

# Intervening to Deepen the Democratic Process

*In this edition we continue our series on the ACTU/ALP Accord. Here, Max Ogden examines the effects of the Accord and its impact in terms of strategy on the left and the union movement.*

**Max Ogden**

**F**ollowing the recent re-election of a federal Labor government, it is probably time to take stock of the effects of the Accord, the direction it is heading and its impact on the strategy for the left and the union movement.

Initially, many people saw the Accord as simply a pragmatic response to a given situation. With high unemployment and the possibility of defeating the Fraser government, it was felt that, for the moment, an agreement between unions and the Labor Party would be of some value. The alternative of relying on the marketplace was not proving very successful.

For their own reasons, the right saw the Accord as a useful election gimmick, after which it would be played down. On the other hand, some on the left saw it as only a short term practical approach, while many others in the centre and left were somewhat confused.

I would argue that, while the Accord must have elements of the pragmatic, it is more far-reaching and represents the most fundamental change in the union and left strategy that we have seen in the Australian labour movement since the development of the arbitration system and the high tariff barriers in the early part of the century.

We are looking at a totally new approach for the development of socialist consciousness and it is necessary that this be understood in order that the strategy can be pursued with greater clarity. In essence, it boils down to the question of when the left and the labour movement make their best advances. Is it in a period of

economic recession, or during boom periods?

An examination of history in this century and current events in various countries, would suggest that there is little doubt as to the answer. We make our best advances in periods of economic buoyancy when we have more room to negotiate. For the first time, we are now looking at a strategy concerned with all aspects of the economic and political situation, and we have the potential to put reforms into place which will be very difficult to change in the future.

This compares with the past when, in economic boom periods, we concentrated overwhelmingly on the individual wage packet as, for example, in 1974, and we stood aside from intervening in any major decisions concerning the direction of the economy, and thought that slogans, criticisms, and opposition were going to solve the problem.

What we are witnessing is the development of the Australian union movement as a major political weapon the like of which we have never seen before. It is noticeable and highlighted by recent Labor Party conferences that the most important initiatives on the economy and social policies are coming from the trade union movement, not from the Labor Party.

**T**here is a fundamental difference between the reformism of the right and some in the centre, and what is intended by those on the left who support the ALP/ACTU Accord. This is the key if we are to understand the potential for developing the strategy effectively.

On the one hand, the right wing allied with various forces in big



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business are quite happy to pursue reforms which look good on the surface but involve little change at the base and, in particular, maintain an elite form of politics.

Basically, they seek to understand public opinion in order to get into power and stay there. Our approach must be to understand public opinion to get into power and stay there with the clear objective of changing public opinion in a left direction. That is the difference between the two approaches.

Our fundamental concern is that the reforms open up the possibility for us to mobilise and involve unionists and the public in the broadest possible way. This means that people on different sides of the political fence will view the same reforms quite differently. In essence, it means that it is up to us to make effective use of the new atmosphere created by such things as commitments to tax reform (and especially the process by which it has been negotiated), and the strengthening of the free medical health services, to generalise commitments to egalitarianism and strengthen the democratic process whether the government intends that or not.

Such a strategy has got nothing whatsoever to do with whether or not we trust Bob Hawke or the employers or anybody else for that matter. In essence, it has got to do with our having the capacity to develop and change public opinion and the atmosphere, to the extent that Hawke and even business will increasingly be locked into a situation which will not necessarily be of their making.

There is no other way, nor can we avoid the step-by-step process which is very hard going. There is no mass base for socialism in Australia, nor in the working class, nor even for what would be reasonable reforms for such things as access to company information.

As long as Hawke can claim 78 percent support and develop his idea of a consensus, we have no choice but to seek to change the content of that consensus. This does not suggest for a moment that we should not have criticisms of the Labor government or its leaders, but that such criticisms should be kept within the perspective of the *realpolitik* in this country. The alternative is simply to blame leaders for everything that happens, thereby falling into the trap of conservative politics that is all about leaders and the elite and opting out.

The classic example at the moment is around the uranium issue. It is true that ALP policy has been undermined and moulded to the dictates of business to some extent, but not entirely, and to the whim of certain leaders, and for this we can be critical.

However, this should not blind us to the fact that the issue of uranium mining, despite the large mass participation in recent times, is still not strong enough in the public mind to bring the government to heel. This being the case, there is no substitute for working to double and triple involvement and mass demonstrations. The alternative is to do nothing and carpet leaders. -

**T**he real issue for us, then, is **how** do we make the change in a way that the process we use embodies the very objective we have in mind.

The strategy is mass education of Australian unionists and the public, based on two principles:

- People learn best when they are involved in issues, and they are mainly involved when these issues are close to their day-to-day experience and concern.

- It is important to move to the unknown from the known.

Unfortunately, this is not always reflected in the labour movement as we often concentrate on issues, no matter how important, that are far removed from the day-to-day experiences of people. This was manifest in the recent national conference of the ALP where some of the fiercest debate was on issues which, despite their importance, had little relationship to the average person, at least as far as they understood it. Such general approaches will always suit the right and, in future, we should seek to give priorities to those issues which are of closer interest to the average person.

One of the arguments and perhaps even some confusion surrounding the strategy is that it demobilises workers because there is less industrial action and conflict. This view is based on the idea that the only involvement that we can have is one of conflict manifested by militant action.

Already, we can demonstrate that a number of the initiatives resulting from the strategy, which is not simply the Accord but a broad approach within which the Accord is central, have seen a greater involvement on a range of issues. For example, the big



**The Accord: Representing only select groups or the broader community?**

increase in activity around occupational health and safety, involvement of both officials and union rank-and-file activists, in various tripartite and other bodies concerned with job and industry development, and the excellent developments around industrial democracy in a number of state and federal government instrumentalities, all of which add up to more people being involved in meaningful positive activity than has normally been the case.

The left has tended to assume that because conflict is necessary to make gains, we have to like it and welcome it. This view is at odds with the overwhelming majority of people who do not like conflict. By understanding that view we should seek to make gains by involvement in committees and negotiations as we are likely to generate greater support. Most would see this as a more productive method. If there is any lesson to be learnt from the Hawke approach to consensus, this is certainly it.

This is not to suggest that conflict is not necessary because, as we set out to intervene more in major decision making about the economy and the workplace, there already is and will be an increasingly bitter class response from employers and some ministers and government officials. The difference will be that the conflict will manifest itself more in vigorous negotiation in the tripartite and other processes at all levels across the working class, rather than the traditional widespread and rather *ad*

*hoc* industrial action. Nevertheless, at times, it will be absolutely necessary that we bring the full weight of the union movement to bear in industrial action.

**A**s Winton Higgins points out in his forthcoming chapter in a book which will be titled *Socialist Strategy in the Hawke Era*, it will be an important class victory if we can minimise the market forces of the owners of capital. Far from being in our interest to allow the marketplace to run riot and the economy to boom and bust in the traditional way, it will be important to minimise the room in which the ruling class has to move. Conversely, we need to maximise economic buoyancy with intervention which will give us a greater chance to negotiate a social wage, maintenance of living standards, and democratic controls. This would be a substantial class victory. In other words, it is not a question of no class struggle, but the manifestation of that struggle into the national arena, and not limited to each individual workplace as has been the case in the past.

A major lesson of the last eighteen months has been that the strategy must be all-embracing and have clear objectives and priorities, and have a national approach to wages as its linchpin. A socialist wages policy has been an elusive issue for us and was highlighted during the 1974 wages explosion when, despite massive gains, we could not point to very much development of critical consciousness as a result. If anything, it strengthened

capitalist ideas of the role of the marketplace.

We now understand that a socialist wages policy is one that has a firm commitment to the whole of the working class, minimises the role of the marketplace, and has linked to it a range of issues generally known as the social wage and a concern to intervene democratically on economic planning around maintenance of jobs and the direction industry should take. We are only at the beginnings of this strategy of which the Accord is the first manifestation, and it will take us quite some years, perhaps a generation, to develop and win a consciousness right across the union movement.

In essence, what we are talking about here is a totally new kind of union movement which is equipped to identify all the problems from the workplace through to the national and international. Such a movement would require an activist core with the following characteristics:

- skilled and trained in research
- able to negotiate with government and within the tripartite structures
- understanding the concerns of its members beyond just wages
- understanding the processes through which the strategy needs to develop
- understanding the role of education
- having some grasp of the economy
- having a knowledge of how companies make decisions in their corporate planning processes
- having a knowledge of the role of industrial democracy within the overall process.



A key to this will be a far deeper theoretical and ideological understanding of the strategy. Very little has yet been written on this aspect as the Accord has largely been seen as a tactical rather than a strategic development.

**W**ith that in mind, we need to start looking at the decision making processes within the broad labour movement and seek to change them in line with the strategy. In particular, it would seem quite inadequate that unions, ACTU congresses and Labor Party conferences should simply put together a whole series of *ad hoc* policies which do not necessarily relate to one another. This is clear when examining the recent Labor Party National Conference where some decisions are in clear conflict with others. Maybe at the moment this is inevitable, given the factional balance.

However, from the left, we ought to have the aim that, at the next ACTU congress and future union conferences, we produce a strategic action program for the ensuing three or four years where there is a clear connection between the policies. This would mean that we would have to establish clear objectives, some approximate timetables, and reach agreement on what are the priority issues in order that unity can be built effectively. This is already happening as a result of future thinking about the Accord and in the metal industry around jobs, but it needs to be carried much further and the consciousness of that strategy needs to go much deeper.

There are a number of advantages, even in the short term, in this approach. One is that by hammering out agreements on action programs and associated priorities and objectives which are real issues and able to be achieved, we are more likely to get agreement between different factions than when we discuss things in generalities and theories. Secondly, and very importantly, by deciding on such action programs, we will have a clear criterion by which to judge our success or otherwise.

In the past, by simply espousing slogans or blaming leaders, we would opt out of responsibility for judging our effectiveness. We would always say that the system had not matured enough to have done any good anyway, or that we were sold out by certain leaders or whatever. But, above all, we had no responsibility for the results.

Being able to set criteria by which to judge success does not mean that we would ignore the material conditions in which we work but, in taking them into account, we will more objectively determine our success. This has already been shown in the short term with the Accord where, for the first time in many years, we can make a reasonable judgment as to what has been achieved as against what we expected. We now need to develop that over the next five years and, in particular, set real objectives to be gained within the life of this Hawke government. For example, we should, in the industrial field, set objectives

such as legislation for the protection of shop stewards and union activists, initiatives on company information access and perhaps even legislation, a substantial development in occupational health and safety, etc. We will need to argue these issues and agree on the priorities fairly quickly in order that we can lay a basis for united action.

The trade union movement in Australia has one of its best opportunities ever to intervene in the most important areas of decision making, and to become a political movement with a large involvement of rank-and-file activists in an enormous range of activities throughout the political and economic structure. The success of this will depend, to a large extent, on strengthening the strategy by further developing it in its broadest sense, which goes beyond the ALP/ACTU Accord which, nevertheless, is the centrepiece, by making it understood by, and the property of, not only the union movement but the public at large. The unions can become the spearhead for broad mass issues which, in a step-by-step process, can intervene and open up untouchable areas and truly deepen the democratic process. We cannot afford to let the opportunity go as we will not have another one for a generation.

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