Workers' control has become part of the vocabulary of an increasing number of worker militants in Australia in the past four years. Workers' control is, of course, not a new idea in the marxist and radical movement, in Australia or in the world. It was prominent in the October Revolution, when the slogan was "Peace, Land, Bread and Workers' Control."

The last part is something often forgotten.

Workers' control, in general terms, is something as old as the labor movement itself. The right to strike and to form unions are forms of workers' control, limiting the bosses' power. The big struggle for the recognition of shop committees continues, and their rights are denied in many places, such as BHP. This struggle too is an unconscious expression of workers' control -- the aim is to limit the bosses' power on the shop floor.

Of course, many of these elementary starting points have been accepted within the system, although there are continual efforts to deny them -- and where is there anywhere in Australia the "legal" right to strike? In other cases, workers' control as a tactic has been used. The sit-ins of the past, including the well-known Glen Davis sit-in, the Dalfram dispute, etc., come to mind. What is new today is that workers feel the need to go beyond these traditional, partly accepted instances of workers' control, to tackle new, formerly unquestioned "rights" of the boss, for example, the right to hire and fire as the boss wills.

But the fact remains that, for the first time for decades, the new advanced and more conscious application of workers' control challenges to the boss have only appeared in the workers' movement over the past four years.

If we look back over this period and ask why workers' control has so quickly become a major issue, I believe we must start from those two traumatic events of 1968: the May-June revolt of workers and students in France and the Prague Spring of the same year. These two history-making events left their mark on the Left in Australia as perhaps no two similar events have since 1917.

In both of these major historical events of 1968, the concepts of workers' control and self-management were crucial. Crucial because they provided a solution to the growing contradiction between the higher cultural (in the general sense) and educational level of the working class and all oppressed sections of the population, and thus their ability to manage their own working and, indeed, whole, life without bosses or bureaucrats on the one hand, and the continued authoritarianism that in fact governed their lives on the other. Workers' control and self-management in both France and Czechoslovakia were the major part of the movement, although only partially expressed consciously in 1968, for the general social self-management of all aspects of econo-
mic, social, political and cultural life that threatened to burst asunder the ossified, authoritarian bourgeois democracy of Gaullist France and the similarly ossified and authoritarian bureaucratic rule of the Novotny era.

But in both cases, workers' control and self-management were not only goals, models and visions to be fought for (even unconsciously) by the mass of workers and students and their newly forming leaderships, but also provided a tactic and a strategy to build in the here-and-now a new society of socialist democracy based on self-management. The widespread occupations of workplaces, universities, schools, cultural centres by striking workers and students in France was the key tactic, adopted spontaneously by these forces in the struggle. In some places, these occupations changed to rudimentary practice of self-management, where workers operated factories and the circulation and distribution of goods was undertaken by strike committees. Perhaps if this system had been generalised in all the occupied factories and cities, if the workers had begun to produce the goods and services and organise their distribution themselves, then the outcome may have been different in France.

In Czechoslovakia, the degree of workers' control introduced under Dubcek, which expanded beyond the formal limits set before and after the invasion, provided one of the basic elements for the depth and enthusiasm of popular support for the Dubcek regime, and the passive resistance that occurred after the invasion. It is possible also to point to other upsurges in the postwar period which were marked by the idea of workers' control: the Belgian general strike in 1961, the Hungarian Workers' Councils in 1956 and, even earlier, the Yugoslav experiments with workers' self-management from the early 1950's.

The fact that these examples of the introduction of workers' control into various struggles, and on a wide scale in Yugoslavia, did not have the same impact in Australia as the events of 1968 is due, I believe, to three major factors. First, the workers' movements in the advanced capitalist countries were still, at that time, in their big majority, stuck in the mire of the Cold War. It was a period of retreat and downswing for the workers' movement throughout the "West." Second, stalinist dogma maintained a grip over the minds of worker militants, who while continuing to struggle for the advancement of the workers' demands, were blinded to the importance of workers' control and self-management as a tactic, strategy and objective which re-defined the socialist goal. Lastly, and perhaps most important, the contradiction between the workers' increasing ability to do without bosses and bureaucrats, and the domination of the latter, was much less sharp and only beginning to develop. The workers at this time were still gripped by the gloss of the image of the "great" (consumer) society and "welfare State," which, no matter how limited, contrasted with memories of the depression, still strong in their minds.

There is no room here to trace how or why the situation changed. However, we can say that by 1968-69, the workers' movement in most advanced capitalist countries and in Australia was already well on the upswing, stalinism was in retreat, the Communist Party of Australia was re-examining stalinism and consequent policies with an open mind, and the gloss of the consumer society was looking more and more sick to youth and many workers. In January, 1969, the National Committee of the CPA decided to adopt the concept of workers' control and popularise it among the working class. In the same year, the great strike movement against the penal clauses effectively made them a dead letter. The Left Action Conference provided a forum in which the ideas of workers' control and self-management were among the most dominant. A Workers' Control Conference was also held in 1969.

Yet, looking back, we can speak of something of a "regression" in the movement for workers' control in 1970 and 1971. Perhaps this was due to the fact that in those years most working-class and Left militants were involved in the great Vietnam Moratoriums advancing the slogan of "Stop Work to Stop the War," and later the anti-apartheid campaigns. Perhaps, it was also partly because after so many years of neglect, a couple of years were necessary for patient propaganda and explanatory work, before the validity and implications of the concept of workers' control could really begin to grip the minds of worker militants.

However, at the end of 1971, inspired to some extent by the work-in at the Upper Clydeside shipyards in Scotland, which had begun shortly before, five boilermakers at a relatively small metal shop (Harco) in the outer Sydney suburb of Campbelltown refused to take the sack and "worked-in" for several months, defying the boss, the employers' federation, the Rightwing ironworkers' union, the courts and the media until they were finally directed to accept the sack by their own union. (The National Workers' Control Conference is producing a booklet on the Harco work-in which will be on sale shortly.)

The Harco workers did not win their jobs back, but that was through no fault of their own, nor of the tactic of the work-in. What they did, however, was to popularise the idea of the work-in, at least among militant workers, throughout the country.

Last year, we saw a rush of work-ins, until in the building industry in NSW, for example, it has become an almost daily tactic to stop the developers from sacking militant workers. In the other places where work-ins have taken place -- at South Clifton mine on the NSW South Coast, at Pillar Naco and Evans Deakin in Brisbane, and the Opera House revolving stage in Sydney -- the work-in tactic has met with varying degrees of success. In all cases, the degree of official union support has been crucial, along with the degree of con-
The degree of awareness, in terms of the grasp of workers' control and the need for socialist change has been aroused from these struggles has also varied. Perhaps it is where the boss and employers were most ob-stinate, as at Harco, and the struggle the bitterest, that consciousness has been most raised. The most successful struggle, the one where the greatest degree of control was won from the boss and where big financial gains and a 35-hour week were also won, was at the Sydney Opera House revolving stage job, which was completed late last year. The full story of that mag-nificent struggle has not been written, but there is lit-tle doubt that it was in many ways the most advanced yet seen in Australia.

In any case, it was in this new situation of an upsurge in the practice and concepts of workers' control that a group of militant workers, including some union of-ficials, decided it was urgent that these experiences be analysed (along with those from overseas), that the ad-va nces registered be popularised, and, if possible, that some of the problems which emerged be at least par-tially resolved. They therefore called a conference for Easter this year.

If the discussions there will most likely centre around the work-in experiences, there are other questions reflect-ing the concept of workers' control that will also be raised. These will concern mainly union success in determining social issues, which had previously been the province of profit-hungry developers and other employers and subservient conservative governments.

The different bans placed by the NSW Building and Construction Workers' Union on developers' plans for environmental destruction readily come to mind in this regard. The ban on the Port Phillip Bay pipeline in Melbourne is another instance. In other cases, unions have, in using normal strike tactics, taken over decision-making in certain spheres previously reserved for the boss or the bureaucrat. Victorian teachers boycotted inspectors, while in the oil strike last year, unions took over the distribution of petrol to those in need in the community, and there are other examples. Even the union participation in the Vietnam Moratoriums and the anti-apartheid campaign, despite its limitations, represented an intervention in directly political matters formerly the province of government. This inter­vention roused the ruling class into a paroxysm of anger.

And, finally, workers' control also must mean as di-rec t as possible control by workers over their own unions and organisations, for a real democ ratisati on of union structures.

Workers' control then is a concept which has spread beyond the workplace to the whole of society. It means basically that workers seek to take control of their own working and waking lives, and all aspects of social decision-making that affect them.

Yet, generally speaking, it is necessary to differentiate between workers' control and self-management. Workers' control is generally accepted as being precisely the at­ tempt to impose control over different aspects of the power of the bosses and the ruling class (e.g., the bosses' right to sack, determine working hours [not to grant the 35-hour week], or what piece of the environment to de­stroy, or what war to fight). Because the struggles for workers' control take place in a capitalist society, they can only hope to win limited control, although the pers­pective must be one which sees workers' control as a way to raise workers' awareness to a point where they will seek to take over and run their factory and the whole of society without bosses or bureaucrats: that is, to es­ tablish a system of socialist self-management in which workers, students and other sectors of the population run their own workplace and society as a whole through a network of democratically elected committees, whose members are subject to immediate recall.

Workers' control and self-management are the opposite to workers' participation, which implies not that the workers take over decision-making of different aspects of the bosses' power, but rather that they "share" in that decision-making, which, in fact, means that the boss makes the decisions, while the workers nod their heads, after (perhaps) being given a few crumbs. Workers' par­ ticipation seeks to integrate workers into the system; work­ers' control seeks to mobilise them against it.

The National Workers' Control Conference will discuss the varied experiences of workers' control in the first half-day session and the relation of workers' control, workers' participation, self-management and socialism on the second. The third session will discuss the rela­tionship between trade union structures and workers' control movements, and the final session the aims of the movement.

The ideas I've outlined here on the first two topics will of course only be some of those advanced. There is plenty of room for clarification and deepening of under­standing for all of us.

It is necessary to note, however, that groups on the ultra-Left and on the conservative Right within what is generally described as "the Left," will be strong in their criticism of workers' control as we have defined it, and of the work-in tactic in particular. The opposition of the conservatives is of course understandable. The ultra­Lefts in their criticism of the work-in tactic forget that in the period immediately after the Russian Revolution,
work-ins and sit-ins were widespread in some European countries. The Third Congress of the Communist International held in Moscow in June 1921 had this to say on the question:

"One of the ways of preventing the massive closures of factories, with the aim of cutting wages and worsening working conditions, could be the occupation of the plant or factory and the continuation of production despite the boss."

However, not all of their criticisms will be baseless. It is true, for example, that in some of the work-ins held, not enough was done to develop awareness of the implications for workers' control, or to develop a socialist perspective. It is not however enough to have a purist position on such questions. It is out of nation-wide experience and discussions that such problems will be resolved; not by condemning the work-in as such.

However, the major criticism that is levelled by the ultra-Left and the conservative Right is that workers in a work-in are working for "nothing" -- the boss gets the products of their labor without paying them. The fact is that in every work-in the workers have advanced as one of their demands payment from the boss for time worked. Of course, there is the danger that the work-in might fail and not win that demand. But Harco has been one of the few cases where that has happened. Elsewhere, the money has been won. But the Harco workers were certainly of the opinion that the "risk" -- and the eventual loss -- was worth it, for they always kept in mind their main objective: to win back their jobs.

Every strike has its risks, and as far as the workers are concerned, they rarely get paid for the time they are on strike. A more general criticism from the ultra-Left is that the work-in does not tackle the capitalist system, and that what is really needed is a general strike of all workers, or of workers in a whole sector of industry. That would be very nice, of course. But it is not being in any way rational to advance that as the solution to a dispute involving, say, five workers, as at Harco, or, in the present conditions of bigger disputes.

It is of course essential to rally every ounce of workers' support throughout the country, including financial support and even sympathy strikes or, at a higher level, occupations. But sympathy strikes or occupations cannot be wished out of the sky, nor the struggle for the right to work generalised by decree from on top. The work must be done of patient explanation, practical example and dogged hard work. As workers in general are raised to an awareness of the concept of workers' control by explanation and struggle, perhaps broader and more generalised struggles will occur. The ultra-Lefts who opposed the work-ins of 1972 are in fact hindering that process.

If the National Workers' Control Conference gets the support it deserves from all militant workers and all those on the Left, then it could well mark a milestone in the history of the workers' movement in this country.