The Working Class Today

"WORKERS, INTELLECTUALS AND MARXISM", A. W. Rud-kin's discussion article in ALR No. 3, 1969, was like a breath of fresh air in the stale atmosphere of exclusiveness which some inverted snobs try to perpetuate in the working class movement. What these people do is to label a section of the population "intellectuals" (whatever they mean by this term) and then proceed to declare that these "intellectuals" are bound to play a very secondary role, if they are to play one at all, in the movement. Their zeal in defending the "class purity" of the movement knows no limits, and if challenged they can always produce a string of quotations from the marxist classics as their trump card.

In what follows I hope to show that what these people claim cannot survive even a superficial analysis in the context of today's highly industrialised Australia. Moreover I shall try to prove that the section of the working class described by the "purists" as intellectuals is going to play an ever-increasing role in the class struggle. To start with, I enumerate some of the criteria which have actually been proposed to me by some "purists" for deciding who is a "real" worker:

1. Calloused hands: . . . the acid burns on an industrial chemist's hands or his kidneys ruined through the inhalation of toxic fumes just won't do. I suppose one can classify in this category criteria such as greasy overalls, blue collars, etc.

2. Class origin.

3. Manual versus mental work . . . in a time when there is an increase in the number of jobs containing both these components.

These criteria, which have nothing in common with marxism and which were probably inadequate even during the French revolution, reveal that at least some of the "purists" are bigots. They are people who are either falling victims to their own prejudices or are trying to capitalise on the prejudices of others.
for reasons they only know. The Greek marxist, Vadis, was on the mark when he coined the phrase "class racialism" to describe such attitudes. A bona fide investigator can find an up-to-date definition of the working class in marxist literature. Two such examples which I consider adequate are listed below.

Carey\(^1\) says: "For our purpose we have classified as working class all those who basically neither own nor control means of production and who live by selling their labor power". Quattrocchi\(^2\) distills the following definition of the "new workers" from the May 1968 events in France, events still pregnant with lessons for the marxists of today: "All those who work in fields, factories, laboratories and observatories. Living by selling their labor (in various degrees of comfort or discomfort) without being able to express their needs, practise their inclinations or fulfil their wishes. Without being able to determine the direction, the aims and the hopes of the community to which they belong".

In contrast I find the analyses in the classics interesting but wanting in the context of the scientific and technological revolution taking place in a number of highly developed countries. The reasons are obvious; the classics correspond to an earlier period when the scientific and technological revolution had not begun or was still in an embryonic stage. Now let us examine some of the objections that are raised against including people with high skills, usually acquired at the tertiary educational level, in the working class.

1. Lack of class consciousness: What one thinks he is (the subjective factor) is not as important as what one really is. But even if we concentrate on the subjective factor, what does the Australian scene reveal if not viewed statically? While there is an increase in the class consciousness of the highly skilled section of the workforce, in the less skilled sections there seems to be stagnation if not a reversal. Who has not come across the suburban couple who are acquiring middle-class pretensions because they have managed to pay off the wall to wall carpet? (As a rule the result of endless hours of overtime or a second job.)

2. Higher incomes: A very weak objection indeed, because paying margins for skill and productivity is an accepted method of remuneration even under socialism.

3. A high proportion become employers or self-employed: No one wants to argue that they should be included in the working class.

\(^{1}\) B. T. Carey, *Changes in the Australian Workforce*, p.6.

But what about the increasing proportion of professionals who become employees? There are more self-employed plumbers than professional engineers. Does this mean that a plumber employed by the Board of Works does not belong to the working class?

4. A high proportion become “lackeys of the ruling class”—administrators, executives, etc. True, but this is a declining proportion. And we must not forget that the less skilled sections provide the establishment also with “lackeys”—leading hands, foremen, members of the police force, the army, etc.

5. A high proportion are not directly involved in production—teachers, etc. This objection does not hold water in view of the ever-increasing shift of man-power from the secondary to the tertiary industrial sector in industrially advanced countries. Richta\(^3\) says that in the USA the ratio of “immediate production” to “services” has been completely inverted from 59:41 (1940) to 47:53 (1964). With automation, of course, these changes are bound to accelerate. But forgetting all this for a moment, who would dream of excluding a “trammie” from the working class just because he works in the service industry? Why then exclude a teacher (primary, secondary or tertiary) who works in the very important service industry of education?

Further, it can be argued that in terms of some criteria at least the highly skilled section of the workforce is entitled more than any other to be included in the working class:

1. Degree of exploitation: Richta\(^4\) quoted some Soviet sources according to which the average creative scientist is 36 times more productive than the unskilled worker. This means that under capitalism a scientist, even allowing for a higher income, is exploited to a much greater extent than an unskilled worker.

2. Viciousness of attacks by the “class enemy”: this is generally accepted as a fairly reliable measure of the worth of the activities of an individual or a group. Even a superficial glance at the daily press would convince one that the increased radicalism of the highly skilled section of the workforce, even if it fails to impress the “purists”, has certainly become the target for vicious attacks by the establishment. For example the Young Liberals\(^5\) (what a contradiction in terms!) resolved at their annual convention to infiltrate the NSW Teachers’ Federation “with the intention of completely destroying the left wing control of that union”. In the

\(^3\) R. Richta, *Civilisation at the Crossroads*, p. 93.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 19.

\(^5\) *The Australian*, 18-7-1969.
Queensland Parliament a Country Party member, Mr. R. T. Hinze referred to a radical group at Queensland University as "contemptible hooligans" and "ratbags". One could go on to list many more such examples.

The increase in the militancy of the highly skilled section of the work force at the employed stage or the training stage (tertiary students), in the so-called affluent societies, is an observable fact. What is the explanation? In my opinion Ernest Mandel hits the mark when he asks: "What do these trends mean but the growing proletarianisation of intellectual labor, its tendency to become part and parcel of the working class?" About students: "... they are a social class in transition ... out of this interim layer there arises on the one hand an important part of the future capitalist class and its main agents among the higher middle classes, and on the other hand a growing proportion of the future working class".

What does this mean in terms of class contradictions? The privation factor, of course, is hardly relevant. It has stopped being a determining factor for the major part of the work force in "affluent" societies anyway. The economic factor is still present, with a great number from this section of the work force becoming increasingly aware of the degree to which they are exploited. This is reflected in statements made by unionists after the recent announcement of the farcical Engineers' and Scientists' awards.

The primary factor, however, is alienation. There is nothing airy-fairy about alienation and it is a pity that theoretical marxists do not bring this concept down to earth by explaining it in everyday language and in terms of concrete examples. My personal experience as an industrial chemist and a management trainee taught me that alienation is as tangible and painful as an empty stomach. (I experienced the latter during the war.)

Alienation works in various ways, as the following examples show. A man with "letters after his name" who wants to "get on" has to prostitute himself. On one occasion a manager, a real lick-spittle, trying to threaten me indirectly for my non-conformism, told me about a fellow-chemist who was well known for his leftism, "C.H. is condemned to stay on the bench" (i.e. C.H. was not to

become an executive). In another laboratory a young physicist who was determined to "get on" told me that he saw nothing wrong in fooling the housewives by printing on the packet of a certain product a completely false explanation of the complex phenomenon of the nature of detergents. The young trainee chemists kept "cooking" the results of their analyses because the managers were not prepared to accept results which showed that the products did not comply with the specifications. An Oxford graduate, who had majored in English literature, was a branch manager and was responsible for the TV commercial: "You will wonder where the yellow went, when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent", while a team of psychologists were working on the "guilt complex" of housewives who buy cake mixtures and packet soups...

There is nothing atypical about such young people or about the firms that employ them. If they do not already know they soon find out that if they want to reach the "top" where the decisions are made and the large salaries paid, they have to prostitute themselves. If they do not, they remain "condemned to the bench or the drawing board".

The awareness of this by the highly skilled section of the work force is increasing. Evidence for this is found in a negative way in the relative lack of radicalism in certain faculties like law and medicine — future self-employed professionals; engineering and technology — aspiring organisation men; commerce and business administration — future arch-prostitutes, etc. Then there are clearly pronounced statements such as a manifesto drawn up by a group of ANU students and staff, the opening paragraph of which regretfully says: "The modern university no longer functions primarily as a training ground for those destined to rule society. A graduate's degree today does not take him automatically into the ranks of the top elite; rather it stamps him as a highly skilled worker with a specialised knowledge".

There remains, however, some confusion even in the ranks of the radicals themselves. G. Sharp, for example, in advocating "a reversal of these trends" in modern universities gives the impression that he is nostalgic for the ivory tower-community of the scholars-type university. This brings to mind the slave Spartacus' nostalgia for his tribal past which although understandable was fundamentally reactionary. Humanity will not be liberated from alienated toil by "promoting intellectual values and a culture which transcends particularised ends" but by the technological and scienti-
tific revolution in which the modern university is bound to play a prominent role. A. Langer\(^\text{11}\) quotes a statement by Mao about Chinese intellectuals (that word again!) in 1939. Although this statement was probably relevant in semi-feudal China in 1939 it is, in my opinion, as relevant in highly industrialised Australia in 1969 as the Old Testament.

There are also signs among some radical students of idolisation of factory worker and of a tendency to repeat mistakes of the past such as going to work in the factories, etc. Such "humility" is usually nothing more than a cover-up for a superior attitude, consisting in the belief that the factory worker and his class consciousness will benefit from the presence on the factory floor of such educated and bright cadres, and self-satisfaction with the enthusiasm of their motives. But the factory worker can look after himself and in all probability will not tolerate any patronising "egg-heads" telling him what to do. As for the motivation, there is usually nothing altruistic about it. If they are rebelling it is not to help their fellow humans but to help themselves and to solve the acute problems they will be facing when they become members of the highly skilled section of the work force. The working class movement is, naturally, helped by their rebellion but this is simply a consequence.

If there are hundreds of radical students and hardly any poor in anti-poverty marches it is not because we have hundreds of good Samaritans among us, but because the glaring irrationality of the presence of poverty in our "affluent" society, adds to the alienation of these youths who are being trained in the rational approach. But they would be doing something more constructive if, as graduates, they joined and provided leadership to the many existing professional unions in which militancy is rising for very good and objective reasons. They would serve the working class better if they joined some of the professional bodies, which behind a facade of pompous platitudes about professionalism, have been reduced to employers' pressure groups.

Perhaps it is worth speculating, at this stage, about the merits and demerits of this highly skilled section of the working class when it is compared with other sections. One disadvantage that comes to mind immediately is their lack of tradition in unionism. There is, however, another side to this lack of tradition. By starting from scratch and by learning from the mistakes of others they can probably avoid repeating some of them, particularly the ossification of the structures of the older unions.

A small advantage in present Australian conditions is that this section of the work force, with a few exceptions (for example there is a glut of Ph.D's in chemistry), has the market on its side. And paradoxical as it may appear the relatively greater affluence of these people, in a society which is fairly affluent as a whole, enables them to take the junk which has become the fetish and the distraction of our consumer society for granted. As a result some of them have little appetite for this expensive junk and the ones that do have such an appetite can afford to buy it without having to work endless hours of overtime or in a second job, so they still have time for leisure and involvement in public affairs. Another aspect of this is that although economic demands are still the backbone of unionist activity among them, they can be politicised more easily than less affluent unionists. A good example of this are the campaigns which have been led in recent years by teachers' unions.

Another advantage lies in the fact that they have been trained for years in the art of critical evaluation of data, in the weighing of evidence, etc., so that, generally speaking, they are less likely to become dogmatic and inflexible in their involvement in the class struggle as other sections of the working class tend to be. It is also to their advantage that they have had practice in abstract thinking, that they are articulate, etc; in other words, if their tertiary training has not turned them into hopeless snobs, this training is to their advantage as potential activists.

Finally, to fully appreciate the significance of this section of the work force one must study the situation not statically, but as it really is, in a state of flux. Changes have always taken place, but never as fast as they do now. The left should study trends with an eye to the future. If this is done we shall see not only an increase in militancy in this section of the work force with all the associated factors mentioned above, but also a great increase in numbers at the expense, of course, of the other sections.

A. Pryce-Jones12 writes about the USA: "I read in A. Schlesinger's book that in a year or two there will be more than seven million students in the universities, more students than farmers throughout the country." According to Richta13, in the future, when full automation has been achieved (and the only real obstacle to this is vested interests), this section will become almost the entire working class. So I strongly appeal to the "purists" to allow these people to . . . "join the club" even at this early stage.

13 R. Richta, Civilisation at the Crossroads, p. 103.