the australian left: theory, strategy, practice

The process of fragmentation and renewal of the left, which in recent years has proceeded apace in Australia as it has throughout the world, has led to the formation of a number of left groups, tendencies and parties. In Australia, these groups and parties have tended to follow an international pattern — that is, they adhere to the programs and policies of some tendency which exists in at least a number of countries, even though they may not formally be linked with an international organisation. There are, of course, specific features of the Australian left, as there are of the left in any country, but the point is that there is a definite pattern to be discerned in the re-formation of the world left, especially in the advanced capitalist states. This pattern of differentiation of the left reflects, by and large, real differences of attitude towards the present social reality and how to change it.

What theoretical differences are there between various left groups, and why do these exist? What are the important differences in strategic perspective, and how is one to assess them? What criteria can be used to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of the different strategies? What tactics are used by the various groups in pursuing their stated aims? Is there a gap between the theory and practice of the left? How should the left debate and test its differences?

Theory

The theoretical differences on the left are many and varied, and are often difficult to separate from strategic, tactical and personality differences, all of which are often justified in theoretical or pseudo-theoretical terms. However, there are discernible main areas of disagreement, four of which seem basic:

1) the kind of socialist society aimed for;
2) estimation of the nature of the period we are living in, and the type of critique made of capitalist society;
3) view of the possibilities and dynamics of change and what social forces constitute the main basis for change;
4) the type of theory preferred: open/closed, fundamentalist/innovatory, dogmatic/scientific.

(Many differences listed under 1), 2) and 3) eventually come down to this.)

1) While the various left trends (ranging from the anarchists on one hand to left reformists on the other) are more or less agreed on the broad outlines of the future society we aim to bring about, there are substantial and crucial differences. These centre particularly around the degree of autonomy, democracy, decentralisation and self-management to be aimed for in the period immediately following the seizure of power. While there are some superficial views which see no role for any planning or central management at all, we believe that the tendency on the left is to err in the other direction — to place undue emphasis on the role of central institutions, organisations and parties. But it must be said that the main problem in this area is the lack of any analysis of what the future socialist society might, or should, be like. What most groups have in common, whether they believe in bureaucracy or are against it, workers' control or the party apparatus — all are united in their use of the word "socialism" in an abstract, almost mystical, way.

Socialism, quite rightly, is seen as the answer to the ills of capitalism, but so often that is all it is seen as. There is little attempt to show concretely how the various problems which are insoluble under capitalism would be tackled under socialism. This may seem a minor point but, in fact, it is closely related to the strategies adopted in the fight for socialism. An abstract, far-off conception of socialism tends to foster "great day" strategies which look forward to the inevitable collapse of capitalism, which will just as inevitably be followed by support for the socialist alternative and the socialist revolution. There is no attempt to link specific features of the socialist alternative to the specific problems which people feel under capitalism.

While the CPA still has much to do in the elaboration of a model of the socialist society it stands for, it has gone further in doing this than any other group on the Australian left, and further than most in the world left. This model is there for criticism, discussion and improvement; others should indicate their disagreements or otherwise with it.

2) While virtually everyone on the left sees the present as a period of crisis for capitalism, there are great differences on the nature and degree of the crisis, and what it means. There are those who see any crisis of capitalism simply in economic-structural terms, and some of them see an imminent major economic collapse. Their critique of capitalism tends to confine itself to stating that capitalism cannot organise the economy properly and eventually this will lead to an economic crisis which will only be resolved by instituting a socialist economy. This position sees other aspects of the crisis of capitalist society as peripheral and unimportant, or to be left aside until after the socialist revolution.

This article was written by Brian Aarons for the editorial committee.
As a reaction to this constipated, conservative view, there are those who forget economic-structural factors altogether, concentrating purely on cultural and ideological issues. We argue for the necessity of a total understanding and critique of capitalism, in all its aspects, ranging from economic analysis to the moral and psychological components. We see the crisis of capitalism as expressing itself in all areas. Moreover, the relative importance of any aspect changes with time, so that at one period economic factors may dominate, while at others the economy is relatively unimportant and the crisis of capitalist society takes a cultural, moral or ideological form. Which aspect may bring about the final downfall of capitalism is a matter for speculation, but the important thing for revolutionaries is to analyse and understand all the factors which may contribute. Indeed, it is probably true to say that only the maturing of crises in a whole number of spheres over a period of time, will create the preconditions for revolution.

3) It is in the analysis of the possibilities of change, how change is likely to occur and who is likely to bring it about, that many of the real differences lie. For a start, there are the long-standing reform or revolution arguments, but even within the revolutionary movement there are sharp and bitter theoretical disagreements about these issues.

Traditionally, marxism has seen the working class — all those who have nothing but their labor power — as the main revolutionary force in capitalist society. We see no reason to change that view, so long as we understand the vast changes in the class structure of capitalist society, and see that things are a deal more complicated than the simple picture of industrial workers versus capitalists. We now live under what has been described as neo-capitalism, which has a multitude of features that distinguish it from the capitalism of Marx' or Lenin's day.

One such feature is that the class of all those who sell their labor power in order to live is a highly structured and stratified entity, consisting of various segments and sub-segments. Each of these occupies a slightly different place in the social structure and undergoes different life-experiences, which produce different forms of consciousness. What is needed is an understanding of these forms and their likely evolution. But what we so often get is a retreat to marxist dogma, and the nominating of the industrial working class as the only revolutionary force, while all other sectors are middle class vacillators. Conversely, there are those who equally dogmatically pronounce the working class dead as a force for change, turning their attention to other sections or else to other societies.

We believe that in the conditions of modern capitalism, all sections of the working class must be seen as potential revolutionary forces, but to varying degrees and in different ways (for instance, the membership and leadership of revolutionary parties may tend to come from different sections at different times, and revolutionary consciousness may come to one group of workers sooner than to another). What is needed is analysis of these issues, not a priori assumptions and dogmatic assertion.

4) At the root of many theoretical differences there is the question of what type of theory is preferred. This is often largely a question of personal psychological preferences, but more important there are the wider intellectual and philosophical questions. While it is true that left-wingers in general are highly ideological creatures, particularly when compared with society at large, it is also true that at one extreme ideology becomes almost a mystical religion, while at another a totally empirical anti-theoretical approach is adopted (this is in itself an ideological position of sorts).

Many individuals and groups on the left are, at heart, fundamentalists — there are certain tenets, propositions and beliefs which cannot be questioned whatever the circumstances. While in everyday political activity, such people are often effective (not least because of the appeal of simplistic solutions and slogans) and creative, there usually comes a point where dogma interferes with reasoning and fundamental myths overshadow fundamental principles. There is no group which is completely free from this sort of thing, but some have a worse dose of it than others.

The anti-theoretical extreme is dangerous, and in any case no solution to the problems, but we believe that the most urgent problem presently confronting the left is that of narrow-minded fundamentalism. At a time when there are both the necessity for, and the possibility of, an innovatory approach to marxist theory, there has been a strong resurgence of the dogmatic use of marxism. Even elements of the new left, who only a few years ago scoffed at marxism (quite often making valid criticisms of it) have now joined or formed groups which espouse the narrowest conceptions of Marxism, or Marxism-Leninism, or Maoism or Trotskyism. Needless to say, and here we feel that our own approach is more in keeping with that of the classical marxists, these people, in breadth of vision and imagination have very little in common with their historical heroes, whoever these may be. Such is the case with any mystical approach to theorists and theories. There is need for much more theoretical effort and we hope to continue our work in this area*.

**Strategy**

Explicitly or implicitly, most of the differences of the left boil down to disagreements about the

* A recent effort *Australian Capitalism: Towards A Socialist Critique*, by Kirsner and Playford will be reviewed in depth in a subsequent issue.
strategy needed to overthrow capitalism and create a socialist society. And, we would assert, many of these disagreements in turn boil down to arguments about how consciousness changes, i.e. arguments about how the masses are to be won over to, or will come to adopt, the ideas of socialism. The central problem for revolutionaries is how the hold of capitalist ideas and values over the mass of the people can be broken, and the relative importance of objective-structural factors versus subjective-cultural factors in this process.

Numerous strategic positions, either stated or implicit in the practice of various groups, are taken up. In assessing them, we need not only to look at what they think of themselves, but to try and assess, according to certain criteria, the actual meaning of their strategy. To illustrate this point, we can imagine a continuum of strategies ranging from right-wing reformist to ultra-left posturing. While some groups would place themselves at the left end of the political spectrum, we might judge their practice as being in fact reformist. An example is the Labour Press group — Australian representatives of the Healyite tendency in the Trotskyist movement. This group castigates in harsh terms the rest of the revolutionary left, accusing everyone else of being Stalinist, revisionist, reformist, anti-working class and unmarxist. One might think from the language of their critique that they represented the genuine and pure Marxist revolutionary tradition. Yet, as Denis Freney's article in this issue indicates, their own strategy suffers from a strong dose of economism and reformism: their main immediate demand is the election of a Labor Government "pledged to socialist policies". Thus a "hard" line in theory may go hand in hand with a "soft" line in practice (and vice versa).

Aside from those who openly advocate a reformist-gradualist strategy, most on the left claim to be genuine revolutionaries who pursue the correct course. Each will criticise other groups for ultra-leftism, sectarianism, revisionism, right-opportunism or conservatism. We would suggest that everyone must judge for themselves the validity of each group's claims, and its criticisms of others. This should be done critically, and with attention not only to what a group says, but to what it does. We put forward here a suggested method by which the left should judge itself. We ask others to state their criteria of judgment, along with their views on the questions here discussed.

If we accept as the crucial problem the breaking of the hold of capitalist ideology, and its replacement by socialist ideas, then the key strategical argument is about how this can be done, and/or how it will come about. Our position, briefly stated, is that great emphasis must be placed on the dissemination and popularisation of the socialist alternative to all aspects of capitalist society. However, this alternative will not be accepted simply by argumentation, debate and discussion (although these are more important than many allow). Its very strength depends on a large degree on the extent to which it links up with the everyday experience of the masses — that is, the extent to which it explains their problems and offers a convincing alternative in such a way that inchoate feelings, thoughts and wishes crystallise and are understood when socialist ideas are put. What is important here is not the strength of socialist ideas in isolation, nor the degree to which people's experience by itself makes them unhappy with the status quo, but rather the dynamic relation between the two.

Without a maturing crisis in the social structure, economic relations, culture, politics and reflections of this in mass psychology and consciousness, there can be very little appeal of a revolutionary alternative. Conversely, without an alternative which is appropriate to the given conditions of the crisis the vast mass of people will not be won over to a position of active opposition to the system, and will certainly not be convinced that they should overthrow the system in favour of something else. Hence the effectiveness of any left strategy must be judged on how well it matches up to the needs of this dynamic.

Firstly, we can make a general point about the difference between reformist, revolutionary and pseudo-revolutionary (ultra-left) strategies. The reformist strategy, in either its conscious or unconscious variants, concedes too much to the existing situation and the low level of mass consciousness. It seeks to get around this by cautious manoeuvring and gradual changes, by patching up the system in "nice" (i.e. acceptable) ways, hoping that in this way, socialism will somehow come about of itself ("socialism by stealth"). Of course, it must be said that either initially or eventually the proponents of reformism do not really believe in socialism at all, but in a reformed capitalism. To this extent, they reinforce and create mass backwardness, even if their initial intention was to overcome that very backwardness.

The ultra-left, insofar as it has a worked-out strategy, proceeds from the assumption that the masses already believe in socialism or can be easily convinced to believe in it. All that holds them back is the treachery of union and party leaders — the main enemies who must be smashed to clear the way for a socialist revolution. Part and parcel of ultra-leftism is to be out of touch with existing conditions. They see massive crises (present or future) for the system where none exist (the Healyites are particularly good at this, yearly predicting an economic crisis of major proportions, heedless of the fact that last year's crisis did not eventuate) and they are usually out of touch with the real moods of the workers. Their ideas and theories are usually simplistic and much of their political argumentation consists of shouting formulas and esoteric slogans, few of which the average worker is likely to under-
stand. Paradoxically, an ultra-leftist in theory is often a reformist in practice, as can be seen from an examination of the practice of maoist trade union officials, or the tactics of the Socialist Labour League (Labour Press).

Lelio Basso, an Italian marxist, suggested some years ago that there are, in fact, common features of reformism and ultra-leftism: "... subordinate reformism and Bolshevik extremism are two faces of the same phenomenon, the dissociation of the final socialist objective from the daily struggle". This suggests a definition of a genuine revolutionary strategy. Such a strategy seeks to:

(a) understand at any given moment the actual mood and level of understanding of the masses, i.e. their state of mind at any point of time;
(b) to analyse and understand the structural features of the system and their likely future evolution;
(c) to work out a model of socialism which caters fully to individual and collective human needs;
(d) to create a state of tension between the accustomed habits and modes of thinking of people and the ideas advanced by revolutionaries. To do this by linking up revolutionary ideas to problems which people see as issues (or to get people to see that there are problems where previously they thought none existed) and by choosing issues which are not easily solved within the system;
(e) to analyse the experience of the movement as it continually tries to put this strategy into practice. That is, to analyse society as a dynamic system, with ourselves as part of that system, not as something static or apart from us and our efforts. This is what a "marxist analysis" surely means.

Taking the foregoing as our criteria, we can assess the worth of strategies put forward by various left groups.*

- The Maoists — CPA (M-L) — the Healyites (Socialist Labour League) and some small revolutionary groups hold ultra-left views about the dynamics of revolution. They have simplistic notions about the realities and dynamics of capitalism, and have little idea of what people think, feel and want.

- The SPA and the ALP left, with the exception of some in the Socialist Left, adopt reformist strategies but sometimes make genuine contributions to left and progressive movements.

- The CPA and the Revolutionary Marxist Tendency of the Fourth International (RMG — supporters of Michael Pablo) are the only groups who lay great stress on self-management under socialism and struggles for workers' control, and people's power at all levels.

- The CPA, the SWL and the RMG have more flexible views about the dynamics of revolution — the SLL, CPA (M-L) and, in a different way, the SPA, all hold simplistic and determinist views about revolution.

- Only the CPA has fully incorporated into its strategy the Gramscian (and Leninist) notions of the fight against hegemony of capitalist and conservative ideas.

- Various intellectual groupings (e.g. the group around Arena) have done important theoretical work but little if anything in suggesting strategies and actions on the basis of this, and show very little sign of helping to implement their own ideas.

- The CPA (M-L) SLL and SPA all adhere to a fundamentalist, dogmatic version of marxist theory. To a much smaller degree, this also applies to the SWL. All these groups to one extent or another follow overseas "heroes". Internationalism does not mean blindly following an international organisation, but requires first and foremost independent thinking and activity by everyone.

- The SPA, the CPA (M-L) and the pro-Russian opposition in the CPA all adopt models of socialism developed in other conditions and places, which have grave deficiencies and which, in any case, cannot provide an attractive alternative to advanced capitalism. To take only one point, when personal and social liberty are important issues, the appeal of bureaucratic and undemocratic states is hardly likely to be large.

- The CPA has alone put forward in some detail what type of socialism it stands for, although the RMG has developed furthest the theory of self-management.

- The CPA, and to a lesser extent, the SWL-SYA and the CPA (M-L) are the only groups really active in all the important mass political movements: anti-war and anti-racism, women's liberation, etc. Other groups remain outside of these, isolated from the large numbers of uncommitted people who are active in them. Some left groups like to criticise and pronounce from outside about what should be done by these movements (e.g. the RMG during the Moratorium, the Australian Socialist group during the Moratorium and the "Stop the Tours" campaign) but are rarely to be seen actively participating.

- All the trotskyist groups (SWL, SLL, RMG) are isolated from the workers' movement except via the ALP, having no real industrial base of their own.

- By and large, all groups except the CPA adopt a rigid model of the revolutionary party. For the CPA (M-L) and the SPA this is a hang-over from the Stalin Era; for the trotskyist groups it seems to have been adopted as an over-reaction to the recognition of Lenin's correctness in his debate with Trotsky on organisation. However all these groups have lost the basic content of the
The test of any revolutionary theory ultimately lies in its ability to interpret, explain and act as a guide for changing society. Hence, any theory or strategy which is seriously put forward must be submitted by its proponents to critical tests of this ability. This requires, in the first place, that theories be formulated in a concrete, testable form and not couched in oracular terms so that they are capable of any interpretation and re-interpretation or justification after the event. Further, it requires that theories and strategies be tested in practice, which, in turn, requires that proponents of various ideas should act on them, and not simply be carping critics or armchair leftists. This is not a matter of demanding that everyone should do something before they put forward ideas and criticise* but of seeing that until differences are in some way tested out they remain in the realm of speculation.

There is, in fact, a certain divorce between theory and practice on the Australian left. This occurs between groups, within groups and within individuals. On the one hand, the activist and theorist functions are too often completely separated in different individuals, and on the other, there is a failure to act according to the theories proposed. A good example of the former occurred at the Socialist Scholars’ Conference held in 1970. There was much hostility between “activists” and “scholars”, each tending to exaggerate the importance of their own work and to belittle the work of the other. There was little recognition of the need for people to be involved in both theoretical and practical work, or of the need for theorists and activists to constructively discuss issues. While a separation of functions is partly inevitable (it is impossible to write a good book while totally immersed in everyday activity and vice versa) it is also true that activists too often get into a routine without thinking about what they’re doing, while radical and socialist scholars can be so isolated from the experiences of the movement that their “theory” loses relevance.

All that said, what individuals and groups on the left do and say in their practice provide the most reliable guide to the real content and orientation of their ideology. Everyone on the left may say they stand for “socialist democracy” and national self-determination, but those who support the suppression of dissent in Eastern Europe and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, lose all credibility for their claims no matter what rationalisations they may invent. When Maoists claim to support all struggles for national liberation and then support the bloody suppression of Bangla Desh, their image becomes a little tarnished, to say the least. When Trotskyists criticise bureaucracy and bureaucratic practices, but behave in bureaucratic ways within their own organisations or in the mass movements, it is hard to see any real guarantee that they would run a socialist state in a non-bureaucratic way. If a revolutionary activist in a trade union claims to be doing more to foster socialist ideas among his members than a left-reformist, but rarely states his socialist ideas in public, acts like any good reformist official, and perhaps even collaborates with right-wing officials, then it is to be doubted that the revolution gains anything much by his election to the position.

It is a measure of the problems confronting us that all the above examples exist. They can only be overcome by constant criticism and analysis of the behaviour and activity of individuals and organisations (and naturally we include the CPA and its members in this).

Differences

Given that there exists on the left substantial differences of theory, strategy and practice, it is valuable to work out a framework within which these can be discussed and debated, if not resolved (which most of them almost certainly will not be).

Firstly, ordinary standards of honesty and fairness in debate should be applied. Any group which practises the dishonest methods of argument which Labour Press resorts to is hard to conduct a discussion with, because there isn’t even a common basis for methods of debate. We would propose that the following principles be observed in debate:

- Honesty and fairness in stating your opponent’s real views.
- Avoid labels as sticks to beat opponents with, unless these are clearly defined. (Labour Press for instance calls all communists “Stalinists”, whether they support CPA policies, are opposed to them, or belong to the SPA.)
- Aim to treat everyone according to the same criteria; and not apply one standard to opponents and another to ourselves (or members of our own organisation).
- Refrain from scoring points over trivial or minor issues (e.g. the fact that somebody doesn’t cough their views in accepted marxist jargon) and try always to look at the real content of differences.

For our part, we will try to proceed according to these principles. We will make further critiques of various trends on the left, including appraisals of the CPA. The pages of ALR are open to anyone else who wishes to put forward views about theory and strategy or the merits of various groups.