symposium ~
workers' control

Following the Workers' Control Conference held at Newcastle, NSW, in April of this year, ALR asked a group of workers some questions about the significance and prospects of this movement. The questions, and the answers to them, appear below.

QUESTION: Have you any direct experiences of workers' control activities? How do you evaluate them, especially in regard to the questions raised in this symposium?

ANSWERS

Joe Owens: I have been connected with a number of worker control activities on building jobs. With two exceptions, the workers generally regarded the action as a means to gaining a short-term aim although individuals in the struggle began to think about the "outer limits" of workers' control. The two exceptions tested the "outer limits" with differing degrees of success, and some failures.

The symposium conducted by ALR has made me question more deeply the experiences I have undergone in these struggles. It has not provided any quick answers -- indeed that is not its function -- but it is searching in its approach, and therefore of great value in the arena of continuing debate on this subject.

Judy Gillett: Being a teacher and a member of Women's Liberation, the only direct experience I have had of workers' control activities has been in close connection with teacher/student relationship and the combatting of sexism and elitism in all its forms in schools.

I believe this type of action to widen and improve the quality of control over one's work area and, ultimately, one's life, is a vital one, both in its role of establishing successful experience of one's own worth and ability and its subsequent effect of breaking down bureaucratic, authoritarian organisational forms and challenging capitalist hegemonic ideas of authority, experience, division, leadership, submissiveness, complacency, cynicism and alienation.

John Wallace: Two jobs I have worked on -- the Sydney Opera House mechanical stage project and the Johnson and Johnson factory at Botany -- have seen actions where workers have gone beyond traditional trade union dispute tactics into the territory of workers' control. The workers at the Opera House exploited their particular situation and gained great financial rewards, at the same time eclipsing one management completely and forcing the second into playing little more than a nominal role.

Two points of extreme importance -- first, the two unions involved, the Builders' Laborers' Federation and the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union -- fully backed and gave valuable leadership throughout; second, the removal by the workers without reference to the official leadership of the unions concerned of demarcation barriers. This break-
down of craft barriers, once authoritarian pressure had been removed, was remarkable, and perhaps the most important contribution to the debate around workers' control. The Opera House workers became, for all practical purposes, a community of workers where each man could be judged by his individual effort rather than by his acquired skill.

The dispute at Johnson and Johnson was quite different. The fitters (AMWU and ASE) and electricians were only a small percentage of the total workforce and were involved only on maintenance. The bulk of the workers at Johnson and Johnson are process workers in the Shop Assistants' Union whose officials were extremely hostile to us and our actions.

It is true that the workers concerned debated at length the work-in tactic eventually agreed upon. I and another metal worker "worked-in" over a period of two days and were finally arrested under the NSW Government's Summary Offences Act.

The dispute lasted for about five weeks and, during that time, the workers became increasingly unhappy about the situation. This was to be expected, however, as Johnson and Johnson had no history of industrial struggle and, in fact, the company (wholly US-owned) was very paternalistic, wages were reasonably good and the conditions were excellent.

However, the fact that these workers did take a "work-in" decision, and later worked a 35-hour week for two and a half weeks (despite provocation as a result of which 12 out of 63 fitters left during the dispute) shows that workers will respond to new ideas, particularly when a principle is involved.

This may not sound like a successful dispute, but I still feel that workers at J & J gained something which will guide them in future disputes. One point in particular was that the almost complete reliance, in the very early stages, on the advice of the union official from the AMWU (the only union which involved itself at official level) gradually lessened as the workers became more confident and competent in debate at meetings.

Once again, it must be said that the AMWU fully endorsed all the actions taken, and on the arrest of their two members arranged legal representation and set in motion a campaign against the Summary Offences Act in conjunction with other unions (BLF, FED & FA, Teachers).

Max Ogden: No, except to the extent that such actions are specifically discussed at shop stewards' schools. In that regard, there seems little doubt that the morale of stewards and workers involved is certainly good, and such examples are very effective as an indication of the potential for other workshops.

Dave Lofthouse: The immense financial power of a multi-national corporation, and the remote and bureaucratic management, have forced workers to realise that old traditional forms of struggle have become inadequate.

The commandeering of the Pillar-NACO plant by the workers a year ago proved to be a blow to the management's confidence and a boost to the struggling workers' morale. It was one way of attracting the attention of the Australian people to what was going on in pursuit of profit. The occupation of a plant discourages would-be scabs.

The main weakness in our efforts was the lack of contact between shop stewards and shop committees throughout the Rio Tinto Zinc empire in Australia.

What is the main reason in your view for the importance now being attached to workers' control? Do you see it mainly as a tactic (e.g., a new tactic in pursuit of the aims of the trade unions), or as a strategy to bring about social change?

Joe: The importance attached to workers' control is because it is recognised as part of the wider political movement for self-management. Care must be taken to avoid workers' control being restricted to narrow tactics aimed at achieving traditional trade union demands. We must also be careful to ensure that whatever measure of control has been achieved through the struggle is not handed back upon "victory." Workers' control must be used in conjunction with other grassroots movements as a vehicle for radical social change.

Judy: I believe the main reason for the importance now being attached to workers' control is the increasing awareness (of radicals and revolutionaries in industry and elsewhere) of the necessity to encourage workers to counteract the all-pervading techniques and ideologies of capitalism which maintain the alienated and subservient ethic of workers.
Workers' control is a real attempt at challenging this very basic ideology in an aggressive and positive, not defensive and negative, way. When seen as a first stage in developing counter-hegemonic strategy it has very real potential for social change. I believe trade unions should become involved in workers' control struggles as I believe it is in those struggles that a real revolutionary platform can be established by them.

John: Perhaps many workers see workers' control tactics (occupations, work-ins, etc.) as another weapon in their armory to achieve traditional trade union aims and, in fact, the use of these tactics in disputes can be highly successful.

For many years, the revolutionary party (parties) have endeavored to change the political consciousness of workers through propaganda and by trying to convey to workers the political implications of their struggles. Newspapers, pamphlets, political meetings have, to my mind, not basically changed workers who have continually sought more material wealth -- as they have been conditioned to do by the far greater and more sophisticated power in the hands of authorities in our society.

I am convinced that, almost overnight, people, not only in their working situations but in community situations also, change dramatically when involved in attempts to encroach upon "normal" prerogatives of the employer or political authority. No one can possibly be exactly the same again, and the more these actions around workers' control continue, the more aware the people involved become. The workers and the people in community action groups are arriving at a point where social change can, and I think will, accelerate over the next few years.

Pierina Pirisi: I think that, apart from the general shift to the Left in the Australian political scene, the various work-ins (UCS, Harco, Opera House, etc.) and the actions taken by the builders laborers and residential groups in defence of the environment and for control over production have done a lot to popularise the concept. In recent times, the Master Builders' Association has got out a lot of publicity on the workers' control movement in their attacks on the builders laborers.

I think, also, it has something to do with the development of movements like that over the environment and the liberation of women which are, in fact, asking for the same rights as the workers' control movement, though in a different context.

I see workers' control both as a tactic and as a strategy for social change; but, in my view, its long-term importance as a strategy is far greater than its short-term value as a tactic. I think it is valid as a tactic in pursuit of trade union aims if it does not confine itself to that.

Max: From a revolutionary viewpoint its importance is as a strategy for social change. However, it can't be divorced from normal trade union demands, and control-type actions are, in fact, more effective anyway in achieving union claims. Therefore, there are numbers of examples of such actions used by workers as the most effective action for their particular problems. Quite a deal of this is not necessarily new, but what is new is the recognition by revolutionaries of the great potential for politicisation which challenging for control offers, and hence the need to widen the movement and give it a clear anti-capitalist perspective.

Dave: In this age of the giant corporation in the Western world, with its bureaucratic remote control, geared to the accelerating technological revolution to make the maximum profit regardless of consequences to the people in this country or others, there is a growing realisation by working people that they must control the mode, purpose and quality of the production process which governs their livelihood and holds the key to their children's future. This growing awareness developed workers' control concepts and will develop the movement to be a force for social change. Workers will require their unions to assist and encourage this movement in short-term tactics, and a long-term strategy for the running of industry by the people for the benefit of people.

What connection, if any, do you see between workers' control and more traditional trade union issues and forms of struggle on the one hand, and newer issues and movements on the other?

Joe: There is a world of difference between workers' control and traditional trade union issues and struggles. The aim of workers' control is to place the running of factories and workplaces more and more into the hands of
the workers, whereas the traditional trade union struggle in the past has been for a bigger piece of the cake, but still leaving the lion’s share to the boss.

There is a distinctly similar character to workers’ control and other movements such as Women’s Liberation, Aborigines, environment groups, etc., in that they all seek to control their own destiny. As I said in answer to the first question these important struggles are all part of the movement for self-determination, and each one is related to the other. I feel there is a tendency for individuals within all groups to be parochial, and this must be avoided. We must recognise our inter-relationship.

Judy: There are very many similarities between the struggle for workers’ control and other forms of social struggle, e.g., women’s liberation and environmental struggles, etc., which also are struggles for self-determination, anti-authoritarianism, anti-exploitation and anti-divisiveness. Like workers’ control, these are also counter-hegemonic struggles.

Pierina: Traditional trade union issues and forms of struggle, if we mean by that struggles around wages and working conditions in the narrow sense, can be easily contained, as we can see in our everyday experience, because they don’t challenge the basic power structure of capitalism. In fact, the need for trade union collective bargaining is readily acknowledged by bourgeois economists as a form of the competition which is the basis of a capitalist economy.

This does not mean that these issues should not be taken up. Apart from the value they might have in themselves, the facts are that many workers have not, as yet, developed a trade union consciousness, let alone a revolutionary one.

I see it as a task for the workers’ control movement to try and inject new values into these issues, take them further, and transform them into a challenge, having in mind the necessity of developing workers’ control as a strategy for social change, as I said earlier. Connections between the workers’ control movement and other movements (environment, women’s liberation) are very deep, because, in fact, they are asking for the same rights: the right of workers to control their own work, the right of women to control their own lives, the right of people to control their own environment. I realise this is an over-simplified picture and all these movements have a complex character and can’t be easily defined in a few words, but what seems common to them is that all of them, in their different ways, demand as a right that people control their own lives. Therefore, I think that cooperation and discussion between these movements is essential in the struggle for social change.

Max: I have answered this to some extent in the previous question. To carry it further, I would say that workers’ control, if it is to emerge as the main tactic of the workers’ movement, must first be built out of the normal union issues around which struggle develops. Experience, to this stage, seems to indicate that control-type actions tend to develop around issues other than wages struggles, e.g., hire and fire, safety, attitude of managers, etc. This could indicate a point of departure from traditional union actions and wages issues. Workers’ control, precisely because it tends to break out of the limiting wages area, can develop a logical affinity with environment issues, women’s liberation and the like. This is not inevitable, but will only happen to the extent that these movements, and revolutionaries, set out to link up and identify each others’ interests.

Dave: The workers’ control movement can and will modernise the thinking of the unions to enable them to meet the challenges of the ‘70s and ‘80s. Without this modernisation in thinking, the unions will fail to protect and safeguard their members. The failure by the unions to adequately pursue issues related to the survival and democratic entitlements of their members will necessitate the workers’ control movement doing the job. Pollution of the environment and the energy crisis will not go away by ignoring them, and the first people to feel the effects are the working people. They will demand and devise methods of solving these problems.

**What relationship do you see between the workers’ control movement and the established trade union organisation? Do you see the movement influencing preparations for, and decisions at, the coming ACTU Congress?**

Joe: I believe that workers’ control is supplementary to trade union organisation. It assists the development of a strong grassroots union movement. Workers’ control with its built-in checks, balances and changes such as tenure
of office, etc., represents a threat to opportunism in the unions, and the greatest opposition comes from those unions or officials who seek to perpetuate their stay in power for opportunistic and political reasons. The rifts in the "Left" are being widened by differences of opinion on workers' control.

The resolutions and debate at the ACTU Congress on workers' control as opposed to worker participation will sort out "who's who in the zoo." The aim of the reformists will be for containment, and whilst no one expects any revolutionary decisions, the debate on worker control resolutions will be a highlight.

Judy: I believe that workers' control movement and established trade union organisations could and should be supplementary, i.e., I feel both are compatible if the interests of the workers are seen as primary. The fact that reformist trade unions are afraid to extend their areas of struggle into the arenas of direct confrontation with the very bases of capitalist organisation and control, in a permanent and consciousness-raising struggle, is one which radicals and revolutionaries are conscious of. I believe the movement will influence the coming ACTU Congress because it is posing direct and unavoidable questions and problems for the trade union movement... problems about capitalism's ability to contain workers' struggles, wage and price fixation, exploitation of the environment, industrial pollution, 35-hour week, etc. How far can the ACTU envisage struggle going without an ultimate challenge to the very form of society which perpetuates the conflicts of workers?

John: Already I believe the support for workers' control and the growing debate around it have moved some trade unions towards encompassing workers' control policies. The AMWU shop stewards' charter is a move to force upon employers far greater respect for "on the job" union representation. The bans placed on undesirable projects by the BLF, FED&FA, and the AMWU are a recognition by these unions that workers should have a voice in what, where, and how they should build. The Port Phillip Bay pipeline ban by the AMWU is another example of union action that is a workers' control action.

So we can say that:

a) workers' control tactics in disputes of a traditional nature (wage claims, sackings, etc.) change workers and highlight what is really possible if they had control;

b) when this situation occurs, and it has, pressure is applied increasingly by the workers on the unions for official adoption of more far-reaching policies and claims for workers' control;

c) as unions move into the field of workers' control they must link up with community groups seeking democratisation and liberation.

The workers' control movement must be a force which will change the attitudes, tactics and, eventually, the goals of trade unions, and also embrace other claims by growing liberation groups in the community.

Pierina: I don't think the workers' control movement should become the property of the trade unions, but I don't think it is practical to say that it should become an alternative to them. In my view it should develop independently and try to influence the trade unions to change from passive and bureaucratic bodies into active and democratic ones; from their defensive position into an offensive one. Workers' control of the unions should be one of the first demands and slogans of the workers' control movement.

The only practical solution, where Right-wing unions are involved, is to try to get the workers to change the union leadership, and put into practice the ideas of workers' control through the union. I don't say this is easy, or even always possible, but I can't see any other solution.

I think the preparations for the ACTU Congress would be influenced by the developments in the workers' control movement, may-be not so much following the Conference in Newcastle, but even more because of the present disputes in the building and power industries and elsewhere.

Max: This is a complex question, but as I said earlier, to imagine a workers' control consciousness arising without utilising and, at the same time, changing, the unions, is a dream. The relationship must be a complementary one whereby the unions protect the workers while they learn to mount offensives against the boss, and as such experience develops, the unions, in turn, will be strengthened and radicalised by the workers. Much of the ideas and action can and will be assisted and initiated from outside the union structures, but to do this without considering the
position of the union or unions would be disastrous, although there will undoubtedly be times when opposition to the unions, especially Rightwing unions, will be required.

In particular, if workers' control is to get anywhere, then special attention needs to be paid to the regeneration of the shop committee movement, and the attitudes of the unions will be crucial on this issue.

Dave: The relationship will be determined by the conditions and circumstances of the time, and the principled or otherwise stand either movement takes. The unions should assist and encourage the development of the workers' control movement.

Women participants at the Workers' Control Conference expressed criticisms of it. What was the nature of these criticisms, how do you evaluate them, and how were they, or should they be, received?

Joe: The women's criticism of the Workers' Control Conference was aimed at the inflexible procedure adopted by the conference which clearly showed male, trade union dominance. Many matters such as women's liberation, Aborigines, BLF environmental green bans, and their relationship with workers' control were not adequately discussed because no allowance was made for this in the agenda. It may have been better if the conference had broken up into commissions to allow deeper debate on such issues. I cannot stress to highly the inter-relationship that all these struggles have in the spectrum of workers' control.

Judy: From what I have heard, women participants at the conference expressed criticism of the way in which discussion was organised via the "Standing Orders." They felt, and I believe rightly so, that highly structured and organised gatherings tend to, and in fact do, inhibit those who are less articulate and less conversant with formal meeting procedure. This applies especially to women workers, and very often conscientious, enthusiastic male trade union officials forget this. However, I think that women's liberation experience is showing that the best way to combat this problem is to encourage women workers to learn and understand democratic meeting procedure, and to utilise it for their own improved experience, not to do away with organisation, but to use it democratically and responsibly. I think the domination of discussion at the Workers' Control Conference by an articulate, active few showed that some sort of democratic control is essential for the protection of the rights of the less articulate.

John: Some women participants were extremely critical of an apparent male sexist attitude by the National Workers' Control Conference committee and some male delegates. They made points very strongly and although perhaps arousing some antagonism at the time, must have stimulated much re-thinking among other oppressed groups as well as women. No criticism, particularly from workers who endorse workers' control, can be ignored, and the people involved in the workers' control movement must continually be re-evaluating attitudes and policies as long as these criticisms arise.

Pierina: As far as I understand it, women at the conference did not approve of the Standing Orders being prepared beforehand by the Planning Committee. As it was a conference on workers' control, they thought it more appropriate to let the workers themselves decide what kind of standing orders were needed, as it would have been a good experience of workers' control for them. I think it is very important that this question has been raised, not so much because of the standing orders themselves, which I have not seen, but because I think it is a good experience for people to realise that they can make their own rules, and in my opinion the workers' control movement should try and establish the widest possible form of workers' control among its own ranks. I think people don't feel so much a part of a meeting when rules are handed out to them, or not as much as they would had they made their own rules. Therefore, I don't think it would have been a waste of time to let people decide what kind of standing orders were needed in the circumstances.

Max: The criticisms of the women participants are no doubt bound up with the problems which women's liberation is all about, and so there are no simple solutions unless males are suddenly changed overnight. However, the tokenism of having a woman in the chair for example must be done away with, and the serious consideration of the problems of women workers must be the issue. Things like the lack of child care facilities at the conference, and the rules of debate, are issues which can be solved quickly in the future, and would not exacerbate the already glaring
problems of women workers. Obviously, the workers' control movement needs to consider questions like the rules of debate, as the old union formats can be manipulated, and maybe a whole new approach can be designed. The union movement is as yet a male movement and this was reflected in the conference to a large extent. It is obvious therefore that the workers' control movement has, as one of its major tasks, the development of equality in the workers' movement.

What obstacles, in the thinking of the workers, do you see to the development of the workers' control movement? What, in your experience, is the actual response to ideas of workers' control?

Joe: I believe the biggest obstacle to workers' control is adherence to traditional trade union procedures. Trade union leaders are generally wary of new actions which give the rank and file a large measure of control, and try to channel energies into well-beaten paths. There is a lively response to workers' control by the rank and file generally. The initiative released by such experimentation improves the calibre of workers in struggle, and this has created more interest and healthy debate than any other trade union issue. The recent switch-on of power by metal workers during the so-called power shortage in NSW is a highlight in this direction. Whilst there is a growing acceptance of the work-in, etc., I think that the average militant still regards it as a good industrial tactic, and here lies the need for political understanding and aims to be projected more into the debate around workers' control.

Judy: I think most negative reactions by workers to workers' control have been rooted in capitalist ideology expressed as the inability of workers to compete with intellectuals (staff) who know how to run industry, schools, etc. There are other factors, too, which add up to the same thing -- a defeatist and cynical attitude, perpetuated by society. Another great danger is the wooing of workers to the ALP's 'worker participation' schemes and all that they imply. In my experience, the actual responses of teachers to workers' control concepts have been mixed. Radical teachers are becoming very vocal and active in areas of education which involve direct challenges to the system, i.e., the school's role as conditioner for capitalism. They are directly challenging the old concepts and organising around new counter-hegemonic ones such as alternative schools, community schools, the ending of streaming, grading and assessments, control and organisation of schools by students and teachers, breaking down the institutionalised concept of education, and broadening it into a continuous education throughout life, as part of an interaction with, and for, the community.

John: All workers, in my experience, have not fought well, or at all, unless they have been able to relate directly to the demand made upon the employer. Traditional union demands for more money or conditions on the job can be easily seen, but beyond these narrow confines there is seldom any movement.

However, one important issue for which militant workers will enter dispute is that of preserving another worker's job when it is jeopardised by management. This control of firing is a workers' control demand. Workers generally see themselves as consumers, and the individual ownership of goods and property is their aim. They do consider that the boss should have many rights and it is difficult to persuade even the most militant workers to enter disputes for more control, or use what I would call workers' control tactics.

Pierina: As far as my experience goes, apathy, lack of desire for control and belief that the boss should have certain rights, are usually combined. Adherence to traditional trade union procedures and reformist ideas also occur together. About actual response to ideas of workers' control, I have no direct experience, but from what I know about workers' struggles, both here and in Italy, I think it is easier to get a practical response to ideas of workers' control as they arise around particular issues than to get workers interested in the theory of it. What happens is that workers don't really see these struggles as struggles for workers' control. I know, for example, of very advanced struggles which have taken place in some factories in central Italy, where they have factory councils directly elected by the workers which have won very important concessions on control of working conditions, dust and noise levels, speed of production lines, etc. But as far as I can understand from what I
read in an interview with the delegates on these jobs, there was no long-term perspective; these struggles were not seen as struggles for power. And I think there is a real danger in this, because these types of "directionless" struggles, advanced as they may be, can be and are being absorbed by capitalism into schemes of workers' participation which don't challenge, in fact, the basic power structure of capitalism.

Max: I think there are considerable grounds for optimism, and where the issues are argued out, the radical view usually wins out. However, undoubtedly the biggest obstacle is the mental blockage many workers confront when the challenge goes beyond certain limits. Ideas of the bosses' rights are deeply ingrained in workers, and this cannot be overcome in one go. Nevertheless, where this barrier is breached, whole new horizons open up and the potential is enormous.

Dave: Workers respond favorably to the logical argument for workers' control. The technological revolution, the recurring money crises of the Western world generated by the speculative binge of the multi-national corporations, the obvious pollution of our environment which already affects the quality of life, are examples of the failure of the promoters of the so-called free and healthy private enterprise. The seriousness of the situation has not yet hit home because so few have been directly affected, and therefore most avoid spending the time and energy needed to implement workers' control.

Do you see any problems or dangers in the development of the movement? For instance, attempts to divert it into schemes for "workers' participation" as in some European countries; dangers from success where factories are handed over to workers; diversion from the struggle for State power, etc.? How can these problems be overcome?

Joe: Attempts are already being made to divert the concept of workers' control towards "worker participation." Alternative ideas of union capitalism, job enrichment, seats on the board, etc., are simply a cloak to cover old ideas, and to seek to divert the struggle towards reformist concepts.

To avoid these pitfalls, political debate must take place with every struggle instituted. The constant theme of self-management, with the ultimate aim of State power in the hands of the workers, should be repeated. Care should be taken that successes, such as workplaces taken over, do not fall back to the status quo when attractive concessions are dangled. Control won must not only be held, but must be extended. There is no doubt that concessions will be made by both employers and governments when success is imminent (as was the case at the Sydney Opera House), and political understanding is necessary if workers are to withstand the sophisticated onslaught which is aimed at containment.

Judy: I believe the "worker participation" concept is perhaps one of the most serious problems. With teachers and students, the ideology of "democratic involvement" has an infamous history. Student councils and teacher involvement in decision-making, like any good "participation" scheme has succeeded in siphoning off some of the radical elements and alienating others. Its overall technique has been to deceive students and teachers into a false feeling of democracy and control, whilst the school and hierarchy still preserved and protected (often viciously) the role of education and the school system in perpetuating capitalist society.

John: Already the "workers' participation" lobby in the Labor Party and the trade unions is moving strongly with participation schemes and speaking out against workers' control. Workers' control is being portrayed as a form of "mob rule" (I think Ducker called it the dictatorship of the proletariat.) Workers' participation on the other hand is seen as a movement to form a binding partnership between the two sides of industry -- the junior partner, of course, will be the worker. I think the Australia Party will come up with a participation scheme and possibly some so-called "small l" liberals in the Liberal Party may do this also.

Workers' participation schemes cannot be ignored, but we must ensure that any such scheme, in fact, becomes a further step on the road to socialism under workers' self-management. All aspects of workers' participation schemes so far in operation (in Europe) must be analysed, their faults pointed out -- particularly the alienation of the workers from their supposedly elected representatives. Employers, certain union officials, and politicians can negotiate on a workers' participation scheme, but the result must be a
workers' control scheme.

Pierina: The danger of struggles for workers' control being contained through schemes of workers' participation is very real. Therefore, the movement should try to analyse every concrete situation and see it in the light of the struggle for social change. It might seem a very unrealistic way of putting the question, but I think we should not underestimate the ability of capitalism to adapt itself to changes in the thinking of the workers, as long as they don't challenge capitalism's basic power.

As far as dangers from success are concerned, I think it is clear that workers' control does not mean that the workers own the factories where they work. In fact, society as a whole should be the owner of the means of production. However, when work-ins take place, we are faced with the problems of workers having to run a factory in the interests of the community while, at the same time, being subject to pressures and competition from capitalists. I think this situation can't be handled over a long period, and if the factory is eventually handed over to the workers, they will be faced with the fact that they have to become like the capitalists if they want to survive in a capitalist economy.

As for workers' control struggles being a diversion from the struggle for State power, I don't think this is the case. I don't mean that there should not be a struggle for State power, but if we want the people to have State power, not just a particular party, workers' control is an essential part of the struggle for State power. Struggles to gain access to Parliament are also important in the struggle for State power if seen in that perspective, but not the most important in my view. On the other hand, State power without workers' control means, in my opinion, a bureaucracy which is little better than capitalism.

Max: There can be no doubt that the workers' participation schemes are being developed precisely as an antidote to control demands. The movement will need to be vigilant as many of these schemes will have the support of workers, and will be attractive. Our task will not simply be to attack them, but to put forward, and fight for, radical programs which expose and go far beyond the shams of participation, but are still seen as reasonable and winnable by the workers. It will be impossible to avoid all participatory schemes, as these will be reforms within the system and often won by struggle. It is also often difficult to work out what the effect of many reforms will be, as some will tend to radicalise, and others tend to integrate. Providing the movement is flexible, and critically examines all experience, it should be possible to go past workers' participation, but most importantly, where possible, to creatively use such schemes to further broaden the horizons in challenging for control.

The direction of the movement so far in Australia has tended to create confrontations with the State machine in a most effective way and so this has been positive in exposing the machine rather than being a diversion, e.g., when police have been called in during occupations and the like. Providing the direction of the movement has been maintained, it will play a positive role in exposing and challenging the State.

Dave: I can see the Establishment trying every method in the book to defeat the strategy of workers' control, from union officials on boards to saddling workers with obsolete plants. These moves will have to be seen for what they are and countered by the creative initiative of the workers on the job, according to the circumstances. Those who involve themselves in workers' participation, as in some European countries, will finish up as alienated from the mass of rank and file workers as the present management of the plant. Through control struggles, workers find out that they have been giving management credit for special skills which never existed and this experience will help workers to assess the value of the capitalist system itself.

How do you see the relations between the workers' control movement and the struggle for socialism? In what way do you think the movement will influence the kind of socialism achieved?

Joe: The relationship of the workers' control movement to the struggle for socialism is based on the concept of self-management. In developing towards socialism it will lay bare the rootless structures of modern multi-national capitalism as an institution of the people. The influence of workers' control lies in its depth, democratic methods, and its direct involvement of all concerned within it. This will have
a profound effect on the kind of new society achieved. It will certainly avoid the mistakes which have led to the shallowness of present-day socialist regimes. Along with the other grassroots movements in our society, one cannot over-emphasise the importance of workers’ control as a guideline and a means to the future of socialism.

Judy: The relationship between the workers’ control movement and the struggle for socialism is very basic. It is possible to achieve some kind of socialism where State power is still run by bureaucrats, but the workers’ control movement, I feel, very basically shows workers that grassroots organisation and control is not only possible and practical but it ensures the maintenance of true democracy for those who form the majority in society, the working class; that their hegemony is the one which fully satisfies the needs of a socialist society.

John: The struggle for workers’ control must be, ultimately, a struggle for socialism. Where the socialist politician fights in Parliament and in his party for socialist policies, the success of his struggle will depend a great deal on the demands being made outside by the community and the workers.

The workers’ control movement has to ensure that increasing demands for greater democracy at work are made. What is the use of a nationalised industry if a board of State bureaucrats are appointed by the government to run it without workers having any say even in the day-to-day “on the job” decision-making? This would merely replace private capitalism with State capitalism.

By making demands now for more control workers will eventually gain the necessary confidence and ability to play a meaningful role in a socialism which they have not only helped into being but which they themselves formed along the road.

By forcing employers to concede authority in areas presently held to be “sacred,” if and when industry is taken over by the State, those workers who would have fought and gained so much in the enrichment of their lives could not conceivably be expected to hand back this control just because the State had become the new owners.

Pierina: I don’t think there can be any kind of socialism without workers’ control, and in my view, only if workers’ control has been developed to its fullest extent throughout the whole of society can it reach its conclusion in a self-managed socialist society where the State power really belongs to the people. Development of workers’ control theory and practice is essential in establishing a revolutionary counter-hegemony, because it really represents an alternative to many of the basic ideas and values of capitalism.

Max: The relationship is crucial as I cannot see how an overall challenge to the system can be made without first laying the ideological and organisational basis in the workplace, and workers’ control makes this possible. In particular, workers’ control takes socialism out of the realms of distant dreams and posts it right in the everyday experience of workers. This is important as many people support socialism as a principle, but because the task appears so formidable, quickly shrug it off and go about the day-to-day problems. Workers’ control, however, opens up concrete alternatives which not only make socialism practical, but give it an urgency which distant dreams don’t have.

Workers who have won control over ever-wider areas of the bosses’ prerogatives, leading up to the beginnings of socialism by long, arduous, democratic struggle and organisation are not going to hand it all over too easily to a handful of bureaucrats and, therefore, such tactics have an inbuilt potential for a democratic socialism to emerge.

Dave: I consider that any efforts to wrest control of a plant from the management, whether over minor matters such as how a boss treats or speaks to workers, or over major matters such as the management of the plant, what it produces and whom they will serve, is a step in the right direction.

I think unionised shops will play a major part in the struggle for control of industry and for a socialist system in Australia. There will be a need for an independent workers’ control movement under a socialist State, for while the capitalist system has encouraged a payola-oriented, no-opinions, no-ideas, suck-hole type yes-man management machine, there is a danger of this type developing and worming their way into a socialist system.

The workers’ control movement also has the potential for overcoming the problem of isolation and alienation through constant rotation of responsibility.