

# book @ bedtime

In the latest instalment of **David Grove's** exploration of novels with a political message he looks at the political novels of André Stil.

So far in this series I've recommended three political novels – from England (*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*), USA (*The Grapes of Wrath*) and Russia (*Mother*) – all acknowledged classics. Now here's another three – not so well known – from France.

André Stil (1921-2004) was editor of the Communist Party newspaper *l'Humanité* from 1950 to 1956. He wrote a trilogy "The First Clash". English translations (by Yvonne Kapp) of the first two – *The Water Tower* and *A Gun is Unloaded* – were published by Lawrence & Wishart in 1953 and 1954; there are to be no English translations of the third: *Paris avec nous*. But the first two can each be read on their own for enjoyment and enlightenment.

If you want to know how you'd feel if the Party were strong enough to become the heart and mind of your community, read these books. They'll inspire you to help make it happen.

There's no plot as such, just the exciting story of Communist campaigning in the Atlantic port of La Pallice, where the Party branch is leading the dockers and the community in opposing the occupation of the port by the US army. This is linked with their struggles against poverty wages and substandard housing, against the French war in

Vietnam, and against German rearmament.

The story is told not as a political narrative but through the thoughts, the actions, and the dialogue of a large and varied cast of workers – Communists and others – and middle class citizens, some sympathetic to the struggle, some hostile. All are convincing characters, with strengths and weaknesses, doubts and determination. There are no one-sided caricatures.

There are lots of personal encounters, all charged with political significance. My favourite is the incident when a group of Party members is hanging perilously from the jib of a crane, painting an enormous slogan on the dock wall: *LES AMERICAINS EN AMERIQUE* (= Yankee Go Home!). Youssef, a North African worker, is drawing the *Q* when a police patrol is heard approaching. His comrades urge him to leave out the *U* but he insists on painting it. "Without the U," he says, "they'd have said we didn't know French."

Activists will recognise many of the issues that arise. Henri, the branch secretary who is the central protagonist, falls out with Robert, the TU official who fails to see the link between the struggle for better wages and conditions and the campaign against American occupation.

**The story is told not as a political narrative but through the thoughts, the actions, and the dialogue of a large and varied cast**

Commenting on their disagreement, Area Secretary Gilbert remarks "If he took it badly, it isn't only a question of character. There's nothing so political as character."

Then there's the argument between Henri and the local doctor, who thinks the CP should be more reticent in the peace movement, for fear of antagonising anti-Communist supporters.

Henri and his wife are a loving couple but he's done little to advance her political education. She studies Marxism surreptitiously and one day surprises him with a remark about the Russian *narodniks*. At first he puts her down, then realises his error. Eventually he encourages her to make her very first speech at a public meeting.

As it was for British communists in the 1950s, there are no electronic communications to help mobilise the party, even very few telephones. I remember when for a British branch secretary, as for Henri, the main organisational tool was a bicycle. That's why he calls his old machine *MOSCOW GOLD*. Riding it, he finds his whole being "raised to the level of the great events which concern and involve all of mankind."