

The State and Australian Socialism

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Many discussions on theoretical questions are as tedious as the TV repeats over the holiday season. Let us hope we can make the discussions on the state now proceeding something more than a re-run of classical situations and past controversies.

The issue has arisen again in connection with "eurocommunism", the dropping of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" by the French Communist Party, the possibility of a left government resulting from the impending French elections and the political crisis in Italy.

Many articles and pamphlets have appeared, and at least two books: **Eurocommunism and the State** by the Communist Party of Spain's secretary, Santiago Carrillo, and **On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat** by Etienne Balibar, a member of the Communist Party of France. Unfortunately, only the latter is available in Australia at the time of writing.

In Australia the controversy is linked with the search for a way forward in the current uncongenial political climate, publication of the Communist Party of Australia's proposal **A New Course for Australia** and discussion on the CPA's general program to be adopted at its 26th Congress next year.

To avoid a sterile debate on the state we have to locate it in our context. Socialism being so far from an immediate prospect here, the debate could appear a little ridiculous. And it would be if it diverted attention from the **actual** task which is the building of the social and political forces

needed to bring **revolutionary change** and make the destination of the state a real, practical question.

But, properly posed, there is a relation, because the future and the present are connected. One of the fundamental problems of political strategy in fact is to grasp the connections, so that the immediate struggles lead in the desired direction, not some other.

We have not widely used the term, but "the democratic road to socialism" describes fairly well the line the CPA has been following over the last decade or so. My aim in this article is to discuss the meaning of this in relation to the current controversies. The following points seem to me especially important.

1. A view of the **nature** of the problem of revolution in a modern capitalist society, compared with that in (say) tsarist Russia.

Of course, the nature of the problem cannot be completely divorced from the concrete setting. The Russian revolution took place during a devastating world war, and no doubt if Western Europe (or Australia) were to perish the thought - similarly involved today, policies and strategies would have to be very different.

Leaving this aside, however, the despotic tsarist state was appropriate to feudalism, as was the prevailing ideology. Yet Russia was well along the capitalist path even in agriculture which, while very backward, was increasingly concerned with the production of commodities - goods for exchange as distinct from those produced for direct consumption.

The feudal ideology had decomposed. It was no longer hegemonic and was ineffective in holding the masses of people within the system. The repressive power of the state was therefore the prime obstacle to revolution and could be toppled by quick assault. (A new ideology appropriate to a socialist system was held by only a comparative few - advanced workers and some intellectuals - and this fact greatly influenced the course of later developments. But that is beyond our scope here.)

The Italian marxist Antonio Gramsci tackled the different problem in more industrially developed countries:

"In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks" (Prison Notebooks).

It followed that revolutionaries needed to direct their energies in the first place to the "fortresses and earthworks". Not as a substitute or an excuse for not tackling the state but as essential preparation for it - preparation without which talk of overturning or "smashing" the state became mere rhetoric covering practical impotence.

It should also be remembered that Gramsci wrote in the aftermath of the first world war, and at a time when industrial development, state involvement in civil society and the power and sophistication of the mass media were far less than they are today. In this light we would have to say that the tasks posed by Gramsci have increased.

But there are offsetting factors, now highlighted by the continuing economic crisis of the capitalist world and the great range of contradictions manifested in the many social movements and the intensity and breadth of class struggles.

There have also been changes in the state. The greater involvement of the state in civil society is not a change in **class nature**. Even we in Australia who have not experienced directly wars and revolutions in our country know this from November 11, 1975, for example.

The changes are that the state is much more involved than previously in education, social welfare, housing, transport, communications and various forms of intervention in the economy.

And despite ideologically and economically motivated efforts to cut back and hand some of it over to private enterprise where a profit can be made from it, state intervention remains massive. The very functioning of modern capitalist society, which it is the state's business to maintain, requires it. The pre-occupation of various arms of government with the "restructuring" of Australian capitalism to fit in with the requirements of a world economy dominated by a few multinational empires only emphasises this.

Consequences flowing from these developments include:

- The state has large numbers of employees. Most of these, while having such privileges as a certain security in employment, have roughly the same standard of living as people "outside", and feel similar economic pressures. They are parts of bureaucratic structures run from the top down, with themselves on the bottom. To varying degrees they have to be closely in touch with ordinary people and their concerns.

Thus, many functionaries of the state can take up similar economic struggles to the people they "rule". They can become "infected" by similar concerns such as ideas of women's liberation, opposition to uranium development, anti-authoritarianism, etc.

- The claimed "impartiality" of the state, which is a vital ideological prop for the institution and the society it helps maintain, has to be given at least some lip-service. This creates some avenues for ideas and actions which don't prop up the existing order. The Fraser government is going to great lengths to close up these avenues, but in doing so meets resistance and builds up pressures which will find vent later.

Looking more concretely at it, we could take the education system. This is an arm of the state which has the function of providing the "mix" of tractable industrial cannon-fodder, intellectuals, etc. required by the system. The study courses, the ideology conveyed and the form of organisation in

schools is vital if this state function is to be discharged to the satisfaction of the capitalist system.

Having done a little teaching, I have experienced the anguish of having to fit in with and minister to these requirements. Nevertheless, the school system affords some avenues for progressive activity by teachers and pupils motivated by anti-authoritarian feelings, opposition to sexism and racism, ideas of the development of the person, etc.

Some employees of the Australian Broadcasting Commission have taken its professed impartiality at face value and presented ideas which have thrown the establishment into a rage. Axes have fallen since Fraser got in, but the possibilities of resistance have also been displayed.

Australia Post employees, workers in the telecommunications, transport and general administration fields have acted against the policies of the departments and commissions which head them.

Even some prison warders declared that they would not "process" people arrested in anti-uranium demonstrations. This does not stop warders from beating up prisoners, or opposing most demands for prison reform, but it is still notable. All state employees experience to one degree or another their contradictory position which people involved have to concretely study. But the point is that is **contradictory**. The state is not a monolith.

There are even examples in history of armies - the ultimate core of the state - being influenced by the prevailing social sentiment and political situation to refuse to fire on strikers. Magri, a critic from the left of the Italian Communist Party, affirms that a section of police and judiciary in that country is aligned with the workers' movement.

These examples bring out the fact that while the function of the state considered in the abstract remains always the same, the actual state is prey to all sorts of contradictions. This creates the possibility for the state to be "neutralised" or rendered incapable of actually discharging this or that function under certain conditions. And this becomes the more possible the more preparation has gone on previously.

Sometimes (for example, 1968 in France) an eruption in one sector is likely to spark others, creating an upheaval that seems to come from nowhere, but spreads like wildfire because the smouldering contradictions are set alight.

Of course, this depends also and especially on the struggle in the non-state sector, in particular, industry.

The struggle for workers' intervention and control goes on at all sorts of levels. It is part of a **constant** struggle, of which the fight over wages (over division of the value added in production between wages and profits) is one part. Or rather **can** be part if not narrowly conducted.

Success is not likely to come out of the blue in finished form (such as "nationalisation under workers' control"). It has to be prepared for by more partial actions in which a working class political force is forged in actual struggle.

The particular forms such struggles take at a given time depend on circumstances and the degree of consciousness already attained, though the general nature of the demands advanced derive from analysis of economic and social tendencies and the particular sector or industry involved.

That is why **A New Course for Australia** puts stress on —

- Concrete programs which go beyond the immediate and seek to deal with economic and social trends seen from a class perspective.
- Grassroots involvement of the people concerned in working out and acting to achieve such concrete things, and their organisation in the process.
- A general framework of proposals on the economy and social life which establishes links between the separate activities.

One small example is the way workers at Ajax Nettlefolds (which makes nuts, bolts, screws, etc.) intervened through a committee of shop stewards in an Industries Commission inquiry into the industry.

They saved a number of jobs, and while supporting the employers' claim for a temporary increase in tariffs, took a quite independent class position which they stated in the following way:

"We, as workers in the Ajax Needlefolds company, wish to state clearly that we are not seeking continued protection to make the company more profitable, as we believe their current profit level is more than adequate. We would be opposed to the Australian people carrying the burden of an unnecessary, inefficient and wasteful industry, simply to provide higher profits.

"We believe that the propositions we are putting forward are designed to create a more efficient and worthwhile industry, the benefits of which must flow to the workers in the form of shorter hours, better work environment and greater control over work organisation.

"In particular, we believe that a greater say in the overall workings and investment of the company by the workers will assist in making it a more worthwhile and efficient company, producing for the social good. This will be greatly assisted by access to far more information, all of which is perfectly reasonable when one considers the public support required to keep the company going.

"We fully understand that given the system we live in, it is difficult for any real rationalisation to develop, because of the sole concern of manufacturers to achieve the highest profit regardless of inefficiency and the good of workers.

"This is made even more difficult by the almost total absence of a national plan for the manufacturing industry. Therefore, we strongly support the concept of national planning that is based on the criteria of socially useful and necessary production, benefits for workers that include adequate wages, working conditions and shorter hours, and that the industry is either economically viable or shown to be an essential part of Australian manufacturing. We believe that the propositions we put forward for the fastener industry, if accepted, would head in the direction that is indicated."

Different and bigger examples of workers' intervention can be found from the Australian green bans to the 1977 Fiat struggle in Italy, but the point is intervention from a class point of view, at a level suited to the circumstances.

In The State and Revolution which he published in the second half of 1917, Lenin

talked about other things besides violence, despite the fact that violence was very much to the fore in the conditions of the time.

The state consists, he pointed out, of a separate, a special body of people whose function it is to rule. The aim of marxists in respect to the state is not to make it all powerful, but to "do away" with it. That means to **not have** a special body of people whose job it is to manage and rule.

How can this be done? By having **everyone** partake of the function. We call this self-management, and see it as a great extension of democracy.

A "democratic road to socialism" might therefore be briefly characterised as the process in which more and more people in more and more spheres of social life act over things that affect them.

There are, of course, obstacles, including the conditions and habits of an exploiting society.

"Owing to the conditions of capitalist exploitation the modern wage-slaves are also so crushed by want and poverty that 'they cannot be bothered with democracy', 'they cannot be bothered with politics'; in the ordinary peaceful course of events the majority of the population is debarred from participating in social and political life." (S & R, Ch. 5, Part 2.)

Poverty, illiteracy and social discrimination are still a big obstacle to Aborigines, migrants, the unemployed and those on very low incomes participating in democracy, but they are not insuperable. However, they are not now the obstacles to most people doing so, and it would be useful to discuss what the obstacles actually are. But the point is that none of them are insuperable, that there are today more possibilities of pushing out the boundaries of democracy.

"To develop democracy to its logical conclusion, to find the forms for this development, to test them by practice, and so forth - all this is one of the constituent tasks of the struggle for the social revolution. Taken separately, no sort of democracy will bring socialism. But in actual life democracy will never be 'taken separately'; it will be 'taken together' with other things, it will exert its influence on economics, will

stimulate its reformation; and in its turn it will be influenced by economic development and so on. Such are the dialectics of living history." (S & R, Ch. 4, Part 4.)

As a dialectical process this is unlikely to proceed smoothly. Basic transformations do not occur without crises and upheavals, and we will return to this shortly.

But the "quantitative" process of extending democracy and mass involvement is the crux of any "democratic road to socialism", the condition for any qualitative transformation taking place.

But, even here, sweeping generalisations should be avoided. Various aspects of social change may be spread over lengthy periods of time. For example, "political power" changed suddenly in Cuba, but the other arms of the state were only "smashed" at a later date. (I think in fact that in many cases it would be more accurate to say that they were "reformed", and that the process still continues. The word "smashed" can easily give rise to flights of political fancy, far removed from the real tasks.)

As to the type of "upheaval" envisaged, "the democratic road to socialism" involves a commitment to try to avoid civil war.

The CPA's Program Principles, which will guide the development of its general program, state on this point:

"The fundamental sources of social violence are capitalist exploitation, the ideas based on it, and authoritarianism enshrined in the state. Nevertheless, the CPA aims for socialist transformation of society without civil war, striving to utilise all the contradictions within society, the state and the ruling classes nationally and internationally to this end, and seeking the support of other socialist and liberation forces throughout the world.

"This requires consistent defence of people's interests and rights, opposition to authoritarianism, including in our own practice, opposition to 'legal violence', and promotion of the positive ideals of socialism and communism which envisage and require a great expansion of democratic rights."

This direction is the CPA's choice, as the only viable way to proceed in our society. But for others who make a different choice we point out that an alternative is not created

just by "choosing". To imagine that the kind of struggle the "democratic road" involves is impossible in Australia, while the kind of struggle involved in an insurrection is possible, is to indulge in fantasy.

In Spain and Italy, which are far more "political" societies than our own, with long revolutionary histories, even critics from the left of the communist parties (Magri, Giacomo) acknowledge that anyone advocating to the workers that they take up arms and launch a civil war would be laughed out of court, if not subjected to more material criticism.

This leads to questions about likelihoods and possibilities. These questions should be discussed free of rhetoric and dogma, but they are legitimate and important to discuss.

Drawing lessons from the coup in Chile, Enrico Berlinguer, secretary of the Italian Communist Party, pointed to the need for broad alliances, of avoiding a split "down the middle" of society, and advanced the aim of winning "the vast majority" for a policy of "democratic renewal".

The "historic compromise" which envisaged the winning of at least a section of Christian Democrats was related to this perspective. (The C-D's are the conservative ruling party, but the party played a positive role in the struggle against fascism and has the allegiance of about one-third of industrial workers.)

The limited support the PCI gave the C-D government, and the struggle for first, a communist voice, then a communist presence in the government derived from this aim.

Even though he disagrees with the PCI over the "historic compromise" and other issues, Lucio Magri, one of the founders of the *Il Manifesto* group, affirms the necessity of using to the full the "democratic terrain" which —

"... means using all the opportunities that bourgeois democracy offers, for example, the opportunities for union struggles, the openings created by the articulation of state power, local government agencies, the co-operatives. One must use all these opportunities rather than think of building only a vanguard which then uses a moment of crisis to conquer power in a violent way.

The problem of violence remains, but only as defensive violence in reaction to attempts by the bourgeoisie during the course of the crisis to overturn democratic forms - this is already happening and will increase." (**Socialist Revolution**, No. 36.)

There is no sure-fire way of being sufficiently prepared for every turn of events or for such an eventuality, but it is important not to ignore these aspects, even though no other approach than the one outlined here seems viable for countries like our own. I am sure that the PCI (for instance) is quite well aware of the theory of the state, the problems and the dangers.

But I would like to make two points.

Firstly, it appears at the time of writing that the CP and other parties of the left could form a left government, something the PCI had wished to avoid. This would pose the problem of a society divided roughly down the middle politically, and of the communists as the major partner taking the **responsibility** for administering Italian society which remains capitalist.

Because of the development of the world capitalist economy and the power of the multinational corporations, actions by the latter can be consciously undertaken to "destabilise" any society. Such actions would no doubt be countered by further political mobilisation, further controls over or confiscations of property and capital, co-operation with movements in France, Spain, Portugal and other measures. But the living standards of the people could fall, creating severe hardships and political difficulties. The issue at each step is decided by the strength and skill of the forces in struggle, it is not decided **one way or the other** in advance.

This leads to my second point: that while it may be entirely correct to reject the road of insurrection in which a vanguard seeks to seize power in a crisis, and consider only counter-violence, the latter has to be taken seriously. And sometimes it is not, because all gaze is directed one way.

I visited Chile in 1965 to represent the CPA at the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Chile. This was one year after the 1964 elections in which Allende stood for President as the Left candidate. He received

39 per cent of the votes, but lost because there was a single opposing candidate, Frei.

When I arrived in Chile there was still a lively debate going on as to whether the same policy should be continued. It was, and at the election in 1970 Allende, with 36.3 per cent of the vote became President because the opposition was split and he got the highest vote of any candidate.

But during the 1965 discussion, partly acting as "devil's advocate" I posed questions about the dangers, using among other examples the bloody overthrow in April 1964 of the much milder President Goulart of Brazil.

I was assured that this possibility was always in mind, that preparations were being made for such an eventuality, and that while they had no illusions about it in the final analysis, the tradition of non-interference in civil affairs by the Chilean army (very different from the armed forces of other Latin American countries) was of significance.

But CPC secretary Luis Corvalan had this to say at a Central Committee meeting in August 1977, not long after his release in a prisoner exchange between Chile and the Soviet Union!

"... toleration of the excesses of the counter-revolutionaries constitutes a capital error.

"The line of Popular Unity and President Allende of relying upon the democratic sectors of the Armed Forces sought a growing identification of the military with the people, but it was not pursued to the core.

(there were considerable difficulties in changing top personnel in the armed forces but) "in spite of this, we could and should have promoted at least some changes and eliminated some of the most reactionary elements, seeking the support of the sectors most inclined towards the new regime. This was especially possible in the first months, as well as just after the municipal elections in 1971, and following the tanzaco" (the abortive coup of June 29, 1973).

The behavior of the Government and Popular Unity in this field was undoubtedly influenced by erroneous conceptions deeply rooted in the Chilean mentality which, in one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent, affected all parties. Obviously, we are

referring to the belief that the armed forces of Chile were distinguished by their subordination to the Civil Power and by their abstention from politics and sense of professionalism.

"..... despite all the errors or insufficiencies of our work with the armed forces, there were among the latter important contingents on whom we could have counted whatever the circumstances We ascertained this in our contacts with military personnel at all levels. However, the deterioration in the correlation of forces also had repercussions on the armed institutions and the aforesaid contingents were reduced and felt confused, frustrated and helpless. This was the basic thing. Added to it was the fact that neither the Government nor Popular Unity had elaborated an operational plan - worthy of the name - with loyal military personnel to crush a coup d'etat were it unleashed. Thus came the 11th of September. The coup caught us unprepared with regard to military defence."

Corvalan then goes on to outline some actual preparations of the CPC. They had organised about 3,000 members with one degree or another of training and a quantity of armaments, but the amount was inadequate and the military conceptions involved were far too primitive.

The enemy, he further says, knew that there were some preparations, so instead of the "traditional" rather unorganised coup which might have been repelled and defeated like the one in June, they launched, with CIA assistance, a full-scale military blitzkrieg which allowed no time for political and military mobilisation of other forces.

The fact that such frank self-criticism is made gives credibility (of course, not proof) to another conclusion advanced by Corvalan. He affirms that the slogan of the Popular Unity "No to Civil War" was correct. It had the objective of uniting as many forces as possible and also expressed the conviction - which the CPC leadership still holds - that the correlation of political forces would have been changed for the worse by any other slogan, because the masses were not prepared to follow another road. The consciousness of a party can influence that of the masses, but it cannot necessarily determine it.

This has little to do with our own situation at present, but maybe an analogy can be drawn.

In correctly (as I believe) focussing at present on the arduous nature of the tasks we face, and recognising the conservatism of large sections of Australian society, including considerable numbers of workers, we should not lose sight of the possibility - indeed, in the long run, inevitability - of crises, upsurges and upheavals of various kinds.

It is wrong to count on upheavals coming at a time we cannot know, possibly quite far away, as a substitute for the hard, patient work we must put in today. But it is also wrong to lose perspective and get into the habit of thinking that things will always go on in the same way and at the same pace.

The contradictions in modern capitalism in general are many and chronic. Australia is no exception and has also its own particular weaknesses as well as strengths. One or another of these contradictions can easily become acute and erupt, transforming the situation in which we work. If our gaze is too fixedly one way, this would find us wanting.

It has been put to me that the reason the Latrobe valley strike did not result in the public backlash many of us expected was that, with the mass movement at a low ebb and reaction riding pretty high, a deep chord of sympathy was struck for a body of solid people, running their own thing. If this is so, then in altered circumstances, a rapid resurgence of the ideas and movements now being pushed down by the Fraser government could occur.

The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"

Discussion of "the democratic road to socialism" leads naturally to consideration of "the dictatorship of the proletariat".

This phrase is so overlaid with past controversies, emotions, obscurities, different interpretations and popular antipathy, that little will come from denouncing it as outmoded or passionately asserting that one must stick to it or forever be condemned as an opportunist. Balibar,

in his book, does not avoid the latter approach, but he does the positive service of pointing out that the issue is concerned with the **whole transition period** from capitalism to communism.

Rather than be taken up with phrases and slogans, therefore, it is better to pose this question: what are the essential characteristics of such a transition period?

I would say there are three:

1. There must be a fundamental change in the economy away from domination by the corporations; and in the state, in which capitalist rule is embodied politically.
2. There must be a new state to help effect and preserve the economic and political changes which this entails.
3. This state must be in principle different from any previous one. Different in that it will not be, or aim to preserve, a separate, distinct group of people whose special function is to manage and rule.

It will be of this new type because, and to the extent that, everyone performs some part of the work of "ruling", which means to the extent that self-management develops. The new state will thus progressively do away with itself, or "wither away".

The connection between this and the democratic road to socialism will be evident. It is an essential preparation for the future society and **in that sense** represents a necessary preparation of the new within the shell of the old. Not in the sense that the new will be born without some sort of upheaval, but that an upheaval of the kind required will not take place without that preparation.

So far, so good, some might say. But that is the dictatorship of the proletariat. But this is much too pat, I believe, and leaves too many unanswered questions. It ignores lessons from historical experience which marxists must pay heed to, rather than proceeding from categories and concepts as though they were eternal truths.

After the initial wave which brings a new society and state into being, one of the chief problems is that differences arise within the working class (however defined) and between the working class and other sections of the people.

These differences arise from many causes, and may become the subject of intense struggles, affecting the stability or even the very existence of the new society.

As differences arise, the question is "who will dictate to whom?"

Socialist history shows that some will claim that theirs is the "proletarian line" and that the others are "capitalist roaders", even if they are socially proletarians. Such accusations usually include the claim that non-proletarians or former exploiters support those denounced. But it is not unknown for the positions to be reversed a bit later. So who should "dictate" to whom?

Will those who, at the time, actually constitute or control the state power decide who possesses the truth, decide which line is right (presumably their own) and use their hold on state power to "dictate" to the others?

Of course, the more self-management exists, the more the state will have "withered away", leaving it to democratic processes to decide. Therefore, the further the processes described as essential to the democratic road to socialism have proceeded, the more the problem will be mitigated. But it is idealistic to imagine that it will be finally "solved". And in any case, even with developed self-management, there will be differences, and probably quite strong ones at that, between different enterprises and sectors on various social questions.

Therefore, socialists' commitment to democratic processes is, and will continue to be, a real issue.

The CPA's commitment is to a plurality of parties (that is, of their right to exist), that the state should not have an official ideology or a monopoly over the media, and recognition of the right of people to vote out a government as well as to vote one in (whatever the system of electing representatives). To state this does not, of course, provide for all contingencies, but it expresses our firm commitment. We have to **mean** it, and people - including and especially "the "proletariat" - have to be convinced that we do.

That is why I think "socialist democracy" which links up with the democratic road to socialism is a more accurate, not to say intelligible, way of stating our position.