for
socialist consciousness
in the unions

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UNION education in Australia is comparatively new. There is not a great deal of accumulated experience. So far there are intermittent schools and lectures and very little in the way of unionists embarking on extended study projects. This limited activity is proving very popular among union memberships and it is growing steadily. In February this year by far the biggest and best school yet was held in Canberra. It was organised and conducted jointly by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations and the Council of Commonwealth Public Service Organisations. As well, response to the unions-sponsored correspondence courses, based in South Australia, has been excellent and shows the undoubtedly keen desire of unionists to improve their education.

This activity raises the problem, as does all work in unions, of whether we are further integrating the unions into and strengthening the capitalist system or whether we are challenging the very ideas, values and concepts upon which the system relies so much for its continued existence. It is dawning on a lot of people of varying political shades that unions offer a convenient, organised way of having their ideas about society discussed. What is staggering is that there has been so little formal union education in the past. This no doubt stems from the pragmatic, anti-intellectual, anti-ideas tradition for which we are renowned.

It has been a major weakness that revolutionaries have not prosecuted the ideological struggle in an organised way within the workers' movement to anything like its potential. So much is left to chance. Left-wing union journals or papers may and often do carry articles on some aspects of socialism, but it is seldom material that is closely related to the members' experience on the job.

A conscious official will sometimes raise issues of socialism or the Vietnam war during the course of or at the end of a dispute, but while this is of some value, it does not assume much prominence coming tacked on the end of a particular issue. Communist Party branches have held classes and produced bulletins over many years and this kind of work needs to improve enormously, but nevertheless it is still external and not accepted as an integral part of the job in the way the union is.

Thus we fail to get anything like the ideological and political result that the rest of our union activity ought to bring.

If we are serious about the development of a rank and file workers' movement that has potential to challenge the power base of society, then it will be necessary that large numbers of stewards and members be armed with the knowledge, expertise and above all the critical faculty that will enable them to come to grips with the complex problems that modern society throws up. In short, what is needed are workers in factories, offices and sites who have abilities, similar to those of the revolutionary students, which will enable them to argue and analyse, and who can apply those abilities at the job level.

It sounds a tall order, but it is certainly possible. What is needed is an organised education program, closely linked to the job, which is primarily oriented towards people educating and liberating themselves. In most big workplaces it really only needs a handful of capable rank and file leaders
who are good organisers and who know what they are talking about to transform the whole place into an active aware workforce. With that kind of thinking, I believe that a good education program could change the whole movement in a few years into self-acting, democratic structures, controlled properly by the membership, which would pose a serious threat to capitalism.

When Michael Barratt-Brown was in Australia recently, he said that the most important single factor in the development of the British shop stewards’ and workers’ control movement has been the education program carried out by the Extra-mural Department of the Sheffield University where he is on the staff. There are eight full-time lecturers and a number who lecture part-time. Their salaries are paid by the Government and their only job is to conduct courses for trade union activists. It is important to note that the British establishment is somewhat hoist on its own petard, because people took its liberal rhetoric about everyone deserving educational opportunities literally and it has been forced to finance the department and to pay the wages of students undertaking the day release courses.

The main criteria used in accepting students for enrolment in the courses is that they be reasonably active in their union or on the job. Most applicants who show that they realise that studying is solid work and not just a day off are enrolled. This is normally done with the agreement of the union involved and the employer. Students come off the job for one day a week for 24 weeks a year over a three years’ period.

The course extends from dealing with the development of expertise in normal day to day union functions such as meetings, negotiations, public speaking, organisation and so on in the first year through to general economic and political theory in third year when students come to grips with philosophies, concepts of imperialism and so on. If they wish to continue their studies, students are credited with the first year of a degree course.

Between three and four hundred are enrolled every year and approximately 75 per cent of them remain union activists. Some go on to teaching and other vocations and a few are bought off by the boss. I believe that 75 per cent is an excellent return on effort and it means that there are now large numbers of activists in Britain, articulate, capable and critical, who are posing real challenges to both bosses and union bureaucracies. It is interesting to note that some union leaderships as well as bosses are not enthusiastic about the program, but attempts to stop or to modify them have been strongly rebuffed by rank and file action.

Students are not simply taught marxism, but, for example, in the second and third years they set up a contest between Marx and Keynes and in this way they come to understand capitalist economic theory better. Then, armed with such knowledge they can make considered, conscious judgements and most opt for Marx, as could be expected, when the arguments are developed.

During the recent miners’ strike in Britain, the Sheffield University Extra-mural Department was strongly attacked by employers and government as being the chief cause of industrial unrest. To date, most of the students have come from government industries and there is yet to be a big breakthrough in the private sector.

Some difficulty has been experienced in winning acceptance within the union movement for certain important and necessary features, such as ideological offensive which does not just leave things to chance.

Experience of our work over about three years in the Amalgamated Engineering Union in Victoria shows some of these weaknesses as well as a number of positive features. Anti-intellectualism still runs deep in our union movement, although I think things have improved. Nevertheless there is still suspicion of intellectuals, especially when they raise criticisms of the movement for these are seen as an attack rather than an attempt to seriously analyse problems. Our experience has been that nearly all academics, when asked to lecture at a school, prove eager to give assistance and most have been excellent. Naturally, not all the people we have had have been of high calibre, but in the main the lecturers have developed challenging new thinking and broken new ground for the students involved. In spite of all this there is still a fear of deep thought and re-examination of past experiences, and the desire to go on doing things in the same old way is strong.

Such attitudes unconsciously show a lack of confidence in the rank and file’s ability to come up with the answers unless they are getting “the line”. It is one thing to go to the rank and file when large stoppages or big shop stewards’ meetings are needed; it is quite another to have the faith and understanding that the rank and file, given the right encouragement, can understand problems and take action of their own volition. We generally have union officials to lecture on specifically union matters such as negotiations, and it is interesting that when first asked, most officials have questioned whether they have anything to offer.

In the main they do a good job and their accumulated experience of many struggles and strike situations becomes invaluable when discussion and questions get under way. One of the areas which as yet has received little attention is a thorough re-examination of particular strikes and campaigns. In other words, case histories. On
the few occasions where this has been attempted it has proved extremely interesting and provided that this is tackled critically and fearlessly, it may prove to be one of the best educative methods.

As an aside, it should be noted that there is far too little information and exchange of experiences about particular struggles. The Tribune and other left papers will cover a strike or action in a general way and raise the more important features and unique aspects, but union journals and news-letters need to deal more often with the particular steps that led up to the action so that activists on other jobs can get a clearer picture of the way it developed and its weaknesses and strong points in order to be able to use that experience to perhaps raise a similar demand themselves or to follow a similar tactic or strategy.

One criticism that has been raised about our education program is that we are trying to make the union do what a revolutionary party should be undertaking, that is, political education. I believe that this criticism is ill-founded because it seems logical that we should seize every opportunity for politicisation, no matter from what quarter it comes. A union, by its very nature, brings together people who are, or can be, in the heat of class struggles, struggles which often open up the way for a greater degree of political and radical thought than is usual.

If the members accept, as they now do, the union's right to run schools and classes, surely we would be failing in our work as revolutionaries if we do not set out to take that education beyond the mere bread and butter union issues. The important thing is that the ideas developed should be ideas which lead to a questioning of capitalist values; it is a secondary matter that they are not emanating directly from a revolutionary party. This is not to suggest that a party is not necessary but to point to the need for revolutionaries to work more effectively within the unions and to make the most of every opportunity that arises.

This raises the related criticism that some of the material we set for study is too advanced and leftist in character. While it is certainly true that some of our subjects could be better arranged and titled, I do not feel that it is leftist to discuss ideas of people like Marx and Gramsci, for instance, that are relevant to an understanding of a particular subject — economics, politics. It is one thing to try to take people into advanced actions for which they are not ready, but it is quite another to advance radical and revolutionary ideas in the course of legitimate study and inquiry. In fact, it is precisely that which can and will lead to consciously understood advanced actions.

Our experience is that at some stage during nearly all our day schools there is discussion about socialism. Often this arises spontaneously, because almost any subject we tackle can lead to questioning of the capitalist system if it is done in a challeng-