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LOOKING AT
THE UNIONS

A leader of the Young Socialists raises a point of view about the unions and discusses the need for greater efforts to secure wider participation by unionists in policy making and activity.

THE AGE OF "AFFLUENCE", technological change and the computer, have caught up and passed the Australian trade union movement. The problem now is whether the unions will be rejuvenated sufficiently to play a leading role in society or whether they will fall even further behind.

I believe that this question is absolutely urgent and that unless the answer is found within the next few years, it will be too late. Interesting figures as to the present tendencies are as follows: between 1961 and 1965 the proportion of unionists amongst wage and salary earners decreased from 51 per cent to 50 per cent in Victoria. In New South Wales the 10-year period 1954-64 saw a decline from 61 per cent to 56 per cent (NSW and Victorian Year Books): This is despite the fact that the overall work force from the intellectually trained to the unskilled is growing as a percentage of the population. The 1967 Victorian Year Book shows that of those occupied in the work force, including employers to employees, the employees have grown from 81.3 per cent in 1954 to 82.6 per cent in 1961, and we can confidently say that this process would have quickened since 1961. Other figures show that many of the blue collar unions are declining in membership, while white collar unions are growing. These figures seem to indicate that the white collar unions are not attracting people quickly enough to offset the losses in the blue collar unions, and that as more young people now move into white collar fields it is probably they who are not joining. On the other hand more and more migrants are filling the unskilled and semi-skilled jobs so maybe it is they who are not being attracted.

Unions are today seldom regarded as a dynamic force and are often thought to be losing relevance in society. To some, they appear to have become "integrated" and to be almost part and parcel of the Establishment. None of these views is entirely correct,
although each contains partial truths. In a society which has increasingly complex problems, there is objectively a greater role for unions than ever, as is being displayed in isolated instances. On the economic front one only has to recall the massive metal trades struggles earlier this year to see that such actions are far from redundant. No, it is not the specific objective conditions so much (many of which are probably here to stay), as the need to rethink the role of unions and associations within the revolutionary framework.

In recent years there has been a spate of marxist rethinking on a host of questions such as democracy, alienation, transitional programs, perspectives within socialism, class motivations and so on. Not very much has filtered through to the union movement yet, although it is gathering pace. What is required now is to start transferring some of this new thinking into concrete reality, and here surely is where the unions start to reveal their potential. We have a unique situation. Over 50 per cent of working people are in a union or professional association—one of the highest membership rates in the capitalist world. We have one major centre uniting blue collar unionists and a fast growing unity of and with the increasingly important white collar and technical unions. To top it all the Australian Council of Trade Unions gives lip service at least to the eventual establishment of some kind of socialism. If that is not an important base on which to build, we'll never have one.

What is needed is ramified union organisation, firmly under the control of the rank and file and involved with almost every facet of a unionist's life. Such things as cultural activities, clubs, children's organisations, housing co-operatives, educational institutions, medical centres, etc., run by the membership, would begin to give meaning to participatory democracy. A big barrier is that many union leaderships have become so obsessed with constant wage cases that little time is given to anything else. In fact the skilful moves of the ruling class have trapped us into these interminable antics, in a very conscious attempt to enmesh the unions in Establishment processes.

To some extent unions have developed an acquisitive mentality because of their concentration on economic demands. This has led to higher incomes and material standards, but has not consciously assisted in improving moral judgments, cultural appreciation, political understanding and a more fully developed person. In fact the result is quite the contrary.

Perhaps we should get down to some concrete examples to see what can be done. Shop committees and local branches should be the springboard, as illustrated by a couple of examples from
the Preston tramway workshop. Several years ago a seminar on Indonesia was held at different lunch time meetings, with four speakers, ranging from Catholic to Communist. The attendances were good, showing this was an effective way of moving outside ordinary union affairs. In another innovation, for the first ACTU Youth Week the shop committee organised a function in the Preston Town Hall with the full support of the council. This has become an expanding and permanent feature of youth week, reaching out to secondary students, church youth clubs and sporting organisations. Now the idea of a whole week of youth activity in Preston is being put forward. Some time ago the committee had a lunch time meeting to hear about the forthcoming fortieth anniversary of Preston. This led to the establishment of the Preston Historical Society, which is now a thriving organisation.

Shop committees in fact should become the focal point for most activity within workplaces and factories. This would mean supplanting the employer-sponsored social clubs which are often used as a sop. There is no reason why shop committees should not be able to run socials, sporting events, cultural activities, etc., a whole lot better. In the cultural field, for example, ACTU Youth Week factory gate folk concerts have proved a winner, like poetry reading during the last Adelaide Arts Festival. Why should these not become regular features of workshop life, instead of being presented just once a year? If sufficient support is engendered, surely it becomes possible for unions to consider sponsoring tours and concerts by international artists, Pete Seeger for example, and even developing their own theatres. The same kind of program can be envisaged for local branches, which should be able to take part in local affairs and activities in a big way.

Turning to bigger projects requiring overall leadership, we already have the Butchers’ Union Trade Union Clinic in Footscray, which is winning itself a reputation with its research into industrial accidents and safety measures. Why should there not be a network of such clinics throughout the country? Then there is the new Teachers’ Federation building and club in Sydney—an object lesson in the kind of atmosphere and facilities which must attract greater interest from members. The overall approach embodied in the Youth Week concept has proved useful, the weakness being its once a year format which does not follow up activities. The development of “FOCO” in Brisbane is perhaps the most shining example that young people can be won to some kind of allegiance with the unions, given the right approach. To prove the point, as a result of “FOCO” 5,000 young people turned up to the opening function of this year’s Youth Week.

In the field of education, the unions could consider the establishment of cheap coaching classes to assist members’ children
doing Matric and Leaving. At present, this avenue is left wide open for profitmaking concerns and surely a young person so assisted would be impressed by the unions' concern for his education. Ideas presented by G. W. Ford in *The Australian Trade Unions* are very useful, especially the suggestion that unions have to emulate the employer and go into secondary schools to sell unionism, so that those starting work will have some understanding of its value. We should certainly take up his idea for a union-produced handbook on trade unions for use in schools.

It would also be worthwhile for unions to consider granting scholarships, especially for research into matters of concern to them. As a further move to develop student-worker cooperation, consideration could be given to a liaison committee between university SRC's or Labor Clubs and Trades and Labor Councils or groups of unions. This would be of mutual benefit during big campaigns.

Children's activity also deserves attention. Some unions have dance groups, picnics and pages in their journals, but perhaps we could develop union-sponsored kindergartens or nurseries. This would also present a good opportunity to bring housewives into activity. A further project could be cheap holiday camps for members' children.

To do these things, far more streamlined organisation is necessary and less involvement with the mundane tasks. In this regard the AEU is setting the pace with its complete re-organisation and use of computers to reduce the time-consuming administrative work, the whole object being to free local branches, organisers and members precisely for extending the union's activity and in such a way as to involve the rank and file more than ever. Already one branch is planning to establish its own local centre for activities and recreation, and another has begun to look into local problems of social services and public facilities with the object of initiating campaigns. The AEU experiences will need to be followed closely, as with its job organisation and branches it could become an example of what the whole movement can do.

This type of involvement in every facet of life does not mean that we turn from campaigning to simply emulating the government and the boss in providing services. Quite the contrary, because this must be seen as revolutionary strategy and not simply popularisation of unionism. It is precisely under a socialist society that unions will provide schools, universities, hospitals, holiday camps, theatres, etc. etc., so we will in fact be building in embryo form the people's organisations which will eventually control such things.
The very concept of workers’ control becomes more relevant surely when unionists see their potential, while involved with a network of union undertakings. In fact within such a movement the alternative power structures can grow, on which we will build the new society.

We must constantly keep in front of us the demand for rank and file control of all campaigns and projects. This becomes a concrete example of socialist democracy in contrast to our lack of participation and control of capitalist institutions. Democracy must be at the very centre of our thinking on the modernisation of unions. The rightwing concept of modernisation is the employment of experts and leaders to take over and handle everything, and no doubt this is a serious trap into which we could fall inadvertently. Because of the complex problems confronting the unions, we would need the advice of experts, but not control. Some well-meaning people have suggested that unions should invest their money, as a way to modernise. This would be entirely wrong, as they are immediately turned into their opposites with vested interests in preventing conflict. Money should be spent in those fields where it will provide a useful service for members: theatres, clubs, colleges, etc., and no doubt such ventures would also prove profitable.

Close involvement with important social undertakings and problems would lead to a deeper understanding and a better capacity for militant action around such things as social service, education, housing and so on. The Living Standards Conferences held in both Sydney and Melbourne turned into abortive attempts to broaden horizons. No doubt rightwing bureaucracy and lack of clear-sighted approach on the part of the left contributed to the poor follow up from these excellent beginnings. Nevertheless another factor was that they were a flash in the pan. If factory and branch organisations had been deeply involved in the wide range of issues discussed, vigorous action would probably have developed and this would have been more difficult to bottle up afterwards. With the accepted practice of wide involvement will no doubt come a more ready acceptance of political action, which will obviously be necessary in many issues. In such circumstances the issue of peace will surely be regarded more as an ordinary part of activity than at the moment.

During the course of this development the vexing problem of which social group is the main force for change will probably be solved. A movement with a dynamic approach and challenging ideas can attract as allies students, academics and other progressives. Based on purely material concepts it may be said that the industrial working class is redundant as a revolutionary force. However this perhaps ignores the important role of ideas, which
can be introduced into the movement, and this has been seriously lacking of recent times. It may be a little easier to introduce socialist consciousness to the better educated white collar workers, especially as the technological revolution develops. Nevertheless such consciousness does not appear spontaneously and will need to be tackled differently among different sections of the working people. The important thing is that a union movement with a socialist consciousness oriented towards all working people, students, academics, housewives, pensioners and children, and not just to a particular section, will surely be capable of social change.

Finally, I agree with G. W. Ford in the essay mentioned earlier when he says that modernisation is absolutely urgent. What is required is a new revolutionary strategy for the trade unions, and we need to start developing it immediately. No doubt there are many well informed academics who would be pleased to assist if approached, and this would be a good start. We need to start posing new challenging ideas and framing programs for next year's ACTU Congress, and winning support from the rank and file to back them up. We have the job of breaking the ACTU obsession with arbitration and wage cases which are making the unions simply an appendage of the courts. We need to break through leftwing bureaucracy and conservatism which seriously retards a lot of work, and thus give full rein to initiative. The development of rank and file activity with far-sighted leadership and assistance should be able to discredit and weaken the rightwing. The possibility then opens up of building a union movement with revolutionary potential. I can only stress again that the task is urgent and must start NOW!

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