

Testimony for Vera Deacon

By Rod Noble

I first began to get an idea of the importance of Vera Deacon when interviewing her husband Stan for an oral history in 1982. The interview was in their house in Sydney but Vera was at work at the Post Office the day that the interview occurred, so I did not get to meet her on that occasion.

Though we were both members of the largest left-wing political party in Australia (the CPA), it was a number of years before I actually did meet her. That meeting was at the wake in Newcastle of a mutual friend and comrade (Jean Bailey) who died in 1994.

Our connection was solidified when, in 1995, a Union choir, the *Newcastle Peoples Chorus*, performed a song called “Weevils in the Flower”, at a *Labour History through Song* event at the Graphic Arts Club in Sydney. I was a singer in that choir. The words for the song were written by well-known author, and fellow comrade, Dorothy Hewett who based it on Vera’s family living on an island in the Hunter River during the 1930s depression.

Weevils in the Flour – 3rd verse:

“In those humpies by the river,
We lived on dole and stew,
While just across the water,
Those greedy smoke stacks grew,
And the hunger of the many filled the bellies of the few”.

That was the life of Vera and her family in the 1930s depression.

Vera told me the history of the song at the 1995 performance mentioned which was the first time she had heard it performed. She was very excited and appreciative of our rendition. From then on, our friendship grew stronger. The Peoples Chorus is still going strong and Vera has become the most prominent “groupie”.

By the 1960s Vera was an established writer with numerous articles published in the Tribune newspaper from the mid-1950s onwards. In fact, from the archives of the domestic spy agency ASIO we know that an agent reported the crime that Vera “was often up late at night typing”. Just one of the articles she was typing was a marvellous “The Men Who Make the Steel”. Vera joined the *Realist Writers* in 1954 and in 1957 won a **Mary Gilmore Literary Competition**

medal for writing. In 1960 she became National Secretary of the *Realist Writers* that had in its charter to train working class writers. In 1963 she came to Newcastle to assist Bruce Toms to set up a branch of that organisation.

The CPA had dissolved in 1991 and she joined the organisation that was formed to preserve its politics and achievements, that is, the "Search Foundation". Her husband Stan had died in 1993 and Vera came to live in Newcastle in 1997, whereupon she continued to pursue her writing and political involvement with amazing energy and perseverance. This approach continues until the present day. Those of us lucky enough to be at events where her story telling was in full swing, including many times over the past 20 years at the Newcastle People's Chorus parties, must consider themselves very privileged indeed.

In 2014, Vera proudly received an '**Outstanding Service Award**' from the Hunter Valley Broad Left of which she is a supporter (it consists of the ALP Left, the Progressive Labour Party, the Search Foundation and non-party Left). She received the award in "**recognition of the inspiration given to following generations to fight for social justice and strive to make our society more caring and sharing**". At the bottom of that Award are two quotes:

- a) "Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." Mandela.
- b) "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Marx.

These two quotes sum up Vera Deacon perfectly. She never became obsessed with success but more with getting on with whatever project she was involved in. If put end to end, these projects would take up many normal lifetimes. Whether it was local history, labour movement history, aboriginal history, cultural history, environmental activism and much more. And though she possessed a well-integrated philosophical perspective that enabled her to analyse geo-political events and sum them up quickly, she prioritised action to correct the problems, following on from the analysis.

We are lucky to have in Newcastle such a person as Vera Deacon, as a political activist, an example to others, an advocate for those not so well off, and for those in need of support. She is absolutely treasured by all who know her.