

Bob Gould 1937-2011: A political assessment

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“Left” Labor Party activist and bookseller Bob Gould, who died on May 22 aged 74, has been described in several obituaries as a Trotskyist. He was not. Trotskyism is, first and foremost, based on an internationalist perspective. Gould’s politics were grounded on the doctrines of Australian nationalism, fashioned and developed by the Australian Labor Party on the basis of its organic hostility to the “foreign” ideology of Marxism.

For almost his entire political career, Gould functioned, not as a Trotskyist, but as a particular Australian representative of the political trend known as Pabloism. This tendency, taking its name from the post-war secretary of the Fourth International, Michel Pablo, emerged in the early 1950s as a middle class revolt against the program and principles of the world party of socialist revolution, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938.

Pabloism rejected the two central political foundations of the Fourth International: that the struggle for socialism had to be based on an international strategy against the nationalist ideologies that dominated the workers’ movement in every country; and, flowing from this, that the task of the revolutionary party, under all conditions, was to fight for the political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie and all its political representatives and apologists in the workers’ movement.

Repudiating these fundamental conceptions, Pabloism sought to adapt the program of Trotskyism to the prevailing national milieu. It found an ardent adherent in Gould, whose political work, extending over five and a half decades, consisted in trying to develop “left” and “Trotskyist” sounding formulae to block the development of an independent political struggle for socialist internationalism against the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the trade union bureaucracy.

Gould was born in 1937. He was the son of World War I veteran Steve Gould, who had fought both at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. Steve Gould was a fervent supporter of the right-wing, White Australia nationalist and populist Jack Lang, Labor premier of New South Wales (NSW) in the 1920s and the early 30s, and remained a close political ally of Lang throughout his life. The two men were expelled together from the Labor Party for opposing conscription in World War II. Lang was readmitted in 1971, on a motion that had two movers—future Labor treasurer and Prime Minister Paul Keating, and Bob Gould.

Still a teenager, Gould came into active political life in 1954, joining both the ALP and the Communist Party of Australia-controlled Labor Club at Sydney University. While his exact relationship with the CPA at this time is not completely clear, he was, to all intents and purposes, a member and regularly attended party meetings and gatherings. His main area of political work was in the Steering Committee of the NSW Labor Party, which had been formed in 1954, with considerable input from the CPA, to fight the influence of the right-wing Catholic Church-backed “Grouper” faction in the ALP. The conflict, which arose out of the anti-communist Cold War, was to lead to a split in the Labor Party the following year.

A much bigger political upheaval was soon to come. In February 1956, Khrushchev delivered his “secret speech” to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, revealing some of Stalin’s monstrous crimes. The speech produced a deep crisis within the CPA.

Gould sought to probe the revelations, and was among those influenced by the public agitation conducted in Sydney against the Stalinists by a young British Trotskyist, Gavin Kennedy. Kennedy had been won to Trotskyism after he joined a London branch of the Labour Party, in which members of the British Trotskyist group led by Gerry Healy were conducting political work.

Gould and his close associate at that time, Denis Freney, did not, however, turn to the International Committee of the Fourth International. Instead, they became part of a Pabloite tendency led by Nick Origlass.

Origlass had led the fight to found the Australian section of the Fourth International in the late 1930s, and had waged a courageous struggle for the program of Trotskyism during World War II. He and his comrades defied the combined efforts of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the capitalist state to destroy the Trotskyist movement throughout the war and in its immediate aftermath. But, under the impact of powerful pressures generated by the post-war restabilisation and subsequent economic boom, Origlass became drawn towards the Pabloite perspective. In November 1953, the leader of the Socialist Workers Party in America, James P. Cannon, issued an Open Letter to the world Trotskyist movement, calling for a repudiation of Pablo’s politics and a return to “orthodox Trotskyism”. While Origlass had been closely aligned with both Cannon and Healy for years, early in 1954 he declared that there was no support in the Australian organisation for Cannon’s positions.

Gould would later describe his time in Origlass’s group as his “university”. Political work centred on the Labor Party and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which was modelled on the British organisation.

In the early 1960s, American imperialist intervention in Vietnam began to intensify, and the Australian Liberal government of Robert Menzies prepared to provide support. In 1964 it introduced military conscription, through a birthday ballot system, and in May 1965 sent the first contingent of Australian troops to Vietnam.

Gould and some of the younger members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament used the group’s mailing list to establish the Vietnam Action Campaign (VAC). As the secretary of the new organisation, he helped organise its first protest against the Vietnam War in September 1965. The movement that was building up in Australia against the war and conscription was part of an international youth radicalisation, which culminated in massive protests against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Gould undoubtedly played an energetic role in the anti-war campaign, coming into conflict with sections of the Communist Party of Australia-dominated apparatuses that controlled the so-called “peace movements”. Such conflicts were not peculiar to Sydney. They were reproduced in one form or another in every section of the anti-war movement, engendered by the deepening hostility of politicised youth to attempts by the Stalinists and church groups to confine anti-war agitation to slogans such as “Stop the bombing, negotiate” rather than the demand for the complete withdrawal of US and Australian forces.

The real task of “Trotskyists” in the anti-war movement was to educate the radicalised students and young workers in an understanding of the

reactionary politics of the Labor Party reformists and the CPA Stalinists, and to turn them towards a political struggle in the working class for a revolutionary socialist perspective. Such an orientation was anathema to Gould.

On the contrary, he sought to promote illusions in the Labor Party and its leadership. Recalling his experiences in the anti-war movement, Gould later wrote that “the whole of the official labour movement, particularly the courageous Labor Party parliamentary leader Arthur Calwell, strongly opposed sending Australian troops to Vietnam, and called for their withdrawal.”

This was a complete distortion of the historical record. The Labor Party never challenged US intervention in Vietnam, let alone questioned the so-called Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, which was to justify the onset of military operations against North Vietnam. In February 1965, Labor’s Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, chaired by leading “left” Jim Cairns—later to become the most prominent “anti-war” Labor politician—issued a statement supporting American strikes against North Vietnam.

Calwell’s opposition to the war was bound up with his fear that the fight against conscription would develop outside the control of the Labor Party. Calwell had cut his political teeth as a young man in the anti-conscription struggles of World War I—struggles that had split the Labor Party and had played no small role in the radicalisation that led to the founding of the Communist Party in 1920.

As far as Vietnam was concerned, Calwell’s opposition to the war was of a pragmatic, not a principled, character. He was not opposed to American imperialism as such, and insisted that the ALP continue to support the alliance with the US under the ANZUS Treaty. Calwell always referred to Vietnam as that “dirty, rotten, **unwinnable** war”—the implication being that had the US been more successful, it would have enjoyed Labor’s support.

In August 1967, Gould founded the youth group Resistance with his two closest collaborators in the VAC, Jim and John Percy. Resistance set up the Third World Bookshop in Sydney, marking the beginning of Gould’s primary activity for the rest of his life.

Two years later, in 1969, Gould and the Percy brothers established the International Marxist League (IML), which claimed to have a “Trotskyist” orientation. However, the IML was to have a very short-lived existence. The Percy brothers turned to the Socialist Workers Party in the US, and sought to establish an Australian section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec)—the Pabloite International.

This initiative brought the Percys into conflict with Gould, who was opposed to both international affiliation, and to any formal organisational structure, lest these limit his freedom to manoeuvre within the national sphere and lessen his control. The organisation split and the Percys went on to found the Socialist Workers League. Gould kept ownership and control of the bookshop.

While the split with the Percys was bitter, not least because property was involved, it was not, in the end, based on fundamental differences. For all their conflicts, both tendencies were grounded in the same hostility to the programmatic foundations of Trotskyism that were first enunciated by Pablo. In 1985, just 15 years after the split with Gould, the Socialist Workers Party, as the Percy’s organisation was now called, took the liquidationist perspective of Pabloism to its logical conclusion, declaring that the founding of the Fourth International had been a “farce,” and splitting with the USec.

In the year 1969 another political tendency also emerged—one with which Gould was to have a very different relationship. A number of young activists initiated a Marxist discussion group in Sydney, with the aim of seeking an alternative to the protest politics of the anti-war movement. Together with like-minded tendencies in other cities, in April 1972 layers within the group went on to found the Socialist Labour League

(forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party), which became the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, in November of that year. The SLL was specifically founded on the basis of the struggle against Pabloism, in particular, the struggle waged by the British Trotskyists between 1961 and 1963 against the reunification of the American SWP with the Pabloite International. It was therefore politically hostile to Gould.

One of the signs of the political degeneration that took place within the leadership of the British Trotskyist movement between 1972 and 1985, and which led the ICFI to split with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in 1985-86, was the turn by WRP leader Gerry Healy in 1975 towards Bob Gould. By 1978-79 the WRP leaders were trying to effect a fusion between the SLL on the one hand and Gould and his supporters on the other. But the attempt proved futile. Such was the hostility within the SLL membership to Gould’s Pabloite politics and his opportunist manoeuvring within the Labor Party—hostility based on the program for which Healy had fought so tenaciously in an earlier period, and which had proved so attractive to the founders of the SLL.

Throughout the twists and turns in Gould’s political career there was one constant: his adherence to the Labor Party and his insistence that any movement of the working class, would be expressed within it, and any socialist movement would emerge from it. According to Gould, the working class could simply not develop independently of the ALP.

No doubt one of the key features of Pablo’s political perspective that Gould found attractive as he was breaking from the CPA was that “Trotskyists” had to enter the Labor Party. This had to be undertaken, not as short-term tactic, but in order that they could “integrate” themselves into the “real mass movement” and influence it from within.

Entrism as a tactic, not as a strategy, had a certain validity in the post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s, and possibly even into the 1970s. During this period, the struggles of the working class did find a certain limited expression inside the ALP, under conditions where the party had a base in the working class and contained within its ranks workers and intellectuals who saw themselves as fighting for socialism. But that era came to an end with the Canberra coup of November 1975, when the Whitlam Labor government was ousted by the governor-general. The coup was itself just one expression of the vast economic shifts resulting from the collapse of the post-war capitalism boom.

Having refused to lift a finger against the sacking of the Labor government—despite massive opposition to the coup in the working class and wide sections of the middle classes—the Labor Party moved rapidly to the right.

The “free market” onslaught against the working class initiated by the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the early 1980s, was carried forward in Australia by the Hawke-Keating Labor government, which came to power in 1983. This offensive was supported by the entire trade union bureaucracy, with the Labor “lefts” and Communist Party Stalinists playing the key role under the government’s prices and incomes accord. In the space of ten years, the trade unions had ceased to function in any meaningful sense as defensive organisations of the working class. Like their counterparts overseas, they had been transformed into bureaucratic apparatuses for imposing the agenda dictated by financial and corporate elites.

The more the Labor Party and the unions functioned as open agencies of the ruling elites, the more vociferous Gould became in his insistence that it was only within their confines that any meaningful political struggle could take place, and the more hostile to any independent struggle against them.

The reactionary content of Gould’s politics came bursting to the surface in the last major struggle in which he was involved—the conflict that erupted over the decision of the NSW Labor government in 2008 to privatise the state’s electricity system. The government made the decision

at the insistence of powerful financial interests, against opposition from the Labor Party's membership, from electricity workers and from the broader general public.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that absolutely no confidence could be placed in the verbal opposition of sections of the trade union leadership and leading ALP figures, and explained that the fight against the sell-off could only go forward to the extent that it was waged through a political struggle against the entire Labor and trade union leadership. Whatever their rhetoric, they would fall into line behind the demands of the financial elites.

Gould's response was to denounce the *World Socialist Web Site* as "publicity agents for the ruling class" and the SEP as "defeatist", "pro-Tory traitors", threatening that "people who cross over to the enemy side are always regarded as traitors, and there's no political mercy for traitors."

The political wheel had come full circle. Gould, who spent his political life attacking the Labor right wing, was now defending it, using its reactionary methods to attack his socialist opponents.

The outcome of the electricity privatisation conflict fully confirmed the analysis of the SEP. At the end of 2010, when privatisation eventually proceeded in the dying days of the Keneally Labor government, John Robertson, former head of Unions NSW—and a man in whom Gould had declared there was no sign of betrayal—was a minister in the government that pushed the legislation through.

In the course of his or her life, every individual expresses, in one way or another, broad social and political trends. Bob Gould emerged into prominence in political life with the youth radicalisation that characterised the anti-Vietnam war movement.

His evolution over the past 40 years has likewise been bound up with definite social and political shifts. The middle class representatives of the anti-war movement of the 1960s and early 1970s have become a pro-imperialist "pseudo-left". Various one-time opponents of the Vietnam War and "anti-imperialists" now, for example, openly align themselves with the NATO bombing of Libya. Gould was a pioneer in this process.

A critical turning point came in 1999, when what has been characterised as "ethical imperialism"—an updated version of the "white man's burden"—emerged. The major imperialist powers appropriated to themselves the right to carry out military action and overthrow regimes they deemed to have violated "human rights". The new doctrine was launched in April 1999, with the bombing of Serbia by US and NATO forces, on the grounds that it was necessary to prevent a genocide of the people of Kosovo. It was then invoked later that year to justify Australian military intervention in East Timor.

In September-October 1999, Gould played a leading role in the middle class "left's" campaign for an Australian military intervention to defend the East Timorese people, who, in their struggle for independence, were being attacked by Indonesian military squads. All the same arguments used to justify the attack on Libya were advanced again. There was "no alternative" to the intervention if a "massacre" was to be prevented. In fact, the real motivation of the Australian government in deploying forces to East Timor was not to protect the East Timorese people. It was to defend the interests of Australian imperialism, backed by the US, against rival powers, in particular the old colonial power, Portugal.

In an article published in October 1999 entitled "Marching with the war drums" Gould openly acknowledged that he was aligning himself with the imperialist powers. "From my point of view," he wrote, "the IMF, the World Bank and the Pentagon are very dangerous allies indeed, but nevertheless I am relieved that in this instance their pressure has been sufficient to allow a window of opportunity in which, if we mobilise public opinion in Australia sufficiently, the Australian Army can be one of the midwives of a new, small independent nation of East Timor."

Gould's pro-imperialist stance was part of a broader movement.

Recounting his experiences on pro-intervention demonstrations, he wrote: "I was struck by the almost universal way just about everybody of my generation of opponents of the Vietnam War has come very rapidly to the same conclusion as I have."

The significance of the campaign by the anti-Vietnam War "left" for military intervention in Timor was not lost on the more perceptive sections of the ruling class. As the *Australian Financial Review* commented: "This call to arms, has for the first time, given broad legitimacy to the proposition that Australia should be able to intervene militarily outside its territory."

More than a decade on, Australian forces remain in East Timor. They played a key role in effecting "regime change" there in 2006. From 2001, they participated in the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, and continue to play a significant role in the US-NATO occupation of those countries. In 2003 they were deployed to the Solomon Islands, where they remain. Gould played his part in creating the political conditions for these criminal interventions to take place.

Above all else, throughout his political career, Gould opposed the fight for the development of Marxism within the working class, insisting that such an approach was "sectarianism." It was necessary, he argued to pursue a so-called "realistic" course. This ingrained hostility to the fight for principled politics meant that, having set out as an anti-war, anti-imperialist agitator, he ended up contributing to the forging of new ideological mechanisms to justify imperialist militarism.

As a political figure, Gould had his own personal peculiarities and eccentricities, as well as a rather bohemian appearance, reflected in the shambolic layout and organisation of his bookshop. As a bookshop owner he functioned both as a listening post and transmission mechanism for political information. But in essence, he represented that layer of the middle class, and of the Labor and trade union bureaucracy, that worked to politically subordinate the working class to the capitalist state in the post-war period.

All the various tendencies within this social and political milieu attended his funeral to pay tribute to his role and to acknowledge that, whatever their differences from time to time, they were all bound together by deeper interests.

The Labor Party hierarchy was well represented. Among those in attendance were Barrie Unsworth, long-time chief of the right-wing machine that runs the NSW ALP, and a former state premier and secretary of the NSW Labor Council (now Unions NSW). He was accompanied by fellow Labor right-wingers, former Keating government cabinet minister Michael Lee and the one-time speaker of the House of Representatives, Leo McLeay. Prominent Stalinists were also there, including Jack Munday, one-time president of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation and a leading Communist Party member. Lee Rhiannon, one time member of the pro-Moscow Stalinist Socialist Party and now NSW Greens Senator, also made an appearance.

Representatives of the Labor "left" included ex-deputy NSW premier Carmel Tebbutt and former NSW upper house president Meredith Burgmann. Current ALP assistant national secretary Nick Martin was one of the speakers.

In the NSW parliament itself, the leader of the NSW Labor Party, John Robertson, paid tribute to Gould, hailing him as a "great contributor to [Sydney's] intellectual and political capital over many decades." He was joined by Brad Hazzard, minister in the newly-elected state Liberal government, who insisted that "on this occasion, the government and the opposition are as one."

The pseudo-left milieu were well represented at the funeral, with Phil Sandford, supporter of the WRP opportunists in the 1985-86 ICFI split, delivering a speech praising Gould as a "revolutionist," a "Trotskyist" and a "life-long member of the ALP."

There was a sense, among the funeral participants, that they were not

only gathering to mourn Gould's death, but that his passing coincided with the disintegration of the Labor apparatus to which, in one way or another, they had all devoted their lives. Nick Martin recalled that Gould had told him shortly before his death: "We face a great challenge now to save the ALP, which will require a level of unity like never before."

Throughout his political life, Gould fought to prevent the working class from making a conscious political break from Laborism and from taking up the fight for revolutionary socialism. The objective conditions that sustained his politics, however, no longer exist. Vast shifts in the very structure of global capitalism, impacting on the working class in every part of the world, mean that a new period of revolutionary struggles is opening up. Those workers and youth who grasp the necessity to fight for a socialist future will embrace the program of Trotskyism.

It was therefore somewhat symbolic that Gould's body was laid to rest, accompanied by two large volumes of ALP caucus minutes sitting on his coffin.



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