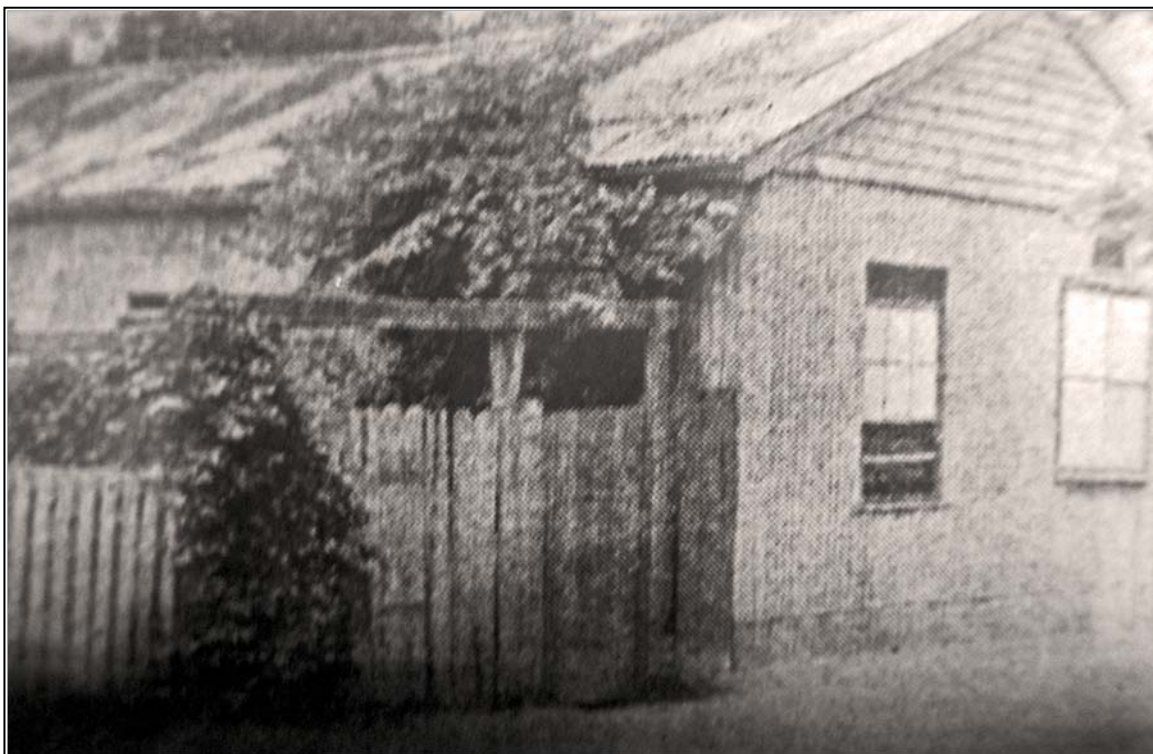# BENJAMIN PELIN

*Edited talk by Howard Jones, (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, September 2014 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 550)*

Albury's leading socialist of his day, Ben Pelin, stood at a town council election in 1925 when Cleaver Bunton was first elected as a young man of 22. Bunton received 306 votes of the 849 cast and Pelin got two. Nevertheless, Pelin was long remembered as a warm-hearted battler's friend. He kept a boarding house in Smollett Street known as the Bushman's Home, or the Wanderers' Club.



The Wanderer's Club in Smollett St Albury

Pelin had an extraordinary career in left-wing politics in Ireland and Australia, culminating in 1932 when he extolled the virtues of Communism after visiting the Soviet Union in his 80th year. He paid his own way to go as an unofficial member of an Australian Workers' Union delegation, as guests of the Soviet officials. Several hundred unionists went from around the world.

Pelin and other delegates returned with glowing reports of Communism at work. After they returned home, there was widespread famine in the Soviet Union. It killed millions in 1932-33, notably in Ukraine.

Benjamin Pelin was born about 1852 in Edenderry, west of Dublin. He worked on farms in Country Kildare until he was past 40. The burning issue in the late 1800s was land for farming – or lack of it.

In June 1892, Pelin called a meeting in Narraghmore of landless labourers and tenant farmers to protest against the landlords who refused to release good land for the ploughing of crops. Pelin was a landless labourer himself but worked for other family members on small farms. He was widely read and an eloquent public speaker.

The meeting at Narraghmore formed a radical organisation called the Knights of the Plough, with Pelin as president. It had several aims, including payment of MPs, a single tax and a pension of £20 a year for everyone over 65.

Apart from advocating a strike at harvest time, the Knights weren't militant and didn't have much time to protest. Labourers worked six days a week, from 6 am to 6 or 7 pm, including Saturday.

The Knights demanded they be allowed to finish at 5 pm on Saturday. A friendly priest agreed to ring the church bell at 5 pm to alert them. As an organisation, the Knights of the Plough was short lived, but it lit a spark that led to the Irish Land and Labour Association. Over the next 30 years such groups became part of the Irish trade unions.

Pelin – who never married – migrated in 1894, possibly after his father and uncle died and he didn't inherit a farm. He had a brother in Orange. He landed in Sydney but went on to New Zealand briefly before returning in July 1895.

He was heading for Melbourne when he stopped in Albury, got a job as a casual at the railway station and stayed here for nearly 40 years.

By 1903 he had set up a boarding house for working men, then bought land in Smollett Street and opened the Wanderers' Club for men down on the luck, from all walks of life.

Once he was prosecuted for selling tobacco after his licence had expired. He refused to pay the fine on principle, and went to jail for 24 hours before his priest, Father Mulligan, paid the fine.

Pelin was secretary of the Albury Labor League in 1904 when the Commonwealth got its first Labor Government. Pelin wrote to the Prime Minister, Chris Watson and asked him to help Harry Davies' election for the Albury state electorate. Watson wrote back to say he was a bit busy, but would see if another minister could come!

Pelin wasn't satisfied that unions were helping the farm labourers, so in 1907 he set up The Farmers and Bushworkers' Union with branches in Corowa, Holbrook and Albury. His ploy was to get the Australian Workers' Union to do more for the men in the bush.

When Pelin stood for Albury Town Council in 1907, he was ridiculed for making far-sighted proposals such as a municipal electricity scheme and a sewerage system. He lived to see both installed. He also advocated an abattoir that was approved in 1937.

In World War I, Pelin became secretary of the Anti-Conscription League in Albury in 1916. This put him at odds with Labor people such as Harry Davies, who at one meeting ordered a policeman to arrest him. However, Pelin's campaigns were successful – in the two referendums, Albury people voted against conscription.

Monitored by police, Pelin in 1917 was convicted of making statements prejudicial to recruiting and was effectively silenced.

Pelin was a delegate to NSW Labor Party conferences in 1917 and 1918. He supported Tom Barker, an anti-war socialist jailed in Albury in 1918 and who later worked in the Soviet Union.

In 1932, Pelin made that trip to the Soviet Union with AWU delegates, paying his own way. On his return, he said everyone there seemed happy and prosperous. The women worked in all industries, swept the streets, drove trams etc and got equal pay.

He had queued up in Red Square to view Lenin's body and visited St Basil's Cathedral, no longer used for religion. Being an Irish Catholic, he was disappointed the Soviet Union was officially atheist. It was, he said, its one black spot.

Ben Pelin died in 1934 and was buried in Albury Pioneer Cemetery.