ISSUES IN LABOR CONFLICT

The President of the Communist Party of Australia advances some views on the issues involved in the continuing conflict within the Labor Party, particularly on Vietnam.

FOLLOWING its defeat at the Federal elections, the Australian Labor Party is once again in the throes of internal conflict in which the future of the party, its prospects, policy and leadership are being fiercely debated.

The struggle again demonstrates the absence of a common political outlook and ideology in the Labor Party. Although organised together in a single party, the policy and rules of which they are supposed to abide by, the various factions and trends almost inevitably take up political-ideological positions that correspond to the interests of different social groups in capitalist society. Also, almost inevitably, their differences stem from or are influenced by the fundamental class division in capitalist society, between the working class and capitalist class.

At the centre of the present conflict in the Labor Party and the differences over leadership is Labor's policy on the war in Vietnam, its plan to end conscription and withdraw Australian troops from Vietnam.

Everyone recognises that the Vietnam war raises great national issues. Australian participation in the war is dictated by the class aims of monopoly capitalism, and by the same token, the class interests of the workers impel them to oppose it. The nation is divided over the war, and it is in this setting that the division in the Labor Party assumes such importance for the whole labor movement and the progressive people in all walks of life.

Labor's Federal election setback has been seized upon by the right wing forces to make an all out bid to take over the Federal leadership of the Labor Party and change its foreign policy. While most of the right wing leaders are reticent in public, they are
campaigning within the party for Labor's Vietnam policy to be changed, and brought into line with the policy of the Holt Government.

The Australian Workers' Union officials, who refuse to be inhibited by Labor Party rules on public statements, openly declare their support for the dirty war in Vietnam and the US alliance, while remaining silent on conscription. Waiting on the sidelines, the Democratic Labor Party is gleefully supporting the stand of the AWU leaders. Mr. B. A. Santamaria said that Labor acceptance of the AWU standpoint would open the way "for agreement with the DLP"—not a very inviting prospect for the Labor Party.

If the AWU bureaucrats publicly proclaim the right wing intention of ditching the progressive points in Labor's policy on the Vietnam war, it is the New South Wales branch executive of the Labor Party which is the main centre of the intrigues and manoeuvres to change the leadership of the party and its policy. The right wing are firmly in the saddle in NSW, and their activities endanger Labor Party unity and threaten a new split.

Left to themselves the right wing groups would probably not get very far. However, they are supported by the capitalist press, which has confused and misrepresented the issues, and this makes them more dangerous. The motive of the press in trying to snatch victory for the right wing is all the more suspect when we recall the scurrilous and vicious campaign it waged during the Federal elections to defeat the Labor Party.

The line of propaganda of the capitalist press is interesting. In an editorial urging the "Labor Party to reconstruct itself by moving right", a Sydney newspaper wrote the following: "This has become a middle class conformist country which distrusts political extremism. It looks for policies slightly left or slightly right of centre." (The Sun, 28/11/66.)

Obviously The Sun is trading on the proposition that the industrial working class is disappearing, being absorbed by, or subordinated to, the middle class, a proposition that is useful for those people in working class organisations who are trying to edge the labor movement away from radical policies.

Statistics demonstrate, however, that the numbers of industrial workers are increasing and there can be no doubt that, as a class, they will continue to be decisive in modern capitalist society. This is confirmed by the continuing high level of the strike movement, which also serves to refute propaganda that the class struggle in Australia is giving way to middle class conformism.
The argument that the Labor Party should weaken its ties with the trade unions is continually advanced by the millionaire press and the right wing, because of their concern that the trade union affiliations might prove a source of left wing and progressive influence on Labor's policy. It is most important for them therefore to condemn or minimise, whichever the circumstances require, the role and influence of the industrial workers.

*The Sun’s* argument also implies that the Liberal-Country Party Government, which has plunged Australia into the Vietnam war, has a policy that is just “slightly right of centre”. In fact, the Government’s policy is far to the right. It reflects the standpoint of extreme and reactionary trends in the monopoly capitalist set-up in Australia. Its support for the United States in the unjust and dirty war in Vietnam brought about the confrontation with the labor movement and radical-democratic forces, and divided the nation.

Labor's defeat in the Federal elections was a serious setback for the labor movement, but it is not the end of the road. Forty-two per cent of the people voted for the parties opposing the Holt Government's war policies. By any standard that is powerful opposition. The main part of this vote came from the workers, but it also included intellectuals, peace supporters and others opposed to the war.

Labor's Federal election policy aroused more interest and debate than for many years. However, confusion on the external danger, and an economic situation that favored the Government, prevailed over the mood for change.

A feature of the elections that calls for close attention is the fact that large numbers of people felt so strongly about the issues that they not only voted against the Government, but joined in various activities in opposition to the Vietnam war and conscription. All this suggests that, providing the forces that advanced alternative policies carry the struggle forward and through open debate and appropriate forms of action that involve ever wider circles of people seek to clarify the issues before the nation, the political situation can be turned against the Government.

Although the Holt Government increased its majority in the Federal elections, it cannot be sure it can retain this support. Having taken the step of involving Australia in the unjust war against the Vietnamese people, the Government must take other steps—conscription of the youth, taxation increases and suppression of opposition.

The war means that a continuous threat of crisis hangs over the Government. It lives in fear of military reverses and their
effect on the people. It must meet the ever-growing demand for more and more men and finance for the war. It has virtually no say in determining war policy and must haplessly follow the US in whatever direction it escalates the war, even to the point of nuclear holocaust. It knows that most countries of the world oppose the war, and it is faced with the opposition of close to half of the Australian people.

That is the position of the Government which, in part, explains the increasing pressure to make people conform to its policies. Defence of the Establishment, defence of capitalism, and suppression of new thinking is high on the agenda. The ultras of the Liberal Party and the extremist, racialist and right wing groups associated with them are leading attacks on democratic liberties. They urge the suppression of anti-war and anti-conscription demonstrations, and call for police action against opposition at Liberal Party public meetings. Students and academics opposed to Government policies are publicly abused and threatened, and in some cases political control and police surveillance of universities have been proposed.

As Australia is sucked deeper and deeper into the bog of war in South-East Asia, and as the exorbitant demands of the war increase, it seems certain that conflict between the people and the Holt Government will grow. The forces opposing the war will be impelled, willy-nilly, to wage their fight on an ever widening front, defending democratic liberties and living standards and pressing for progressive solutions to the urgent social and cultural problems of modern society.

In this connection the standpoint of the Communist Party which is set out in the documents for its 21st Congress is very important. The communists believe that it is essential to combine various forms of action and struggle with debate and study of the issues before the people. More importantly, that the barriers to unity in action should be dismantled to permit parties, organisations and people of different political and religious views to join together in struggle for demands held in common. Unity in action will strengthen the fight of the people for their demands and win new supporters. It will create a new spirit and mutual confidence amongst the participants, open up new possibilities of agreement and of moving towards a coalition of the left forces.

Labor's Federal election policy on conscription and the Vietnam war clearly and sharply differentiated it from the position of the Liberal Party. Mr. Calwell characterised the Vietnam war as a "dirty and unwinnable war" and proclaimed Labor's intention of withdrawing Australian troops. Those very far-reaching propositions immediately posed other foreign policy questions, such as
Australia’s future relations with South-East Asian countries and the United States, but the Labor Party provided no convincing answers to these questions. Even the plan to withdraw the troops from Vietnam became compromised and uncertain following Mr. Whitlam's statement that negotiations with the US Government on this issue might result in Australia keeping its troops in Vietnam. The Liberal spokesmen took full advantage of these mistakes to spread confusion about Labor’s policies and to drive home their charge of isolationism.

The Communist Party believes that Australia should reject imperialist policies and the military alliances to give effect to them. Our foreign policy should strive to bring the Vietnam war to an end on the basis of the withdrawal of all foreign troops and the application of the principles of the 1954 Geneva Conference. This country should work for the creation of peaceful conditions in South-East Asia and the world. Our relations with the United States and other countries should be governed by the principles of recognition of the right of all peoples to independence, non-aggression, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other peoples.

Turning now to domestic issues, Labor’s election policy for increased social service benefits, finance for education, various State projects and Northern development made very little impact. Obviously, something more was needed to arouse interest.

There are a number of vital economic and political issues of outstanding importance for Australia which the labor and democratic movements must tackle. These include the growth of monopoly and the rapid increase in foreign capital investment by means of which foreign, and especially United States, capital has gained control of industries essential for Australia’s future, and also the new problems being created by the scientific and technological revolution. Policies and activities to meet these changes are necessary. They should include greater democracy, worker participation in control of production, public ownership of monopolies and developed plans for future growth. In short, the new economic and political problems point to the need for basic social reforms of a transitional nature, that are linked to the concept of social change, the achievement of socialism.

SUCCESS for the right wing in the struggle in the Labor Party would do serious harm to Labor’s own future and also to the labor and democratic movement in Australia. In a post-election statement, Mr. Calwell declared that Labor would stand by its principles and continue to fight for them. The question for the Labor Party therefore is not to retreat and move to the right, but
to improve its campaigning so as to more widely popularise its policies on Vietnam and conscription among the people, and also to begin to look for more basic solutions to the economic, political and social problems of today.

For the labor and progressive movement in general there seem to be two main lines of approach that have validity.

First, the development of publicity and other activities in support of the issues upon which there is already wide agreement, opposition to conscription and the Vietnam war, by all organisations and people concerned. There is no doubt that as the war goes on many new and related problems will arise, such as the defence of democratic freedom, the rights of conscientious objectors and various economic questions, which will widen the basis of the struggles of the people. The Communist Party believes that unity in action of people and organisations, irrespective of their political or religious views, is the most effective form of struggle and would do most to consolidate the opposition to the Government.

Secondly, it would be advantageous to develop among all sections of the left a wide exchange of views on the problems confronting the people. Shortcomings in the analysis and understanding of problems is not confined to any one section and we could all benefit from deeper study and discussion of theoretical and practical questions. The objective should be the constructive elaboration of policies and a more effective popularisation of them.

CHINA appears to be moving both towards a period of internal political struggle without parallel since Mao took over effective control of the Party, and towards even more extreme expressions of the guerilla ethos and the belief in the omnipotence of the masses which have so long been the hallmark of Mao’s thought and action. In the long run, however, it seems inevitable that Mao’s heaven-storming policies will be replaced by others better adapted to the dull but efficient rationality of modern industrial society.

MAO was supremely well attuned to those needs (of China in an earlier period), and thus he was able to play the role he did. He is today not willing to recognise that the long period during which his ideas and methods were in harmony with Chinese needs has come to an end (p. 325).

(From Mao Tse-tung, by Stuart Schram, in the Pelican series “Political Leaders of the Twentieth Century”. For brief review see p. 64.)