The Trade Unions
Where are they today?

by Bernie Taft

Since the onset of the global recession in 1974, and especially since the Fraser government came into office in 1975, the Australian trade union movement has been subjected to considerable pressures. Some of these are old pressures intensified, some are new ones. The trade union movement has been forced to respond to economic pressures of restricted employment opportunities and significant unemployment.

It was subjected to pressures to reduce real wages, especially by means of increased taxation and by a reduction of the "social wage". The Fraser government openly stated its aim to reduce the share of the national income going to wages and salaries and to increase the share going to profits.

Perhaps the most significant of all was the (ongoing) ideological campaign against the trade union movement. It set out to blame the trade union movement for many of the economic difficulties that the country faces. It depicted unions as selfish and lacking concern for the effect of their actions on the community at large. It portrayed unions as immensely powerful and as abusing these powers.

How well has the trade union movement stood up to the new conditions? How adequately has it responded to these pressures? What are some of the main problems facing the Australian trade union movement now, in light of the experience of the last decade?

It has to be said that, on the whole, the trade union movement has reacted rather than acted on its own initiative. It has responded to pressures without any overall strategy of how to meet them. In general it has put up a relatively strong defence against pressures for wage reductions. It has been less successful in preventing the indirect attacks on living standards by the erosion of the social wage component, especially the massive reduction in social services. It has failed to combat effectively the ideological anti-union campaign by the government and the employers. This campaign has been remarkably successful. The public at large, including many unionists, has many false conceptions about the trade unions. Trade union power is seen as vastly greater than it is, whereas corporate power, which is incomparably greater, has a lower profile in the public mind.

Positive developments

The last decade has seen many positive developments in the trade union movement, including some long overdue changes to adapt to the new economic and social conditions. These changes are welcome and need to be taken further since the unions remain a long way behind the employers in
their ability to adapt to modern conditions and to pursue their interests effectively.

Among these developments are:
* the growth of the ACTU and a considerable expansion of its activities and apparatus;
* the amalgamation of the white collar unions with the ACTU which marks an important development in Australia's trade union movement;
* the strengthening of the white collar unions and a greater fusion between blue- and white-collar organisations;
* the growth in organisation and militancy among government employees;
* some large-scale union amalgamations.

Some of these developments fulfil a growing need and were late in coming; the establishment of a more effective central trade union apparatus, for example, was long overdue.

And negative

But alongside these positive developments, certain negative ones are in evidence, including:
* a growing remoteness of the leading trade union bodies, aggravated by the size of some organisations. In a small union most activists know the officials personally, but this is no longer the case in unions which have many thousands of members;
* a growth of tendencies towards bureaucratisation;
* union structures which remain static or do not adapt to changing attitudes. In many unions the old-style union branch meeting remains the only, or main, centre of direct membership involvement in union affairs. Many job activists do not attend these meetings;
* an under-involvement of women and migrants who remain vastly unrepresented in the trade union movement, despite some progress;
* a slowness to respond to new problems and new issues.

A striking example of the problem is the neglect of health and safety issues by most unions. An enormous amount of factual and scientific knowledge has emerged in the last decade about the great toll on workers' health due to inadequate provision on the job to protect workers from health hazards. Yet the trade union movement was, and remains, slow to fully recognise, let alone act on, the impact of this.

Despite advances, the framework of most unions remains narrow. Most find it difficult to become involved in issues of real and potential concern to their members if these issues go beyond wages, conditions and hours of work.

It is not surprising that the trade union movement as a whole remains inadequately equipped to deal with the more complex problems of modern industrial society. Yet the employers they have to face today are quite different from those of a few decades ago; they include multinational corporations with a vast apparatus available to communicate their "message".

And interestingly, one area where the inadequacy of unions is obvious is precisely in the wages arena. The traditional attitude of the left has been one of suspicion of any form of "incomes policy". There is a good reason for this, of course, (note the British experience) but this traditional attitude has prevented the left from using some opportunities to obtain meaningful concessions from the employers which could have long-term benefit for union members and a positive effect on the working class as a whole. It should be noted in passing that there is always a de facto incomes policy, such as a government deciding to deliberately slow down the rate of growth to keep wages down. The past attitudes have simply meant that the trade unions have had little impact on that policy.

Perhaps the most puzzling phenomenon is the apparent inability or unwillingness of the trade union movement to recognise the seriousness and the fundamental nature of the
ideological attacks on the trade union movement. These attacks strike at the very heart of the trade unions' ability to carry out their functions and sap their strength. With few exceptions (which are all the more significant) there has been no really systematic attempt to counteract this anti-union campaign. Clearly, the implications are not understood by most unions. In fact, many union actions almost seem designed to give credence to the anti-union campaign.

Naturally, such actions are given wide publicity and their effects are highlighted and exaggerated. Strike struggles are launched without adequate and timely explanation to the public which will be affected, and the timing of many industrial disputes takes little or no account of the public effect. Some unions don’t seem to care about the effect that their struggles have on the general public and don’t appreciate how this can be and is used to inflame the public against trade unions. There are cases where the public is hit unnecessarily, where more thought and consultation would have led to forms of struggle which could hurt those employers who oppose legitimate union demands, rather than the general public, many of whom are fellow trade unionists.

A good example

The case of the Australian Railways Union (ARU) in Victoria indicates what a union can do if it acts correctly. The ARU was a union which had a bad public image. Its periodic strike actions which halted a great part of public transport were basically caused by the low-wage policy of the state Liberal government. Nevertheless, these strikes...
greatly inconvenienced the travelling public. Naturally, the media made full use of this and focused on the inconveniences to the stranded passengers, rather than on the conditions in the railways which gave rise to the strikes. In 1979 the union launched a "Save the Industry" campaign in which it tried to stop the rundown of the Victorian railways. Railway workers became involved at the rank-and-file level along with local citizens to prevent the destruction of particular lines and the closure of services. Considerable activity was generated and broad unity was developed. The ARU emerged more and more both as the ardent defender of its own members and as the organisation fighting in the interests of the Victorian public to maintain and expand the public transport system. In addition to the direct involvement of railway workers in the campaign, a well-thought-out and effective publicity campaign was developed. It included advertisements, leaflets and booklets setting out a case for saving the industry and exposing the machinations of the Victorian government to cut back public transport.

When industrial action became absolutely necessary, new and imaginative tactics were used, avoiding train stoppages that affected the general public, but setting out to hit the big freight companies. The union's public image changed.

In the ARU election held in 1981, the militant leadership was elected with a two to one majority. Unhappily, it has to be admitted that the case of the ARU is not yet typical of the trade union movement as a whole.

To explain why, despite some advances, Australia's trade union movement has remained so slow to respond to changing conditions and so inadequate to meet the ideological assault on it, one has to look deeper.

There is an extraordinary dichotomy which affects the Australian labor movement generally and the trade union movement specifically. There is a widespread conservatism in Australian society which has actually grown in the last decade. There is a great deal of apathy. This is true of trade unionists as it is of the rest of society. At the same time, in the last decade, or more correctly since 1968, there has been a radicalisation of a significant group of activists who are to be found in and around the labor movement. These people are influenced by the growing war danger, the ongoing damage to our environment, the waste of energy and other natural resources, and the dangers of uranium mining. The mass actions against the Viet Nam war, the development of the women's movement and the ecological movement have helped to widen the horizons and open new vistas for thousands of socially concerned people. But these people — mostly younger activists — operate in an environment that remains deeply conservative, one where most people focus on private solutions to social problems. In Australia, private solutions are still possible for many people, socially undesirable and inadequate as these "solutions" may be.

This dichotomy leads to enormous frustration and impatience; it often causes people to look for quick solutions which usually prove illusory.

Many of the weaknesses of the Australian trade union movement (the inadequate role of migrants, the continued racist trends, the lack of adequate representation of women) find their deeper explanation in the conservatism of the majority of members. The real task for the left is to ensure that the radicalised, more conscious section in the labor movement uses its talents for the purpose of lifting the consciousness of the Australian working class as a whole and of effectively confronting and countering the present dominance of bourgeois values. This is not an easy task nor can it be done quickly, but it is the only way in which social and socialist consciousness can be advanced.