There's been considerable interest expressed among those working in the field of culture, in the Newcastle Workers' Cultural Action Committee. Perhaps you could explain what it is and where it came from?

The Workers' Cultural Action Committee (WCAC) is a subcommittee of Newcastle Trades Hall Council. It was set up in 1974 by people who were active in the cultural area as well as, at the same time, being active trade unionists. Bob Campbell, an official in the AMWSU was one of the originators — he's an excellent folk musician. The brief of the WCAC has been to take multi-media cultural events to the workers, to try and counter the idea that there are special institutions and...
places of culture that people have to go to. One of the main objectives was to take cultural events to the workplace, and this emphasis continues. Initially the WCAC was not funded by the Australia Council, but for the last few years it has been funded by the Community Arts Board to the tune of about $3,000 a year. The Committee comprises about 12 people — active trade unionists and cultural workers. Some members are both artists and union officials. By having this combination of people on the committee we’re attempting to break down the divisions between industrial workers and cultural workers.

There is enough bourgeois culture around to satisfy the needs of the middle class; what we’re trying to do is to break through to another area altogether, without being patronising to workers. That’s why we need to have rank-and-file workers active on the Committee. Workers can articulate their own needs in ways that cultural workers cannot. A professional actor, for example, may not be in touch with what a steelworker or metalworker wants in his/her cultural life or leisure time.

The thrust of the Workers’ Cultural Action Committee is to take Art out of the closet and into the street, to make it accessible to working people.

Right. We’ve tried to stay clear of contemporary ruling class cultural activities and present workers with alternative, progressive cultural material, which at the same time is not strictly didactic but which draws on working class life. Ruling class ideology has dominated cultural life for a long, long time. It has swept aside and ignored almost completely working class cultural traditions, to such an extent that large numbers of workers themselves are out of touch with their own traditions. What we’re trying to do is bridge that gap.

What sorts of events have you put on and where?

We’ve put on a number of events in factories around Newcastle, through the trade unions; there’s no way it can be done apart from with the trade unions and shop committees. The management has to be approached too, and some of the areas that we haven’t been able to break through are places like, of course, the BHP. Part of the problem with the BHP is the problem of the Newcastle leadership of the FIA. For people like them, culture could be the name of a race horse. The AMWSU, on the other hand, is much better. They have something of a tradition of being involved in cultural events.

The events have been mainly lunch-time concerts, because the performances are very limited. For example, we only get half an hour. The strict limitations imposed by this form of event lead us to look to places like the Workers’ Club as a venue. Quite often we do the two things together — run a lunchtime concert, and tell the workers that an extended form of the same thing is on in the evening at the Workers’ Club. It works; large numbers who have seen it as a lunch-time performance have shown up for the full show.

As well as music, we have been involved quite extensively in theatre and in organising cultural events around May Day. We’ve had a May Day Art Exhibition for quite a few years now sponsored by the May Day Committee of Newcastle Trades Hall. We’re doing what we can to break down the more pernicious bourgeois aspects of such competitions. This year, we decided that we would not award prizes for the art exhibition — to attempt to get around this commodity view of art work. Instead we decided that the works would be viewed by Bernice Murphy from the contemporary arts section of the NSW Gallery and by the Secretary of Trades Hall Council to select prints that would be purchased by the Trades Hall itself. Previously prizes had been awarded by some big-wig in the Sydney art world. The Trades Hall is attempting to build its own collection which will have a broad theme, like the workplace, and we hope that once the collection is built up it can be exhibited in factories in conjunction with local artists who will be able to discuss the work with workers. The Trades Hall collection will be limited to the work of Hunter Valley artists.
The May Day songwriting competition has continued, and usually the songs submitted have a progressive content. The songs are performed at the May Day concert, and the winners are selected by a panel of people made up of workers and musicians. Last year we had 60 entries.

Has the Workers' Cultural Action Committee any direct links with the Hunter Social Research Collective? On the South Coast, cultural activists are closely involved with the Wollongong TransNational Cooperative; is the same true of Newcastle?

There is somewhat of an overlap in that some of the members of the WCAC are also members of The Hunter Social Research Cooperative. Certainly the WCAC uses the Research Co-operative and the Trade Union Research Centre for any background material that it needs, but there is no formal link.

You spoke earlier of the Workers' Cultural Action Committee bringing together industrial workers with cultural workers. Do you find that the idea that someone engaged in the arts is a worker has encountered much resistance?

Yes. The role of the cultural worker in Australia and even within the Left has been given pretty low priority. Within the Left, the industrial workers have had top priority. That the Left still does not recognise that someone who is involved in cultural work is a worker, can only be attributable to the fact that ruling class ideology, a central facet of which is to cut workers off from one another, has seeped into thinking on the Left as well. Even the Left has tended to see the cultural workers as little more than a hobbyist — somehow the work that a cultural worker does is not work. This is related to the suspicion of intellectuals which is widespread in the working class. A lot of theoretical and practical work needs to be done before this conflict, this unease within the Left between cultural workers and other workers, can be resolved.

Considerable debate about this has occurred within the Left over the last few years, but much more needs to be done. Cultural workers themselves are still fairly confused and are not sure the direction the debate will take. We'd like to see the Communist Party, for example, organising a national conference of cultural workers to develop a Left national cultural policy because it's been ignored for too long.

In a number of socialist countries this sort of debate has become old hat. When I was in Cuba, I talked to a number of cultural workers there and they had resolved these questions even before the Revolution. After the revolutionary seizure of power, they were able to put into practice almost immediately the programmes that they had developed in the preceding years.

Many Left cultural workers are themselves still trying to work through the current bourgeois ideology related to things like excessive individualism. The cult of the individual is the dominant strand of bourgeois ideology within artistic circles. A number of cultural workers are still fearful that if they become political activists, their role as an artist and their development and expression may somehow be hampered.

Do you think that cultural workers on the edge of politics are afraid that political involvement will demand stylistic conformity?

This debate certainly happened within the Communist Party itself, particularly for artists and writers who felt that they were being pushed along the path of social realism. There's a place for social realism, as there is a place for the multitude of other styles. There is no need to push a particular kind of style. Under socialism, all kinds of styles and expression are tolerated, or so I found in Cuba. There is no form of theatre for example, which is held up to be the exemplary. In Cuba the classics are performed, Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, but so is street theatre, circus, and highly experimental forms of new theatre. Some of the material is unashamedly didactic, but most of it is not. The whole range is tolerated.

While it is clearly and unambiguously the case that stylistic variation is tolerated, and even encouraged, it is also the case that the
cultural workers themselves want to perform material which they see as relevant to the contemporary economic and political situation. Even Greek tragedy is viewed from a socialist perspective by the performers.

How is it though, that in your own work in Newcastle, you’ve been attempting to present an alternative to high theatre, which you equate with bourgeois theatre, but in Cuba this theatre is somehow transformed and becomes legitimate? Why is Shakespeare performed in the Newcastle Town bourgeois, but in Havana it is socialist?

I think the problem begins with the make-up of audiences. In Australia, so many of the theatre classics are only seen by middle class people. Classic productions cost a lot of money to mount — the classics take the form of a particularly expensive commodity. This means high admission prices, and a restricted audience. Opera and ballet are good illustrations of this. There is no attempt in Australia to make those art forms more accessible. In Cuba, there is every attempt. Theatre in Cuba is very inexpensive and often free. As well, there are a large number of touring companies — theatre isn’t restricted to the metropoles.

Clearly, the concept you use of “cultural workers” has arisen out of your practice in the Workers’ Cultural Action Committee, and the fact that the Committee contains people who are both cultural workers and industrial workers. On this basis the Committee has proceeded into practical political work in a unified way, but has any more developed theoretical approach emerged at the same time?

Theoretically, things are still very fluid: a lot of input, but no hard and fast conclusions. I spoke before about petty bourgeois individualism and how this is manifest in an extreme form in cultural workers, but it is supported by fairly immense social isolation. This is related to the physically isolated nature of the production process itself — the fact is that many cultural workers work alone and in a real sense in competition. This isolation becomes even more pronounced for socialist cultural workers. They become totally cut off from the Art Establishment, but at the same time they remain isolated from the working class, the trade union movement and even from left-wing political parties. A lot of our discussions have centred around these problems and how to overcome them.

Laurel, you seem to be distressed that art is considered a commodity under capitalism, but at the same time you consider artists are workers. Isn’t that precisely what workers do under capitalism, produce commodities?

What is comes down to is the degree of control that the producer has over the commodity produced. Because of their industrial organisation, industrial workers in fact exercise a much greater degree of control than artists. What happens to the commodity is totally out of the artist’s control. It can soar in price, and usually the artist doesn’t benefit from that at all. Artists in Australia are starting to look at the question of copyright, and at the artist’s right to some remuneration at resale. They are also starting to challenge the hegemony of galleries.

This sense of total lack of control is related to the isolation I talked of above. Alienation is not just a trendy word for cultural workers; it’s rather acutely experienced. The solution to this problem of cultural workers is the same as that for other workers — workers’ control; we’ve got to start working out exactly what that means in the context of art work.

In performing arts, the problem is even more difficult. The commodity is ephemeral. But workers’ control is a useful concept to use in the context of the organisation of dramatic work. More and more people are calling into question the structure of theatre companies for example, and are criticising the hierarchical organisation of work within them and are forming collectives and cooperatives. The idea is to break down some of the role-rigidity, around positions such as “the director”, “the artistic director”, and to attack the whole notion of “the star” among actors; also to have the performers involved in the writing of material, particularly in determining its political content.