

editorial

comment

The movement for workers' control, which has only recently begun to grow in Australia, presents many opportunities and poses many problems for socialists. This is evident both from the wide range of opinions about the significance of the movement and from the articles and interviews printed here.

Our purpose in this editorial comment is not to repeat what is said in them. Rather, we wish to discuss briefly the relation between workers' control and revolutionary strategy -- in particular, the "counter-hegemonic" strategy for socialist revolution which we espouse.

Within the revolutionary movement and the left generally, the different attitudes to workers' control largely reflect different conceptions of what socialism is or should be, and different strategies for socialist change. Those who have an authoritarian view of socialism where everything is decided ultimately by top party and state leaders will hardly be enthusiastic about workers' control, although for tactical reasons they may pay lip service to it. Those who think that the socialist revolution will come about through the economic collapse of capitalism will not see the long-term strategic importance of movements such as workers' control in preparation for both

the socialist revolution and the future socialist society.

Those who hold such views, or some less extreme modification of them, tend to see workers' control as a diversion from the mainstream of revolutionary activity. For them the main area of the class struggle is the traditional economic struggle between labor and capital -- the fight for better wages and conditions. Whether such people operate within the trade union bureaucracy or are critics of that bureaucracy, they have a narrow view of the role of trade unions and a limited conception of what the class struggle is. They fall into the old trap which has so often caught the revolutionary movement -- that is, to exaggerate the revolutionary consequences of current economic struggles and to fail to realise the need to inject a *socialist content* into those struggles and to develop alongside them other struggles which challenge the capitalist system in profound ways.

In this connection it is important to recall that the socialist revolution in Russia was preceded by years of struggle for democracy at all levels of Russian society. In 1917 an important part of the struggle for power was

a highly developed workers' control movement which, by November, controlled considerable areas of economic activity. Further it should be noted that an important part in the decline and degeneration of the Russian revolution was played by the rise of bureaucratic control in the factories, workplaces and institutions. When the workers either could not or did not continue to exercise control, when power was centralised in the hands of a bureaucracy, the stage was set for the distortions of socialism so typical of the Stalin era.

Against these sorts of views, we hold that workers' control and related movements are very important, indeed essential, contributions to revolutionary activity. We believe that the class instinct of the bosses who rage against any idea of workers' control is surer and more correct than that of its doctrinaire critics. (see "Viewpoint"). They see both that workers' control is diametrically opposed to the basic economic structure and power relations of their system, and that it tends to generate the consciousness that can lead to making a challenge to that structure and power a reality and not just a wish.

In our view, the importance and role of the workers' control movement can only be properly seen in the context of a counter-hegemonic strategy for revolution. Essentially, a counter-hegemonic strategy places the main emphasis on the preparation of the *conscious* human forces needed for revolution. It recognises that at present, in Australian conditions at least, the central problem is not that workers are basically kept from revolution by the force of the capitalist state, or even by those within their ranks who mislead them, but rather that the ideas and values of capitalism are too widely accepted.

The domination by capitalist ideas and the capitalist world-view of most spheres of life, the lack of sufficient mass resistance to this dominance, and the containment of alternative revolutionary ideas -- these are the crucial problems for revolutionaries in situations such as ours. This does not mean denying or neglecting the problems of breaking the economic and state power of capitalism. Rather it means to assert them against reformism, and doctrinaire views which so often, for all their words and phrases, never really confront the problem of power at all. Our strategy sees the problems of overturn-

ing the economic and state power of capitalism as being posed in reality in the course of solving this initial problem of consciousness.

A counter-hegemonic strategy involves realisation that:

† As long as sufficient numbers of the working class and other strata do not *want* radical social change, such change will not come about.

† Revolutionary activity must therefore be based on helping to awaken and develop those needs which are suppressed or buried by the hegemony of capitalist ideas and the capitalist power structure. In particular, the aim should be to awaken strivings and needs which people are prepared to struggle for because they believe that their satisfaction is both essential and eminently reasonable. If such demands also threaten the very existence of capitalist property and power relations, then they become a very potent force when and if they "grip the minds of the masses". In our view, it is the instinctive realisation of this which makes the bosses, bureaucrats and politicians so fearful of workers' control ideas, even when the movement is still in its infancy. They know how readily the fabric of capitalist society can be torn if people get "the wrong ideas" and begin to *act* on them.

† While there are inherent features of capitalism which pose various problems of existence, these problems will not *inevitably* be reflected at any given time in the consciousness of those who suffer from them. A revolutionary movement is needed to voice the oppressions and repressions of society and to pose the alternative.

† While there are these many areas in which dissenting and socialist ideas tend to be generated, as long as these ideas remain isolated and fragmentary, the struggles in which they find expression will also represent only a partial challenge to the basic power structure and will therefore be "contained".

† Consequently, particular attention should be given to the *relation* of a given area of struggle to an overall view of society and the world and to an overall view of revolutionary change.

† Deep commitment to ideas and causes is reflected particularly in feelings about what is right and what is wrong, what ought or ought not to be -- that is, commitment to values and a philosophy. This is not to be seen

as an alternative to "politics". In fact, it is *part* of politics, which informs and broadens the scope of daily political activity and struggle.

† We agree with Lenin that "politics cannot but have precedence over economics". (*Selected Works*, Vol. 9, p.54). This is so because socialist revolution is essentially a *political* struggle aimed at instituting a totally new and different power structure so that the economic relations, amongst other things, can be transformed. This is what "economists" and determinists of various kinds have never grasped. But just as the economic struggle, with all its importance, is by itself too narrow to generate the required revolutionary consciousness, so too are the struggles taking place over other deep-seated issues such as women's liberation, workers' control, the ecology, etc. On the other hand, all these are the necessary basis, in life as it is actually experienced, which provides a foundation on which such an overall view can be developed.

To recognise this is not to minimise the power of existing ideas as disseminated in family, school, church and mass media. But it is to refuse to concede complete power to these agencies, for to do so would be both to negate experience of actual dissent, and in effect to abandon hope of change. David Sallach discusses some of these problems in his treatment of the "inculcation" and "institutional" theories of hegemony.

No more than any other partial movement by or in itself, does workers' control provide *the* means of revolutionising consciousness or avoiding containment, but it does embrace many features essential to this process:

† It is not an invention which utopians are attempting to foist on the workers from outside, but expresses some deeply felt needs and strivings. This is shown not only by the angry reaction of employers but by the rapid spread of these ideas among the workers themselves -- rapid, that is, considering how recently it has been taken up.

† It challenges the existing and accepted power relations within enterprises and institutions, thereby providing a basis for building up a challenge to power relations in the wider, social sphere. And it does this by challenging the accepted ideas of what is *right*. How important this is, is shown in the symposium, where a number of contributors acknowledge the existence of a widespread view among workers that the

bosses *should* have powers of control. How could workers thinking in this vein ever be expected to mount a challenge to capitalism in the fields of state, political power?

† While often associated with economic demands (e.g. 35 hour week), workers' control begins to go beyond acceptance by the workers of their condition as mere sellers of the commodity labour power, arguing only over the terms of that sale. It involves revolt against complete subservience to machines and the division of labour (the Ford strike), asserts a concern with the process of production as whole and its purpose (the "green bans" by the Builders' Laborers). It also raises questions as to the economic function (or lack of such a function) of bosses and large portions of the "executive staff", and the accompanying subordination and subservience which has generally been accepted though often resented.

† Since workers' control is impossible without a really active, participatory democracy at grassroots level, it is a much-needed corrective to the bureaucratic tendencies so evident in organisations, including organisations of workers such as unions and parties. This does not mean advocating *replacement* of such organisations, though views to this effect are raised and need discussion, but of their revitalisation by close association with, and control by, their members and supporters. The workers' control movement also raises the perspective of *new* movements acting alongside existing organisations and institutions.

† This also is particularly relevant to the *kind* of new society which will be built by people committed to workers' control and women's liberation principles, related as they are to self-management, the fullest development of people, and the radical transformation of existing human relations. As Marx long ago pointed out, people must remake themselves in the course of remaking society. And, as experience has shown, this cannot be put off till "after the revolution" where it becomes largely dependent on the good will of leaders who, in the absence of such active democracy can become just as bureaucratic and power conscious as those they replace.

We hope this issue of ALR will inform and stimulate discussion of these and related issues, and invite further contributions from readers.