THE STATE TODAY
by Eric Aarons

An army which many thought might defend a socialist government in Chile drowned it in blood. An army which was the pillar of fascism in Portugal produced forces which overturned the regime and took an increasingly socialist orientation. These are just two of the most striking events of recent times which have re-focused attention on the theory of the state. Discussion of the nature of some newly independent countries, particularly in Africa, has also centred on the state while efforts to come to theoretical grips with the character of the state in socialist countries are still continuing. Expansion of state intervention in social life, especially since World War 2 also raises many issues, and the present period of intensified crisis and class struggle has resulted in controversies about revolutionary strategy which involve the state.

In these circumstances we should look again at the marxist theory of the state and develop it as necessary to correspond to the new conditions. The main elements of the classical marxist theory of the state may be summed up as follows:

- historically, the state arose along with class society, which, without the coercive, cohesive force supplied by the state would be continually rent asunder by class antagonisms.

This in contrast to the primitive "self-management" of early society, where there was no special body of persons exclusively engaged in "ruling", but self-acting organisations of the people.

- The state consists quintessentially of "bodies of armed men" and prisons, as well as law courts, government departments, parliaments and related institutions.

- the state is separated to a degree from, and stands above, (civil) society, as does its personnel - the essential characteristics of a "bureaucracy".

The relative autonomy of the state deriving from this separation from the rest of society has wide limits, depending on the conjuncture of circumstances.

- In general, "political power" means control of the state, which thus is the objective of political struggle. While politics reflects economics in the sense mentioned above "politics cannot but have precedence over economics" ...." .... without a proper political approach .... the given class cannot maintain its rule, and consequently cannot solve its own (economic) problems." (Lenin). Or put in another, more historically sweeping way, "Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power."

(Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, Chapter 29)

- For marxists, however, winning political power is only part of the objective. The class nature of the state must be overturned, the rule of the working class over the bourgeoisie replacing the rule of the bourgeoisie over the working class.
But also the bureaucracy and the standing army must be done away with as a power standing apart from and above society. This is essential not only because the old state is tied by a thousand threads to the bourgeoisie, but also because the new society, by its very nature, requires it.

- The old state cannot therefore be transformed bit by bit, but must be "smashed".
- The ultimate issues of strategy for marxists are thus how to achieve political power, and how in the course of achieving it to "smash" the old state and replace it with a new one which will develop self-management and wither away.

These are, of course, general theoretical propositions of long standing, and do not of themselves solve concrete problems in the present day. But it should also be stressed that, to a greater degree than with other revolutionary theory, they are products of experience rather than of theoretical and logical reasoning. They are of course also reasoned, and logically connected with the rest of marxism.

A look at some of the changes in the state in recent times is necessary, however, in order to avoid fundamentalist views which are satisfied with abstract "truths" and have the approach that the more things change the more they remain the same.

In order to get the discussion of changes into perspective, a trend of opinion during the '60s including in a section of the "new left", should be recalled. This, rather vaguely stated view, was to the effect that the expansion of the state in size, financial resources, coercive potential through militarisation and the expansion of the "security" police, spying techniques, etc., and the weight it contributed to securing ideological conformity, made illusory any idea of overthrowing the state.

This was an understandable reaction to the difficulties of the times, but defeatist and shortsighted nevertheless. Partly in reply to it, the "Statement of Aims" adopted at the 21st Congress of the Communist Party of Australia in 1970 said:

"The State has grown in power and extent in recent decades. The military establishment has increased greatly in size; governments have expanded their intervention in economic life (by means of government enterprises, by the proportion of the national product coming into government hands, and by various forms of economic and financial control); other aspects of social life which the state controls or in which it plays a large part (education and scientific research foremost among these) have developed in response to the requirements of the scientific and technological revolution, and administrative and other staffs have consequently been greatly increased.

"The enhanced role of the state does not necessarily mean that it rules mainly by direct force, though this remains its ultimate function. The capitalist system exerts an ideological pressure for "rule by consensus" in which mass acceptance of the establishment's ideas, values and forms of social organisation, with powerful pressure to conform, plays a major part.

"This consensus has been assisted by social conditions - almost full employment, higher incomes, stimulation of new consumer needs, the feeling of powerlessness of individuals and groups in a complex and impersonal society, the increased power of the mass communications media to manipulate public opinion and popularise the ruling ideas, illusions about parliamentary democracy and the two-party system, racialism, fear of Asia and communism, the lack of acceptable alternative models of society, etc.

"The strength of this "rule by consensus" makes it imperative to build a body of ideas, and corresponding strategies, forms of action and organisation, which confront and challenge the prevailing ones (a "counter-consensus").

"For socialists this means participating with the people among whom they live and work in struggles around questions of common interest, and in the process, seeking to reveal the fundamental underlying issues so as to challenge the ideas and policies of the system as a whole, not just the particular case.

"It means encouraging and participating in intellectual and theoretical endeavours which reveal the real workings of the system as a whole, not just the particular case.

"It means drawing strength from these sources to develop marxism and revolutionary theory in general. In these ways a growing challenge in the field of ideas and values can be built up in all spheres of social life, intellectual endeavour, and culture."
Concerning the effect of extension of functions and growth of size of the state on its strength, the Statement of Aims went on to say:

"The continued expansion of the state, while increasing its power in certain respects, also increases its potential divisions and makes it more vulnerable to the building of such a "counter" ideology."

"On the one hand, big business (which is also divided into competing groups within and outside Australia), civil administration and the military, though united in defence of the system and increasingly inter-changing personnel among themselves, are still distinct to a certain extent, and this increases the difficulty of maintaining unity in the ranks of the ruling class, particularly in times of great social conflict."

"On the other hand, the expansion of the state into various spheres of civil life and the increasing numbers of ordinary employees involved, make the state apparatus more open to disintegration from within as the 'counter' ideas and values strike chords among the state employees themselves (including the army and police) on the basis of their own experience within these institutions, and the similarity of such experiences to those of the people as a whole."

The aim of this section of the "Statement of Aims" was clearly to summarise the changes which had taken place in the state, to connect these with the tasks and strategy of the party, and to oppose the defeatist view mentioned above.

In the last couple of years, however, a quite different interpretation has been advanced, which I believe to be erroneous. This holds that the people in advanced capitalist countries are frightened of revolution, want changes but want them within the confines of the existing system, and that it is therefore both futile and unnecessary to talk of "smashing" or destroying the state. Rather, because of the circumstances described, especially in the last paragraph of the Statement above, the state can be transformed by removing those particular individuals who are servants of the capitalists, and neutralising or winning others.

Thus the issue is raised as to whether present circumstances and changes in the state make marxist theory of the state and revolution unnecessary and/or impossible of realisation, or whether the changes in the state provide additional opportunities and possibilities of actually carrying that theory into effect.

Pursuing the matter further, let us look more closely at the actual changes in the state, particularly the extension and development of its functions.

Most obvious probably is intervention in the economy. As monopoly in its various forms has developed, regulation of the economy by the market mechanism became increasingly unreliable and dangerous politically. For "regulation" by the market occurred through the ups and downs of the business cycle which, with its crises, gave rise to social as well as political instability. This reached a peak in the depression of the '30s, after which, under the influence of Keynesian ideas, the state intervened more directly and extensively - and for a time, it appeared, pretty successfully.

(Intervention is of course not new. Last century Marx pointed out that state expenditure for such capital consuming enterprises as railways was often necessary because private sources were inadequate, and/or such private financing would lower the average rate of profit. In a big country with a small population like Australia, there were many government enterprises - a greater proportion, indeed, than now).

Economic intervention also occurs through government expenditure - which rose to great proportions during the Second World War, and has never fallen to previous levels since. These expenditures include those on supplies for government industries and enterprises, military expenditure, wages of government employees, and on the other areas mentioned below.

What limitations are there on government measures to "control" the economy? Experience as well as theory shows that intervention cannot over-ride the economic power of private capital. We have this admission from reformists like Dr. Cairns who, it might be supposed, wants to control the economy without having the strategy or will to do so. We have the evidence from Chile, where multinationals like ITT, as well as local bourgeois and petty bourgeois elements and landowners were able to sabotage the economy, so undermining to one degree or another mass support for the government of Allende and rendering it susceptible to a long-prepared military coup.
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d military coup.

That the state is the state of the
economically dominant class is not primarily
due to the fact that its leading personnel
largely come from that class and that their
ideology in the main corresponds with the
dominant ideology, though these aspects are
important (and virtually inevitable). The
primary factor is that while the levers of
economic power are in the hands of one class,
political power cannot for an indefinite period
be exercised by another class. Or put another
way, a political power must have the support or
at least tolerance of the class or classes which
own or control the main sinews of economic
life.

Without that, the economically dominant
class is able to - and will - disrupt the economy,
facing the government with either loss of its
political support because it cannot guarantee
the livelihood of those who backed it, or having
to face a crucial fight to dispossess that class.

This will be difficult in the extreme if the
party or parties holding the political power
have not prepared themselves and their
supporters (especially ideologically, but also
organisationally) for such a struggle, whose
timing, moreover, is likely to rest largely in the
hands of its opponents. There are no
guarantees of victory in either case of course,
but a policy which disarms the revolutionaries
beforehand hardly helps.

Historical examples do not finally “prove”
any case, but they are useful nevertheless.
“Dual power” - classically, the few months
after the February 1917 Russian Revolution - is
notoriously and obviously unstable and
fleeting.

We also have the insistence of Lenin, in the
devastation following the wars of intervention
and the inadequacy of the Revolution’s own
economic base, that a deal would have to be
made with the peasantry, and to an extent with
some of the town bourgeoisie, to maintain
Soviet rule while an adequate economic base
could be built up. This gave rise to the New
Economic Policy.

In China, shortly after 1949, the economic
power of bourgeois elements in the towns -
especially traders - was used to create
shortages and put up prices to the detriment
of the population. This was foreseen and
countered by the government which had
accumulated reserves of grain and oil which
they put on the market at low prices. This
provided for the needs of the people - and also
caused the profiteers economic as well as
political losses.

Private capital today, in the form of
monopolies and multinationals, has, if
anything, a still bigger whiplash over
governments than it did previously. It also has
more possibilities for manoeuvre nationally
and internationally because of its
concentration and connections.

This speaks against reliance on reformist
governments, or even governments which
include forces definitely oriented on socialism
being able to “control and curb” monopolies
and multinationals for any length of time
without proceeding to socialism. For the
forces of capital can, and will when they think
suitable, “escalate” the struggle by economic
subversion, making the government take the
responsibility and undermining its mass base.

That is why, historically, marxists have
refused to participate in governments
presiding over capitalism, except in
exceptional circumstances.

Where the economy has not been suitably
developed, marxists have used the new state
power constructed after smashing the old one,
and the revolutionary fervor of the masses plus
the economic strength available to them, to
contain hostile or potentially hostile forces
while transforming the economy as rapidly as
possible.

This is quite different from a government
which lacks mass revolutionary backing - and
has not consistently propagated the
revolutionary view - trying to gradually take
away the basic economic power of the class
enemy in conditions where the previous state
is still basically intact.

From another angle, however, government
intervention in the economy is a source of
political tension and even crisis. As it has
developed, governments have had to take
more and more of the responsibility in the eyes
of the masses for ordering the economy to
ensure stability, growth and rising living
standards. This, despite the fact that they
cannot really discharge that responsibility or
fulfill the promises they make while the
bourgeois state remains and the dominant
economic power is still that of capital.

We need a two-pronged approach, I believe.
at one level to stress, for strategic purposes
and to raise class consciousness, that it is the
system of capitalism that is at fault, not
particular government weaknesses. This view
must be held to despite demands for elaboration of immediate programs far short of socialism which would cure inflation and economic crisis. At another level to point out that one kind of intervention is to be preferred to another - intervention to benefit the working class and potentially allied social forces at the expense of the capitalists rather than the other way round.

The struggle over government policy engendered by capitalist crises and the expectations that have been built up can thus help develop political crises advantageous for revolutionaries.

One obstacle to this is the erroneous view of the state mentioned above.

Another obstacle is the "structuralist" view which asserts that the role of a political party is wholly encompassed by the requirements of capitalism when it is in government, because it is operating the capitalist state. This has an essential truth applied to the Labor Party as the above discussion shows. Especially when the Labor Party as a whole and the great majority of its members do not envisage even at a propaganda or programmatic level, or on a utopian basis, the change to a socialist society. But this is a simplistic view denying the complexities of the state and politics asserted in other contexts; it neglects essential levers of political struggle, including making use of and seeking to develop differences and differentiation within classes, state and parties.

Another, increasingly important, aspect of state intervention in the economy is the attempt to establish incomes policies. This is not new in Australia, where state regulation of wages through arbitration courts has been in existence for most of this century. But it is relatively new in many other countries, and in Australia itself too, the development of rapid inflation has reinstated the issue.

A feature of the present economic crisis with high inflation and unemployment together, is that the "cure" for inflation favored by the capitalist class and the Labor government is wage reduction, or at least "wage restraint" to lift profit rates. But it is hard to sell, and the working class is strong enough to prevent it being enforced as it has been in previous crises.

Attempts by governments and many Labor Party and trade union figures to achieve this, however, give rise to tensions and conflicts at all these levels, and opportunities for revolutionaries.

While I do not want to go into it in detail here, it is essential also to recognise that revolutionary policy on wages only begins with opposition to wage restraint aimed to "solve" capitalist problems of recession, inflation, profit rates and new investment at the expense of the working class.

While class struggle against wage restraint policies increases the difficulties of capitalism and capitalist governments, thus in a way intensifying the crisis, no hopes should be placed in this being extended to the point where capitalism would be brought to the point of automatic collapse.

Keeping up with galloping inflation only increases the pace of the squirrel cage in which most workers find themselves, bringing a reaction of its own in the absence of a projection of a future which will radically change the situation. It is shortsighted in the extreme to play down propagation of socialist ideas on the grounds that people are interested only in the here and now, and bettering their conditions within capitalism.

More importantly, viewed historically, the task of the working class is not merely to better its economic conditions. It needs to develop a vision of re-making society in the course of transforming its own situation. And, Lenin says somewhere, no new social system can establish itself without sacrifices (as well as support) by some class. The limitations of the purely economic struggle, accepted as ABC by Marx and Lenin, are only high-lighted by the present struggle over incomes policy, while more and more opportunities present themselves for propagation of ideas which go beyond them.

Another major area of government intervention in the economy is in taxation, by which up to one third of all revenue comes into the hands of the state from local to federal levels - especially the latter.

The total of government income, its sources, the rates at which taxation is assessed and on what social groups, and its disposition into various fields are all issues of class struggles. These involve not only issues of "who benefits at whose expense", but general issues and theories concerning the economy and social life as a whole, all of which is important for revolutionaries.

The Asprey and Mathews Reports on taxation reform tabled in parliament as this
article was being written, show just how crucial taxation policy has become for capitalism at its present juncture. Space precludes examination of the concrete issues at this stage.

Other aspects of state intervention in the economy - for example, attempts at planning - could also be discussed here, but I think enough has been said.

SOCIAL WELFARE AND EDUCATION

Despite the opposition of conservatives, die-hard private medical practitioners and others, the demand for reasonable social services in the form of pensions, health care, unemployment benefits, etc., now has the support of the great majority. The same applies to education, while demands for child care and other facilities related as well to the liberation of women are growing.

Who pays for these and the amount to be spent on them are issues of struggle involving the state per medium of government policy. No less important, however, is how they are controlled, by whom and above all, what purpose and whose interests are served by them.

These issues arise in all fields, but are especially evident in education. During this century, and particularly since the war, education has had to expand and develop rapidly to provide a work force combining the requisite "mix" of unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled, professional and "ideological" workers required by the changing demands of the capitalist economy as the productive forces have undergone rapid change.

Despite rhetoric by political and business interests and the educational "leaders" and bureaucrats of the state apparatus about education serving human development, these labor and social needs of capital have been the main concern of the state in the field of education.

A growing number of people, especially educational workers, and most significantly those undergoing the education, are now taking the rhetoric seriously and questioning the control, content and purpose of the education system.

More coercive and ideological power flows from this state involvement on the one hand. But on the other increasing tensions and conflicts and moreover take on a general political flavor, precisely because of the state being tied up in it. State involvement becomes a two-edged sword.

ECOLOGY, RESOURCES, POLLUTION

These are relatively new problems, though of course state responsibility for provision of water supply, sewerage, and "public health", is of long standing and can come under the heading of pollution control. The new scope of the problems in their totality derives from the development of technology, consumerism and in general from pursuit of private profit without consideration of social needs.

The spread of the private motor car, decline of public transport, the concrete jungle of the cities, smog and air pollution, despoliation of forests for woodchips, destruction of the natural environment (for example the threat to Fraser Island) are but some of the most obvious results.

Another article in this issue goes into more depth and raises other sides, but the main point for discussion here is that the state is forced by the growing problems and the mounting mass demands to take political responsibility for acting - or failing to act. But it is the capitalist state, and cannot over-ride the fundamental profit-seeking drive of the system. Indeed, the present recession and effort to lift profit rates has predictably led not only to employer assaults on green bans and pressure to further intensify the rape of the environment, but also to government retreats from previously announced intentions.

This brief examination of the modern capitalist state I believe reinforces the general validity of the "classical" marxist theory on the state. It also speaks against views which regard the enhanced role of the state as an insuperable obstacle to revolution, and against any strategy which counts on "piecemeal" change. It further points up the likelihood, even inevitability, of political crises in a growing number of areas. Revolutionaries should take all this into account in their tactics and strategy.

To speak of crises and upheavals is not to say that the revolution is just around the corner, or even likely to be on the agenda within some definite time. By any criteria, it seems to me, development of revolution in
most industrially advanced countries - and particularly Australia, which is possibly the "luckiest" or most favorably placed (for capitalism) of all - is likely to be a protracted process.

But protracted does not mean smooth, gradually advancing in an even way towards the goal. Social life in general, and especially today, is I believe, likely to be turbulent, with class struggles on a great variety of issues becoming at times very acute.

"Motion, in its turn, is regarded not only from the standpoint of the past, but also from the standpoint of the future, and, at the same time, not in accordance with the vulgar conception of the 'evolutionists', who see only slow changes, but dialectically: 'in developments of such magnitude twenty years are no more than a day' (Marx) ...At each stage of development, at each moment, proletarian tactics must take account of this objectively inevitable dialectics of human history, on the one hand utilising the periods of political stagnation, or of sluggish, so-called 'peaceful' development in order to develop the class consciousness, strength and fighting capacity of the advanced class, and, on the other hand conducting all this work of utilisation towards the 'final aim' of the movement of this class and towards the creation in it of the faculty for practically performing great tasks in the great days in which 'twenty years are concentrated.' "

(Leonin - "Karl Marx").

The revolutionary forces need to equip themselves both ideologically and organisationally to make appropriate responses. This cannot be done in any detailed sense, for the specific issues and circumstances of sudden outbreaks are seldom predictable (at any rate, seldom predicted) and usually surprise even most participators in them. A few examples are the outbreak of the February revolution in Russia, the Dreyfus case, and the May 1968 events in France, and the overthrow of the Portuguese fascist dictatorship last year. At a lower level, the upsurge over the penal clauses of the arbitration acts with the jailing of Clarrrie O'Shea in 1969, though felt by many to be maturing, far exceeding anything that could have been reasonably predicted beforehand.

Of the Dreyfus case - the frame-up of a Jewish captain in the French army in 1894* - Lenin wrote:

"Let us not forget that the French bourgeois republic, for example, in a situation which from both the international and national aspects was a hundred times less revolutionary than the present, such an 'unexpected' and 'petty' immediate cause as one of the many thousands of dishonest tricks the reactionary military caste play was enough to bring the people to the verge of civil war!"

(Left Wing Communism).

Such outbursts focus the normally suppressed and diffuse discontent, anger, strivings and even fantasies of masses of people, revealing more about the actual results of the totality of capitalist contradictions acting on the people than is usually possible from purely theoretical analysis.

The test for revolutionaries is far less in the area of crystal gazing than in the "strategic conceptions" which are based on analysis of the continuing contradictions of the society in which they work. This is a kind of prediction it is true, but its main value is enabling the revolutionaries to orient themselves reasonably quickly to what is happening so they can intervene empathetically and help push things in a revolutionary, rather than a reformist, or some other direction.

So the issue of whether "upsurges" and "sudden and explosive challenges" should be included in the political resolution of the CPA 24th National Congress was more than a pernickety argument about words, or a personal question as to whose version was to be accepted. It involved strategic conceptions concerning revolution and social development in general, and the nature of the period we are in, in particular. It also involved conceptions of the state in modern capitalist society, for the above contention did not stand alone, but was associated with other views about the possibility or otherwise of piecemeal transformation of the state.

I think all these issues concerning the state and its relationship to our strategy should figure also in the discussion preceding our 25th Congress.

* Dreyfus was convicted of treason and imprisoned in 1895, retriend in 1899 and acquitted in 1906.