

## **James Comerford (1913–2006)**

### ***Miner, Union Leader, Activist, Writer***

Born in Glenraig, Fife, in 1913, James “Jim” Comerford began life in the coalfields of Scotland. When he was nine, his family emigrated to Kurri Kurri in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, after his father was blacklisted from a Scottish pit. Like many mining families, the Comerfords carried their skills — and their struggles — across the world.

### **A Childhood Shaped by the Coalfields**

Jim entered working life early. At 13 he briefly worked for a local newspaper, but the pull of the pits was strong, and he soon joined the mining workforce. At just 15 years old, he witnessed one of the most dramatic events in Australian labour history: the Rothbury Riot of 1929, when police opened fire on locked-out miners. The violence of that day left a lasting mark on him and shaped his lifelong commitment to workers’ rights.

### **Union Leadership and Activism**

Comerford rose quickly through the ranks of the labour movement. In 1942, he became the youngest person ever elected to the central council of the Australian Coal and Shale Employees’ Federation. He later served as Northern New South Wales President from 1953 to 1973, and at various times held national roles including General Secretary.

His activism extended far beyond the mines. He championed:

- peace and anti-war movements
- adult education and union training
- social clubs and welfare for workers
- support for retired and unemployed miners
- total abstinence from alcohol through the Independent Order of Rechabites

Politically, Comerford was a member of the Young Communist League in 1930 and the Communist Party of Australia from 1940 to 1959, before joining the Australian Labor Party in 1960. His biographer notes that he privately remained a Marxist throughout his life. He played significant roles in the 1949 coal strike and the 1955 Labor Party split, two defining moments in Australian political history.

### **Writer, Historian, and Keeper of Memory**

After retiring in 1973, Comerford turned to writing, determined to preserve the stories of the coalfields. His works include:

- *Lockout* — an eyewitness account of the 1929–30 conflict
- *Coal and Colonials* — on the origins of Australian coal mining

- *Mines, Wines and People* — a history of Greater Cessnock

He became a Convocation Scholar, writer-in-residence, and later an honorary Master of Arts at the University of Newcastle. His personal library was donated to the Coalfields Local History Association, ensuring future generations could access the history he cherished.

Even in his later years, he remained active. In the mid-1990s he publicly supported striking miners at the Vickery coal mine, standing with a new generation of workers.

### **Honours and Legacy**

In 1989, Jim Comerford received the Medal of the Order of Australia for his service to the trade union movement. His legacy is physically marked in Aberdare, where the Jim Comerford Memorial Wall was dedicated in 1996 to honour miners who lost their lives in the Northern District coalfields. The wall was unveiled by Prime Minister Paul Keating, and later a bronze bust of Comerford — sculpted by Jody Pawley — was added and dedicated by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2007.

### **A Life of Commitment**

Jim was married to Mabel Comerford for 70 years, and they had one daughter, Jean Andrew. He died in Kurri Kurri on 8 November 2006, leaving behind a legacy of activism, scholarship, and unwavering dedication to the mining communities he served.

### **Reference.**

Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Comerford](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Comerford)