
THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

MIKE DONALDSON

Political discussion at the Broad Left Conference formally centred in a couple of workshops with themes such as the future of the left, and in two forums on the Saturday and Sunday mornings. Jim Falk hit the nail on the head when he asked at one of the latter, "Where is the united front?" In a sense, the question was rhetorical for at least part of it was there listening to him, but what both we and he were looking toward was the development of some organisational form that could carry through the agreements and continue the discussions of the weekend.

It was my sense of those discussions that we generally agreed on the need to continue to construct the united front, popular unity, rainbow coalition, democratic organisation, people's movement, broad alliance — the name is secondary — to meet the diverse conditions of the various states and regions. The success of the conference demonstrates that the regional broad left organising committees were useful structures and despite their non-democratic establishment they may be possible places to begin. The experience of the South Coast committee was that those on it were generally worried that it was too limited in its spread.

Some key questions that need to be resolved in the establishment of a front/coalition/alliance are: should organisations affiliate to it or should it comprise individuals? Would it be an

electoral vehicle and, if so, would that mean that Labor Party people could not be members of it? My own view is that groups, organisations and parties — migrant organisations, branches of political parties, women's centres, community organisations, trade unions and so on — should be able to become members but that adequate provision should be made for individuals whose organisations would not seek affiliation. The question of federal, state and local government elections is a vexed one on which I have no light to shed. On the one hand, one of the attractions of such a formation is that it would bring together ALP lefts and progressives and those outside the ALP. On the other hand, I have little doubt that, in NSW at least, the pressures towards electoral activity would be strong.

Some issues for such a formation are immediately obvious, the slashing of the social wage through budget cuts, equal pay, the housing crisis, the poverty of the unwaged sections of the working class, child care, taxation reform, community and public health and welfare, alternative media.

A second theme of the political discussions of the weekend was the formation of a new party to the left of the ALP. It was pretty widely agreed that such a grouping was needed but not what it should be. Suggestions included non-marxist radical reformist; socialist; marxist-leninist; marxist; and new. Discussions towards a new party have been

ongoing in rather a low-key way since the Communist Party of Australia's Congress in 1984 and will now continue with greater optimism and seriousness of purpose.

Whatever its ideological complexion, and my view is that the new party will be marxist at least, it must, like the current CPA, draw together the diverse forms of socialist energy and activity if it is to be an effective political force. But the movement toward such a new political party must not be confused or conflated with the establishment of the alliance/coalition/front — the two processes are not antagonistic, but nor are they synonymous. The alliance/coalition/front will neither be marxist nor probably will it be socialist, though I hope that it would include all those who consider themselves so to be.

This confusion and conflation is evident in the statement on the Easter Conference by the Association for Communist Unity (*Left Unity News* 2, 3). The ACU suggests that one of the final results of the conference was agreement on a united form of activity to implement a common platform of policies. Agreement on areas of interest there was, agreement on a united form of activity there was not. The ACU says that "dialogue at the conference opened the way for a much better understanding of the necessity for these many-faceted activities to join the common stream of activity for socialist transformation". My point is that this "common stream" does not yet exist in any formal sense and thus cannot be "joined". The ACU concludes too that the "spirit of unity will grow still further and the prospect of a completely united left movement can become a reality". Perhaps by a completely united left movement the ACU means a party, but it is not just the confusion of streams, movements and parties that worries me. As leninists and dialecticians engaging in a changing world, the ACU would understand better than anybody that what is "completely united" is dead.

Mike Donaldson teaches Sociology at the University of Wollongong and is the president of the South Coast District of the Communist Party of Australia.
