Discussion:

On Abortion
ABORTION is one of the subjects about which it is most difficult to write a disengaged, scholarly work. This is because child-bearing and rearing affects the lives of nearly everyone at a deep level and over a long period.

Any challenge to the establishment will be met with opposition — even more fiercely if it has some emotive content as does the subject of abortion. Sometimes even well-established trade union leaders will become savagely puritanical on this point, even if they fight vigorously for wages and conditions. Now, owing to the recent campaign for legal abortion, we can mention the subject in a voice a little louder than the former, furtive whisper which, even at that, could brand a woman as an immoral irresponsible.

The aspects which trouble those in power are first, whether abortion would restrict cheap labour since the supply would be less than inexhaustible and secondly whether traditional masculine comfort would be disturbed if women had a choice about their family role.

We know that abortion is available for rich women, and with a minimum of trouble but carrying with it a fairly substantial financial consideration. According to such orthodox journals as Life and Look many continental hotels are reputed to be providing this service, discreetly, but with all the trimmings of specialist treatment and qualified nursing service. By contrast, a mother living in the Bronx, in a one-roomed dwelling with five children already, was refused an abortion. There was no water supply in the room nor eating and cooking facilities. Fortunately the laws of New York city have since been amended to allow abortion by request. If, however, all things were equal, the rich women, presumably with a staff to help with the chores, should be the bearers of children. My position is that all women, regardless of economic circumstances, should have the right to decide how many children they will bear without being conscripted into motherhood. The laws governing abortion were formulated when over-production of human beings was encouraged, even insisted upon. Many babies did not survive childhood and those who did were expected to be a source of highly competitive labour (or fight in wars). There was some reason then for those of the top echelons to be opposed to abortion — for others anyway.

Propaganda about abortion and birth control is directed towards women. The quite simple operation for men, to render the sperm infertile for a specified period, is hardly ever mentioned. Women are constantly informed that no-one of their sex can understand the sexual drive in men. One should reply that no man on earth
understands the terror of discovering an unwanted pregnancy.

Advocacy of abortion is sometimes attributed to emotionally, cold, unmotherly women but it shows neither sense nor devotion to advocate unplanned production of human beings.

I would suggest that in addition to supporting the current campaign for abortion on request we could make a point by writing to the United Nations requesting a world-wide moratorium on the birth of new human beings until we have inaugurated the following guarantees:

1. that parents and children have economic responsibility for each other in addition to that provided by the community, where necessary;
2. that each citizen be guaranteed enough food, clothing, shelter and heating;
3. that education at all levels be available to everyone who can benefit from that degree of study;
4. that no compulsion to motherhood should obtain anywhere;
5. that warlike or sexual aggressiveness should cease to be admired and gentleness and consideration for human welfare should be exalted in stead.

E. B. WILSON

WOMEN AND UNIONS

WOMEN'S OPPRESSION, although rooted in the institution of marriage, does not stop at the kitchen or the bedroom door. Indeed the economic exploitation of women in workplaces is the more commonly recognised aspect of the oppression of women. This is because women have always been the most exploited sector of the industrial workforce. Child and female labour was common in the early stages of industrial capitalism but as industrialization developed and the craft jobs of men were eliminated, men entered the industrial labour force, driving women into the lowest categories of work and pay.

Male chauvinism present in the trade unions today is a reflection of an attitude, that women are the passive and inferior servants of society and men. Some union leaders and many male workers believe that women have no right to work outside the home or that they are incapable of doing difficult work. Such attitudes help to maintain a situation in which some women who need income or independence cannot work, many women who do work are unorganised, union agreements reinforce the inferior position of women who are organised and the cost of child care is seen to be the responsibility of the mother. As a result most women workers have not seen much value in organising. They have less to gain from militant fights for better wages — everytime he wins a dollar she only wins seventy five cents — and they have most to risk in organising in the first place, because of their lack of experience and skill as a bargaining factor with the bosses.

Not only are women forced onto the lowest rungs of the occupational ladder, they are the lowest income earners. The most constant injustice experienced by the majority of women workers is the income differential. Although there have been some recent victories the fight for equal pay is far from being achieved and yet it has been going on for more than fifty years. Can you imagine any issue which vitally affects male workers not being resolved in such a time?

The acceptance of specific role for men and women can and do assist capitalism. When male workers think of
themselves primarily as men (powerful) rather than as workers (members of an oppressed group) they cannot easily identify with the issues of concern to women workers. Despite a relatively decent living standard, in the material sense, all Australian workers are exploited and harassed in other ways than through the size of the weekly pay cheque. They are made into robots on the job; denied security; forced to pay heavy insurance and can rarely save enough to protect themselves from sudden loss of job or emergency. But here too women are called upon to act out a role to make up for failure in the system. It is often the second wage (at 75c of the male rate) that enables the family to eat better, to escape oppressive surroundings through a holiday and an occasional movie and to buy “luxuries”. And it is through her role as “home-maker” that a woman is required to provide a refuge from the alienation of work so that the family can forget, even temporarily, the “harsh realities” of life outside. In this role too she helps to transmit the values of hard work and obedience to each new generation of workers, and she will often urge that her husband not risk his job by standing up to the boss or going on strike.

All these attitudes act against the objective interests of the trade unions but the attitudes will persist while male chauvinism continues. Even in the internal life of the unions male chauvinism persists. Unions accept the dues from women workers but often act to reinforce the concept that females have only passive roles to play. There is reluctance to encourage vital, intelligent women to accept responsibility, let alone challenge the boss. One only has to see the attitude of many trade union officials to their female office staff to gauge how deep is the problem. The women are there to serve.

It is no excuse to claim that union rules do not debar women from seeking office and let the matter rest there. At decision making meetings one hears the strong confident voices of men in struggle but it requires considerable encouragement for women to speak simply because they have been socialised to fear aggressiveness, they lack experience in articulating concepts and they fear the ridicule of men. From childhood they are taught that it is not attractive (to men) to be strong minded and to argue with men. Without encouragement women stand very little chance of gaining positions of leadership in the unions and one wonders where the encouragement will come from. What male official would relinquish his position for a woman and thus admit, even indirectly, that a woman is equally, or ever more competent than himself?

Certain unions also contribute to the system that keeps so many women as an unskilled labour force, easily dispensed with when jobs are scarce. These unions discriminate against, or discourage, women from taking up particular work, training for skills, gaining apprenticeships or seeking promotion. It would be a move in the right direction if every union fought for such demands as: one rate of pay for the job performed; pre-school facilities for children financed from profits; part-time work for people (male or female) with special responsibilities (such as the care of young children); shopping time for all workers; maternity leave with full pay; equal opportunity in employment.

L. D.

On Realism

GORDON ADLER’S article Communists and Art (A.L.R. No 27) ought to stir up some much needed discussion among those of us writers, painters and musicians who have remained in
the CPA. As a contribution to discussion I propose that we re-define some of our terms: otherwise we shall only get out of one impasse into another.

Realism, says Adler, has no special virtue. Well, whoa on! Are we talking about realism as a technique or about realism as a quality? The two are not always found together. Realism as a quality — the quality in a piece of writing that forces the reader to feel “This is real, this is true, this is exactly how people do behave in given circumstances” — can jump out at you out of the most unlikely ambushes: out of the totally stylised tragedies of Racine, or out of the flippant episodes of Len­nie Lower. Realism as a technique, as a workshop method, as a mere habit of painting “warts and all”, is only one among many possible roads towards attaining the quality of realism. As a technique, it is reducible to a set of rules. In the decline of classicism, classicism itself came to be regarded as a technique, and equated with “the rules of Aristotle”. Hence the celebrated epigram: “I am delighted that Monsieur X, in composing his tragedy, has stuck so closely to the rules of Aristotle. I only regret that the rules of Aristotle should have permitted Monsieur X to compose such an execrable tragedy”.

In our own day, Elizabeth Jenkins says in an analogous case: “We do not believe some modern novelists, when, with all their apparatus of ‘realism’ they try to convince us that their puppets are men and women”. What she calls the apparatus of realism is what I have called the technique of realism; and she goes on to claim that Thackeray, for all his old-fashioned air, surpasses many moderns in the quality of realism.

In a slightly different sense, I am old-fashioned too. I still think that the quality of realism is one of the qualities that makes up the greatness of a great work of literature. Racine’s tragedies, with their all-pervading psychological realism, are alive today. Voltaire’s tragedies, with all their technical cleverness, lack this realism and are dead. Not even their propagandistic political content saves them. It is no good “pointing the way forward” if the pointing hand is made of cardboard.

Adler calls his article “Communists and Art”, thus implying a much wider field than literature, though it is mainly about literature that he writes. He did not waste powder and shot on the notion (did anyone seriously hold it?) that the technique of realism could be applied to music or to architecture. Mossolov’s Steel-Foundry has quietly dropped off the concert-programmes even in its country of origin. And if Moscow University represents Socialist Realism in architecture, then the theory is evidently an uninspiring one. All the same, I should be grateful if someone better-informed than I am could extend the discussion to include the arts of music and architecture and some others. My own ideas about the quality of realism provide no explanation of the self-evident greatness of the Citadel Mosque in Cairo or of Mozart’s G-minor Quintet or, for that matter, of a Ming vase.

And by the way, was it our devotion to Socialist Realism or was it just bone-headed ignorance that prevented us from making a hero of the great Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier when he published The Lost Steps? People who doubt whether a profoundly Marxist novel can take a form other than the standard technically-realistic one should certainly read it.

John Manifold