Trade unions: today’s challenge

By PAT CLANCY

A trade union leader says there is need for re-thinking on the role of trade unions in Australia today.

The role of the trade union movement in the present period of rapid technological change is the subject of great discussion. Much of this discussion takes the form of learned discourses by so-called industrial experts, their comments often being thinly disguised propaganda against trade unionism, usually taking the form that the trade unions are old fashioned, capitalism has changed, the class struggle has ended and the workers have achieved their main aims in the way of wages and working conditions.

The rightwing takes up the running with efforts to reduce or eliminate trade union influence in the Labor Party. They also speak of the trade unions needing to change, to find a new way, to adopt a “new” role, by which they really mean closer union-employer co-operation, a more developed form of class collaboration.

To answer these attacks requires more than a repetition of truths about the importance of the trade unions. It demands a thorough re-examination and re-thinking about trade unionism in our country.

What kind of trade unions do we need today? The tasks confronting the trade union movement have not diminished but increased with the growth of industry, the technological revolution, and the concentration of economic power into still fewer hands.

Despite talk of “affluence” real wages are eroded by rising prices and taxes, transport costs have gone up enormously and public transport no longer meets the people’s needs, it is no longer possible to live on a 40-hour wage so overtime has to be worked, social services (pensions, hospital and medical benefits, maternity allowance, child endowment, etc.) need substantial improvements, as do housing and education.
The trade unions need to be much more active in the fight against the danger of war, defence of democratic liberties, and to press for a socialist and democratic solution to the many problems confronting the people.

Official union policy as decided by Congresses of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, contains good decisions on most of these questions and socialism is the stated objective of the A.C.T.U. But insufficient is done to promote these ideas in depth, to develop activity in support of them, or to face up to present-day realities.

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The many struggles of recent times show that there is a strong basic support for trade unionism among the workers, but it is also true that trade unionism is not growing in Australia.

The percentage of trade unionists in the total work force is falling. In 1954, unionists were 61 per cent of the work force. This percentage declined to 56 per cent in 1964. In this same period the work force increased by approximately 830,000, but affiliated membership of the Australian Council of Trade Unions went up by only 343,000.

At the present time there are approximately 1,480,000 in the work force yet to be enrolled in the trade union movement. Lest it be thought that these are only in some remote areas away from trade union influence, it should be pointed out that of the 1,224,700 workers in the manufacturing industry, only 741,300 are unionists.

In the three years 1962-63-64, the membership of white collar organisations went up by 10 per cent as against an increase of 2.6 per cent in the trade union movement generally. In New South Wales, the most industrialised state, the work force increased by 5 per cent in 1964, but trade union membership went up by only 1.6 per cent.

Changes in the composition of the work force and of the population need to be given consideration. White collar and service occupations are growing at a faster rate than the industrial and trade occupations.

In the past 20 years more than one million migrants from many different countries have made their home in Australia.

The majority—6,466,000—of our population are under 30 years of age and have no personal experience of the economic
difficulties and many struggles of the 30's. Approximately 8,000,000 are under 45.

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It seems the changes in trade union work need to be made in two main fields:

1) In the thinking, ideas and outlook of the trade union leadership, and

2) In the organisational structure of the Australian trade union movement.

The criticism that many trade union leaders in Australia are narrow and conservative in outlook has some basis. Too many union leaders confine their thinking and activity to what is called union matters (even this being conceived in a narrow way) and pay little attention to the changes in society and the need to engage in activity on all matters of concern to the people.

Protection and improvement of wages and working conditions are still essential, but an exclusive concern with these ideas is not enough, for on the great social questions it leaves the arena entirely to the ideology and practical control of the ruling classes. This narrowness of outlook does not attract workers to trade unionism; it often turns them against it.

How many times have union activists been met by the question: “What are the unions doing about it?” on issues such as the standard of social services, poor community amenities, democratic rights, world peace? This is both a criticism of the narrowness of much union activity and a demand that the trade unions expand their concepts.

Of course, there are many good examples of the trade unions taking up broad national issues, which has strengthened their general influence. Official trade union policy on peace is improving, the slogan “Peace is Union Business” being well received and supported. In national peace congresses in recent years the trade union section has been the strongest numerically and the most united on the need for common action to preserve peace.

The Labor Council of New South Wales Living Standards Conference was one which set out to draw together people's organisations on all aspects of living standards. The annual Trade Union Youth Week, and the work of teachers as the
main driving force in the campaign for adequate education standards are further examples of broad trade union work. Experiences in this work show that when the trade union movement takes up an issue of vital concern to the community, support for unionism spreads and the whole movement becomes stronger.

The issues raised by automation particularly emphasise the need for a broader trade union vision, including struggle for policies in reorganisation which recognise the workers' interests, enhance their dignity as human beings, and take account of the needs of society as a whole, instead of remaining solely within the ambit of the selfish interests of monopolies.

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Narrowness of trade union outlook is not confined to people of reformist views; it also exists among leftwing union leaders, some of it arising from the limited nature of trade union resources and the present structural set-up.

Most unions are small, being able to employ only a very limited number of officials and clerical staff. Many tasks, often of a widely different nature, have to be borne by the one or a small number of officials.

At the present time there are 340 unions, many of them very small. The national links are not strong, most national unions are loose federations, the big majority of unions being active mainly on a state basis.

Very small state unions or state branches lack the resources to develop, most available time and energy being taken up in attending to the existing membership, very little remaining for reaching out to the unorganised.

One hundred and thirteen of the 164 unions registered in the N.S.W. Industrial Commission have fewer than 3,000 members; only 16 have more than 15,000 members. A dozen have fewer than 30 members, and 69 have fewer than 500.

The financial position of unions is not very strong, the average amount of funds per member in New South Wales in 1964 being £4/17/7 (Industrial Registrar's Report).

It is clear that most of the unions spend the major part of their time battling for their very survival.
Further, the Arbitration set-up not only takes up much of the time of union leaders, but acts to confine the unions to the narrowest matters, while the penalties of the system are aimed to put union action on ALL issues in a strait-jacket.

The multiplicity of unions is linked with the historic development of unionism. In this country, the formation of trade unions was influenced mainly by the craft unionism of England, the earliest unions being craft organisations.

The introduction of Arbitration in the early part of this century played a large part in the development of small unions. In 1901, before the introduction of Arbitration, there were 168 unions throughout Australia. In 1902 this number had grown to a total of 786 unions, one union for every 860 union members at that time.

Many small unions were formed with the encouragement of Arbitration officials to obtain awards and otherwise take advantage of the gains won by the larger and stronger unions. The formation of Labor Councils, various federations in different industries and the formation of the Australian Council of Trade Unions have all been designed to overcome this fragmentation of union strength.

Unions have been able to unite together in these ways and success has been achieved in a whole number of important union campaigns in past years. But today it is becoming increasingly recognised that the forms of trade union organisation must change if the challenge of our time is to be adequately met.

This has been recognised for many years in the constitution of the A.C.T.U. which calls for the closer organisation of the workers by —

a) transformation of the Australian trade union movement from a craft to an industrial basis;

b) grouping of unions in their respective industries;

c) amalgamation of unions with a view to the establishment of one union in each industry.

A.C.T.U. policy officially supports the formation of shop committees which are a vital part of the development of industrial unionism and the activising of the rank and file unionist on a wide range of issues, although little is done from the top
level to encourage them, and some union leaders are actively hostile.

Today, definite moves for amalgamation are taking place. The Boilermakers and Blacksmiths' Unions have already amalgamated. Further discussions are taking place in the metal industry on closer unity and eventual amalgamation. The two large printing unions have amalgamated. The B.W.I.U. and the Operative Painters and Decorators' Union have agreed upon terms of amalgamation and are campaigning for it. Amalgamations have taken place in a number of unions in the building industry in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia.

The achievement of industrial unionism in Australia would enable the trade union movement to become a much more effective and powerful force. Recent moves for unity of action between the industrial and white collar workers and their organisations also could be developed much more quickly.

The unnecessary duplication of equipment and officials would be overcome and much more attention could be paid to increasing trade union membership. The increased financial and human resources would enable much greater and more effective attention to be given to broad questions.

Despite these obvious advantages the move towards industrial unionism is not proceeding quickly enough. Narrowness of outlook and conservatism, the vested interest some officials have in their jobs, exaggerated concern for the identity and historical development of the particular union, differences in political ideology and many legal barriers set up by the Arbitration Court are some of the reasons for this.

Differences in political outlook of union leaders is often seen as one of the chief barriers, and is something which should be frankly discussed.

Among the workers there is strong support for industrial unionism. Workers look with amazement on the multiplicity of union organisations and many call for one union, often expressed in the saying "We should all be in the one big union".

The majority of union officials and activists are very sincere people with a deep regard for their particular union and the interests of the workers. Certainly there are individual careerists, downright opportunists and some scoundrels in the ranks
of union leaders. The way to amalgamation would appear to be that of basing oneself upon the best interests of the working class as a whole, of a genuine seeking to find the points of agreement, of striving for the leaderships of amalgamated unions to be a true reflection of the membership, representative of the different political viewpoints.

Union amalgamations do not come quickly, they need to be prepared for by the supporters of amalgamation working patiently in united actions in support of common objectives.

Forms of organisation need to be devised within an amalgamated union which enable each craft or calling to be satisfied that its identity is not lost, that its particular rights are preserved, that industrial unionism will actually work to the benefit of all workers.

The trade union movement can meet the challenge of today to the extent that it strengthens its organisation and develops the ideas and action which establish it as a leading force for social progress.