Road and were almost diagonally opposite the old Mater Children's Hospital..

⁶ Ron Brown (1916-1980) later became National President of the EYL after its formation in 1942 and worked as Fred Paterson's Secretary/researcher during his term as State MLA for Bowen, 1944-1950. He was editor of the Northern Australian Workers Union paper, Northern Standard, 1939-1953 and later worked as a research officer for the Queensland Trades & Labor Council in Brisbane and was actively involved on the CPA. F3207 (85) - in Communism in Australia

⁷ The Communist Party of Australia had established a Youth Committee in Brisbane. Members of this committee were Florence and Connie Lovegrove and Reg Watson. For some months this Committee discussed theories of youth organisation under the guidance of a CPA youth representative and an active member of the Victorian EYL which had already been established in December 1941.

⁸ Norm Trembath worked as a seaman on the Australian coast all his life. He went to sea in November 1945 and was an active member of the seamen's union for about 45 years, often holding the position of union job delegate. He joined the Communist Party on 30 September 1945 at 18 years of age. His father had been a member of the IWW.

⁹ Interview with Norm Trembath, 15/4/2003

¹⁰ Brian Moynihan retired from the League in 1964, and was replaced by Victor Slater as State Secretary. With the assistance of volunteers, and some finance from the Communist Party, these old premises were made attractive for young people. Interview with Brian Moynihan 9/3/03.

¹¹ B. Blears, *Together with Us ...*, p77 Blears

¹² Connie Lovegrove left as Secretary of the League towards the end of 1942. She was succeeded as Secretary by Eileen Peters who also retired from the position early in 1943. Kath Bacon took over as Secretary and Ron Brown remained as President. Kath says that 'the decision [for her to become Secretary of the EYL] was made by the Communist Party mainly on the basis of availability.' By 1948 Kath was the EYL National Organizer of the League and was succeeded by Betty Thomas as Queensland Secretary.

¹³ B. Blears, *Together with Us ...*, p.89.

¹⁴ B. Blears, *Together with Us ...*,p.87. Kath Callaghan (later Kath Bacon), who was at one time Secretary, said: 'As far as we in Queensland were concerned, we had no doubt that the Eureka Youth League was a socialist youth organisation one of whose major jobs was to educate its members and the youth generally in socialism and to organise young people towards the Communist Party.' It was also thought that the name 'Eureka Youth League' which embodied 'all the great traditions of the working class as symbolised in the struggle at the Eureka Stockade' was more suitable to attract a wider range of working class youth than the old Young Communist League.

¹⁵ *The Courier-Mail*, May 8, 2003. Les Hudson was born in Emu Vale, 31/3/1913 and died recently in Brisbane on April 22, 2003. Always interested in sport, he became well-known as an athletics coach. He was an active member of the Waterside Workers Union for 35 years.

¹⁶ Interview with Jean Leary, 2/12/2002.

¹⁷ Interview with former member Jean Leary, 2/12/2002.

¹⁸ Interview with Brian Moynihan, 30/4/2003.

¹⁹ The team included Jim Osborne, Gordon Fleming, Murray Whitewood, Les Russell, Alan Petersen, Jack Dempster, Wally Robinson, Phil Russell, Eric Graham, Neil Henderson, Janet Conlon, Lorraine Sleeman, Gloria Dowse, Dawn Head, Betty Leary and Norma Hobson.

²⁰ The team consisted of Jeff Haas, Ron Haas, Brian Moynihan, Rob Muirhead, Gus Leary and Owen Ryan.

²¹ *Queensland Guardian*, 6 January 1949.

²² *Central Queensland Herald*, 8 Sept. 1949, p.31. The Shire Council spokesman Cr G.A.H. Watson who moved the motion for the refusal said that the Caloundra ratepayers supported the decision. The EYL had been camped on the reserve at the beach for the previous two years and it was claimed that 'leading

Communists such as M. Julius and E.C. Englart, of the Waterside Workers' Federation, had addressed the campers almost daily.' Cr Watson claimed that local women 'wanted nothing to do with the Communists and detested having them near their homes.'

²³ Interview with Owen Ryan, 18/3/2003.

²⁴ Interview with Owen Ryan, 18/3/2003.

²⁵ B. Blears, *Together with Us ...*, p.155

²⁶ B. Blears, p.234.

²⁷ Interview with Jean Leary who was a member of the delegation, 2/12/2002.

²⁸ *Sunday Mail*, 17/7/49, *Courier-Mail*, 18/7/1949, 12/9/1949.

²⁹ Program – source John Oxley Library, Brisbane.

³⁰ Forum and Conference program, Political Ephemera Collection, John Oxley Library.

³¹ Letter from Alan Anderson, EYL and Plumbers Union, May 2003.

³² FOCO is the Spanish word for guerrilla base, a word made famous by the victorious exploits of the guerrillas in Cuba. See *Tribune*, Wed., 2 September, 1970, p.7.

³³ Alan Anderson, The FOCO story, *Tribune*, Wed., 2 September 1970, p.7.

³⁴ *Courier-Mail*, 16/5/1969 quoting Mr J. Egerton, President of the Trades and Labor Council.

³⁵ Phone Interview with Alan Anderson, 12/5/2003 and later letter.