INDUSTRIAL PERSPECTIVES

A survey of the issues, trends and possibilities in the turbulent industrial scene in Australia 1969, made by a member of the National Committee of the Communist Party of Australia.

SPEAKING AT SHELLHARBOUR, N.S.W., on May 5, the Federal Treasurer Mr. McMahon stated that Australia's gross national product at constant prices had been rising by 5½ per cent annually, 1 per cent higher than the growth rate of the 'fifties. "If the recent rate is maintained," he said, "our gross national product would treble in 20 years . . . Australia, if it maintained its present immigration program would have a population around 20 million by 1980." These are arresting figures even if not accepted at face value. Australia is a young country whose all round industrial development only really took place from the period of the second world war. It is a tremendously rich country with a potential of growth that exceeds the predictions of Mr. McMahon.

But this picture of expanding economic growth will mean different things to different people depending where they stand in relationship to the production process, the share of what is produced, how society recognises their individual and collective contribution to the expansion, and by what say the producers, whether by hand or brain, will have in determining what will happen in the production and distribution of their product.

The scientific and technological revolution, as yet only in its infancy in Australia, is having and will continue to have a radical effect not only on production but more importantly on the structure of the productive forces and the different strata of society. The very nature of human labor, its division, its material and human qualities, are being impacted from all sides by these revolutionary changes in the production processes. The study of these changes in the forces of production and the social, economic and political consequences that flow from them under conditions of present day monopoly capitalism are fundamental to arriving at a correct strategy for the revolutionary movement. It is from here that we start our analysis of the main forces, both actual and potential that can be drawn into the struggle for social change. It is
from this analysis also that we seek the issues, both old and new that are motivating diverse sections of society in the struggle against capitalism.

Lenin pointed out that without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary change. Development of theory on the way forward to socialism in Australian conditions and having it accepted by the mass of the Australian people is a decisive task. The relevance of the Communist Party as a viable political organisation exists only in its demonstrating the ability to analyse social reality and act as a leading force by the transformation of its theory into mass movements of all the exploited and alienated in society — particularly in the trade unions, where it has had its main influence. It is only relevant to the extent that it recognises changes and demonstrates capacity for leadership not by mere proclamations, but in practice. Furthermore, the Communist Party has no monopoly of ideas, solutions or truth. Not only must it win voluntary support for its ideas in open contest with others but it must recognise and be prepared to join in open alliance with other left forces committed to revolutionary change.

The scientific and technological revolution deepens and aggravates the problems associated with further extensions in the divisions of labor and in turn emphasises and accentuates the ever expanding social character of production. The further divisions are expressed in the decisive connection between research and development projects and industrial production — in the ever increasing proportion of public social resources which find their way into research and development and in the fact that research and development requires increasing specialisation with longer periods of training.

As distinct from industrial production, the product (commodity if you like) which flows from research and development is something different, original and new. The creative ideas of the scientist and technician working in the field of research and development in the service of production are as much commodities as those produced by the machine engaged in direct material production. More and more the disposal rights of his creative ideas belongs to the capitalist who employs him.

If alienation of the worker in general stems not only from the division of labor but even more from the conversion of labor's product into a commodity belonging to another, how much greater then is the alienation of the scientific worker whose production is not required to be some standardised product but something that is new, unique and creative, i.e., ideas?
This process of alienation that permeates not only the toiling section of society is causing a whole wave of questioning of the moral and ethical values of the capitalist system. Man's individual creativeness is fettered by the repetitive processes of the machine which is still dominant. Morals and ethics are cloaked in the hypocrisy of capitalist class society, democracy serves the ruling class and the bureaucracy, whilst a sham parliamentary system assumes more and more the character of autocratic, executive rule. In essence the whole question of human values, man's human purpose in life is thrown sharply into focus. It is clear now, if it wasn't before, that there is no real demarcation line between the economic, the political and the humanitarian.

With the development of the productive forces, the social strata in conflict with capitalism and capable of sweeping away the old and establishing the new has been considerably broadened. The concept of the most decisive force for change, the working class, must include today all those who, by hand or brain, contribute collectively, and actively participate in some part of the productive process.

If this social force represents the most important element in the challenge to the capitalist system, then the tactics, organisation and issues required to mobilise them are equally decisive. The ability of the ruling class to maintain some form of stability relies to a great extent on its capacity not only to actually hold firmly the reins of power by force, but also to maintain its ideological hegemony and contain opposition within a limited and fairly well defined framework of activity. It will tolerate such opposition so long as it does not seriously threaten the existing power structure. It is only when opposition breaks beyond these accepted avenues of opposition that the real nature of the class conflict is exposed.

Modern day capitalism has developed the most subtle and sophisticated methods by which to mould and control the mass consensus and forms of opposition. Take, for example, the trade unions. Violently and brutally suppressed in the formative years of industrial capitalism, they now seek to contain and accommodate them within the framework of the established capitalist order. In Australia, a somewhat unique system of State Arbitration, incorporating its own code of penalties, is the main medium by which monopoly pursues its policy of containment. By the processes of Arbitration the Establishment seeks to constantly restrict the autonomy of the trade unions and consciously uses it to impose its own incomes and other policies on the workers. Let us examine briefly how this has operated in recent periods.
The employers' total wage concept first put forward and re­jected in 1964 was adopted by the Arbitration Commission in 1965 and put into effect in 1966-67. This concept provides for a periodical review of wages, based on economic grounds that conform to the interests of the employers. Allied to this there is now the policy of work-value assessments to determine classification rates of individual workers. The effects of this quite radical change in the process of wage fixation have been to:

1. Allow the employers to utilise to the full the most restrictive and exhaustive arbitration procedures.
2. Widen the gap, and consequently the divisions, between the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers with even greater exploitation of the unskilled workers.
3. Attempt to abolish the "flow-on" tradition that was associated with decisions determining the rates in the Metal Trades Award.
4. Attempt to achieve a greater measure of control over all aspects of wages including over-award payments.

The parallel between these changes implemented by the Arbitra­tion Commission and proposals made in the Vernon Economic Enquiry shows clearly the role of the Arbitration system in imposing an incomes policy determined by the employers. The next step in this policy is the so-called Employers' Charter which seeks to extend this process a step further, thus once again placing the trade union movement on the defensive and carrying through the plans of the employers.

If we examine these developments only since 1964, a clear pattern emerges. The employers constantly hold the initiative, utilising to the full the processes of Arbitration and its penal provisions to contain the trade union movement, placing it in a perpetual state of defending the status quo. They are in fact, achieving in a much more subtle way what the Wilson Labor Government is seeking to do by legislation, i.e., foist a centralised incomes policy on the working class and trade union movement. Thus the Arbitration system is able to obscure the real intent of its decisions in legalities and farcical impartiality. The side effects of frustration, costly court hearings, fines and penalties, an almost unavoidable pre-occupation in legalities and economism are important fringe benefits that accrue to monopoly in pursuit of their aims.

A concerted challenge by the Left of the trade union movement against the Arbitration system and its penal powers is necessary,
even essential if the working class is to break out of the straight-jacket that has been tightly woven around it. In the last 20 years since the development of the Penal Powers, orders instituted against unions under them have grown from periods of one month to three months, to six months, to twelve months and in isolated instances bans have operated for two years.

It is true, of course, that opposition to the penal powers by the Left has always existed. There is some validity in the argument that circumstances in the past have not always been favorable for a confrontation on the use of the Penal Powers. The relative strength of the right wing and concern for the possible isolation of the Left were matters that had to be taken into account.

Tactical problems concerning unity will continue to arise but the present political situation, the developing general concern for restrictions of democratic rights conditioned by such campaigns as anti-conscription, opposition to the Vietnam war, the right to demonstrate, opposition to censorship and the hypocrisy of capitalist ethics has considerably altered the whole climate in which such a challenge can and must proceed today.

The jailing of C. O'Shea, Victorian Secretary of the Tramways Union which refused to pay some $8,000 in fines and costs, has been the catalyst embodying 20 years of bitter frustration of the working class. The nationwide strike action and demonstration of workers has been the biggest for 20 years. A significant feature of the action has been the involvement and new unity of students and workers in the demonstrations, emphasising the affinity of issues concerning them both.

Attempts will be made, in the face of the upsurge of opposition to the Penal Powers to modify what was referred to in past resolutions of the ACTU as the capricious use of the Penal Powers. Nothing less than the complete repeal of all repressive legislation in the Arbitration Act will be acceptable to the organised working class. In fact, in this important struggle the whole system of Arbitration is under challenge and the slogan of collective bargaining should be pushed to the fore.

The reasons for which the trade unions were formed, i.e., to defend labor "against the encroachments of capital" remain a basis task. They have demonstrated their willingness to engage in this struggle in the past and will do so in the future. However, to allow the sights of the working class to remain confined merely to questions affecting the price of their labor is to cast them in the role of defenders of the wages system. The trade unions, as organisations of the working class, need to be instilled with the consciousness necessary to respond to every form of social injustice
on whichever section of society it is inflicted. This requires that the trade unions acquire a political perspective, a counter-strategy to that of monoplies, which launches the working class on to the offensive. It requires that the Left in the trade unions examine the issues that flow as a result of technological change to see the counter, not in terms of past demands, but in more radical demands that meet the present requirements.

There is sometimes an underestimation as to the speed with which technological advance is proceeding in Australia. The main trend at the moment has been towards mechanisation and semi-automated processes but some idea of what is planned for the future is indicated by the fact that there are now some 5,000 computer programmers in Australia but the estimate is that by 1973 there will be 20,000.

There is also a tendency in the trade unions to approach the effects of this technological revolution only in terms of solutions that applied to problems of yesterday — to see its effects only in terms of redundancy, preservation of existing work areas and other more obvious social consequences, and moreover to meet these problems with the type of solution which gives the appearance at least of the unions solving the employment problems of the employers or, like the Luddites of old, opposing technological change. Time and again the trade unions are faced with a situation, brought about by the introduction of new methods of production and employer initiative, of being forced to negotiate a solution and then being put into the position of undertaking the responsibility of “selling” the result to the workers. As a result, the workers whose pattern of work has been radically changed and whose thinking necessarily lags behind developments, see not the employers as being responsible, but the unions.

But even more importantly, the issues that arise from these radical developments are in themselves entirely new. The more obvious questions, such as wages and conditions still remain and must still occupy a prime place in trade union activity, though these too need to be approached in a radically different way. But, in addition, the very nature of the changes being wrought in society, throw up many moral and social issues that vitally affect the worker and his family and must also become the concern of the trade unions. The state of housing, social services, taxation, pensions, urban developments and planning. In fact all those questions that go to make up what is often referred to as the “quality of life.”

In fact the trade unions must challenge the right of those who at present own, control and plan the future for their own ends, to
exclude the workers from the making of decisions that affect not only them but the future of society as a whole. This raises the question of democratic control, of the right of the producers to challenge and intervene in all matters that affect their welfare, from those on the job itself to issues involving society as a whole.

One such example of a more radical approach and expressing in an embryonic form the type of demand that must be extended, is the industrial agreement operating on the modern container ships Manoora and Kanimbla. The Seamen’s Union and other Maritime unions, in order to offset the reduction in the manning scale due to modernisation, has instituted swinger shifts (thirty-four weeks on and eighteen weeks off) at a minimum rate of pay for 52 weeks. On each ship there is a committee of representatives of all shipboard unions who meet regularly with the skipper to discuss issues arising from the agreement. Further examples, like the Teachers’ Federation and their demand for representation on an Education Commission (still unsatisfied), the direct intervention by job committees on safety issues and so on must be extended to widen the influence and direct intervention of the workers and their trade unions into all aspects of production. These demands awaken the consciousness of the workers to their real role in society, that of the producers of the wealth of society.

Such demands are not necessarily confined to the job and factory level but extend to the broader social questions which today more than ever express the contradictions between the advantages of the scientific and technological revolution and state monopoly control. In a society where abundance for all is made possible by the great technological advance, can the working class ignore the plight of the pensioners and other large underprivileged minority groups? Can the organised working class continue to tolerate the blatant injustice and denial of land rights to the Aborigine minority? How many trade unions or even individual officials reacted in protest immediately to the renewed demand by the reactionary leaders of the RSL that a government White Paper be produced on Communists and the Communist Party?

The plight of the education system — probably expressing even more clearly than any other social issue the contradiction between social needs and the policy and priorities of an immoral, elitist-thinking bureaucracy, is responsible for increasing agitation and activity by teachers, students and organisations of parents and citizens.

This activity stems from a concern at the inadequacies of an outdated and outmoded education system that denies thousands
of children the greatest possible opportunities to acquire knowledge in an age when higher learning is essential. These children, in the main, are the sons and daughters of trade unionists yet, apart from a few resolutions, the trade union movement does not actively initiate or join with the Teachers’ Federation and other educational bodies in campaigns to assert the rights of all to a free education.

Migrant workers now comprise a large section of the work force, particularly in the unskilled section where, in many instances, they form a majority. Is this fact adequately reflected in the trade union organisation, structure and activity? To attract a more active participation of migrant workers in trade union affairs, the unions must vigorously combat the discrimination meted out to migrant workers, taking issue with such questions as the refusal of the Government to grant naturalisation to those migrants who have been known to take part in progressive causes.

These and many other issues not mentioned require greater vision and a more radical approach in finding solutions. To carry a forward-looking and militant policy through requires also a streamlining of trade union organisation, an expansion of trade union democracy at all levels. This applies particularly to developing virile trade union organisation at factory level and providing the facilities by which this grass-roots level of organisation can find expression at all levels. It requires a conscientious and sincere approach to the amalgamation of various unions in the one industry as an important step to strengthening the union movement economically and organisationally. Bureaucracy and authoritarianism exist pervasively in the trade union movement. Some union structures and methods of organisation, their type of propaganda and style of work belong to an era long since past. A modern, highly efficient organisation corresponding to the exacting demands required to facilitate the dissemination of information, ideas and a policy that reflects the needs of the working class in these days of rapid change is essential.

Unity of the trade union movement is an essential element to carrying through the campaigns that confront the working class. There are forces within and outside the trade union movement which constantly seek to disrupt and divide it. If the Left of the trade union movement advances policies and gives leadership around issues that correspond to the interests of the workers and mobilises them in supporting action, these rightwing forces are made impotent. Since the last ACTU Congress the leadership of the ACTU has been strengthened from the Left. This has been an important development and could assist, between now and September, to create the circumstances for a further swing to the Left.
at the ACTU Congress. The Congress itself is already being portrayed by the reactionary press as a power struggle between Souter and Hawke who are candidates for the vacant position of President. Of course, the outcome of this important vote holds considerable interest for the national trade union movement, but in essence the real issues will be those policy questions decided by Congress.

Will the Congress reflect the great needs of the Australian working class and people in today's conditions? Will the congress, if the issue is still undecided, take up the challenge thrown out by the Tramways Union and the other trade unions to Arbitration and the Penal Powers? Will the Congress reject the futile exercise of applying to the Court for wage increases on monopoly's terms or will it demand of this society that it provide a minimum family living wage for all? Will it declare in support of any young worker who refuses to register for national service to fight in the dirty war in Vietnam?

Decisions on these and other important issues hold considerable interest for the whole of the working class. The great class battles which started in 1968 over the Metal Trades Margins decision and attempts at absorption have been extended to 1969 with the confrontation of the Penal Powers. Already the Treasurer, Mr. McMahon, has declared that the Federal Government will oppose the unions' claim in the approaching national wage case. The workers have registered their feelings and will continue to make their views known. The trade unions, particularly the Left, must give them a positive, militant lead now for this is what they will be looking to the Congress for — re-structuring and the taking up of issues that can make the unions real instruments of social change.