

Len McRae

1911-1996

Obituary

In 1964 when I first began teaching in the Newcastle area and contacted other Federation activists, Len McRae's name soon cropped up. At that time he was the Secretary of the Newcastle Secondary Teachers Association, the Fed Rep at Newcastle Boys' High and a tireless campaigner for teachers and the public school system.

When he was appointed as a languages teacher at Newcastle Boys' High in 1946 he was strongly influenced by a number of other Federation stalwarts likes Les Bailey, Errol Sweaney, and the legendary Bill Gollan. During the '50s and '60s Newcastle Boys' High gained a well-deserved reputation as one of the most militant Federation schools in Newcastle. Len was elected as Secretary soon after the Newcastle Secondary Teachers Association was founded, and held the position until 1965. Annual Conference recognised his work for teachers and students in 1977 by making him a Life Member.

But Len McRae was more than a Federation activist. He was genuinely concerned to combat injustice and greed. His first appointment was to Cessnock Intermediate High in 1933. During his three years at Cessnock he observed first-hand the crushing economic brutality which characterised the Depression in the northern coalfields. Having been born into a fisher's family at Winda Woppa on the isolated northern shore of Port Stephens, Len's early educational experiences were anything but privileged. His formal schooling did not begin until he was eight, but later academic success at high school won him a bursary of 50 pounds per annum for Sydney University. Here he spent the worst years (1929-31) of the Great Depression, living very frugally while he studied for his Bachelor of Arts, majoring in

Latin and French.

With such a background it was natural that Len would find common cause with the unemployed and the underprivileged, and it was probably no accident that 1949, the year of the national coal miners' strike, was the year that he joined the Communist Party of Australia.

Like most left-wing activists during the Cold War, Len thought that the peace movement was just as important as the trade union movement. When the Newcastle Peace Committee was established in the 1950s, Len shouldered the Secretary's position. He didn't confine his work to writing letters and minutes, but tramped the streets and knocked on doors to collect hundreds of signatures on a petition supporting the "Ban the Bomb" campaign. He was a fervent campaigner against Australia's intervention in the Vietnam War and after 1975 he became the local secretary of the Newcastle Campaign for Independent East Timor.

Having retired in 1970, Len still had some time to spare for work in the local branch of People for Nuclear Disarmament.

Len was also known for his enthusiasm for school sports. During his years at Newcastle Boys' High he was a very successful coach for both football and cricket. Len's good rapport with his students, which carried over into regular attendances at Old Boys' reunions, can probably be attributed to his love of school sport. The NSW PSAA recognised his efforts when they made him a Life Member.

As all his friends will attest, Len was a big man, both physically and morally. He was dedicated to his beliefs and worked hard to achieve them. He was a great humanitarian.

Len is survived by his wife Ruth, his daughter Jennifer and his grandchildren, Rebecca, Damon and Jessie.

Written by Bob Phillips.