AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW
NO. 81
SEPTEMBER, 1982

Betty Reilly on the Rag Trade
John Alford: VicRail
Gavan Butler: Social Agreements

Registered by Australia Post: Publication No. NBQ 1106.

* RRP.
ALR continues discussion of labor movement policies and practices. The strategy and experience of the Victorian Railways Union are discussed in Julius Roe's interview with John Alford, a reader contributes thoughts on the 1982 national conference of the Australian Labor Party and Gavan Butler offers a word of caution on social agreements in Economic Notes.

Betty Reilly links the present with the past as she records her experiences as a worker in the textile industry, while Romaine Rutnam looks to the future in Science, technology and socialism. Peter Ormonde's review article of E.P. Thompson's recent writings considers some of the issues now being debated in the disarmament movement.

When Giovanni Berlinguer was in Australia last June for the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of Australia he participated in a Melbourne symposium on "The Future of Socialism — is there a third way?" His comments are reproduced here together with a translation of an article by Italian communist leader Gian Carlo Pajetta who reflects on the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Some background history of Argentina in the last fifty years is provided by Dr. Jim Levy.

A book review completes the issue.

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Dollars and sense:

Social agreements

— a note of caution

— Gavan Butler

References to social contracts, social agreements, "working-class" incomes policies and the like are today quite frequent within the labor movement. The Australian Labor Party is said to have a special relationship with the trade union movement which is capable of being expressed in deals concerning, at least, the rate of growth of award wages, taxation and priorities in expenditure by the federal government. In the prelude to the next federal election, the ALP will be suggesting to the labor movement that it will be able to secure workers' living standards, while also suggesting to employers that it will be able to ensure a more stable industrial climate if not a lower and more stable rate of growth of direct labor costs.

Those who recall the experience of British unions with the social contract of the mid-1970s point out, however, that the deals involved are likely to limit the independence of unions and constrain them to accept a steady decline in the living standards of most workers.

An improvement in the standard of living depends in Australia upon what happens to award wages, to over-award payments, to the extent of the state's provision of basic commodities such as health care and housing (items of social consumption), to social welfare expenditure (or transfers to persons and households), to taxation, to the work, social and general physical environments and, of course, to prices. In the current campaign by the ALP and the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights Union the first five of these factors have more or less been classed as affecting either changes in take-home pay or changes in "the social wage". (The concept of "the social wage" implicit here is not entirely satisfactory but has to be retained to avoid confusing the discussion.)

Each of the various determinants of a change in the standard of living involves different procedures and apparatuses. Only one does not involve the state fairly directly and that is what happens to over-award payments.

The state has come to be involved in determining the general physical and social environment not only through powers to govern emissions of effluent and to confine
activities to specific areas, but through the
design of physical infrastructure — the
location of power stations, the design of road
systems, etc. In corporate pricing it plays a
part that is commonly hidden yet none the less
significant for that. It provides various
industries with protection from overseas
suppliers; and, more generally, it licenses
small groups of companies and thereby helps
to create monopoly power over pricing in
various industries. It is not at all surprising
that the Prices Justification Tribunal became
something which, in the main, simply justified
corporate pricing. In comparison with the
diversity of licensing arrangements, only the
federal government's decisions in regard to
the pricing of crude oil and sugar are
considered by the Industries Assistance
Commission when it calculates the effective
assistance provided by the state to different
industries.

In Australia, as in other federations —
perhaps more than in most others — it would
be very difficult to harness the state into
tripartite agreements (with capital and
labour). The state is something of an hydra:
there are federal, state and local apparatuses
and numerous statutory authorities, some of
them with considerable autonomy. Each level
of government is involved in the provision of
items of social consumption and in social
welfare expenditure. The relative importance
of each is sensitive not only to negotiations
over the formula by which income-tax
payments are disbursed to the states and
municipalities (or federal decisions regardless
of negotiations and the recommendations of
the Grants Commission in regard to the basic
formula) but to the federal government's
preference as between general revenue grants
and grants for specific purposes. Each level
of government is involved in taxation. There is
competition, particularly between the federal
and state governments, for claims to each of
the different tax bases such that any
agreement over indirect taxation between
labour organisations and the federal
government, for example, may have the effect
of enabling state governments to expand their
claims.

Such an effect is, of course, limited by the
interdependence of the states — the concern
of each to ensure that it does not lose
industries to other states because of markedly
higher taxes and charges. Further, each state
can influence its industrial commission in a
direction that is at odds with the direction of
the pressure put by the federal government on
the Conciliation and Arbitration
Commission (CAC). And each state either
can add significantly to any federal assistance
given to a particular industry or, in effect, can
tax that assistance.

Metal trades agreement

Even without any consideration other than
the nature of the Australian state, it is hardly
surprising that unions should seek to engage
employers more directly and to broaden the
ambit of their claims. The metal trades
agreement of 1981 for shorter working hours
and increased awards was achieved by what
has been called "centralised bargaining"
(between four unions and one employer
organisation in the form of the Metal Trades
Industries Association). The agreement was
put to the CAC simply for ratification. Such
centralised bargaining may, in the future, be
extended to cover standards of industrial
health and safety and the payment by
employers of the cost of workers' health care.
Particulars of agreements can be left to site
negotiations involving rank-and-file
unionists. In general, the ambit of centralised
bargaining could be widened to include
matters which, in the past, have been
considered as within the province of the state.
The working out of particulars at the shop
floor level and the fact that centralised
bargaining largely precludes the alienating
legalism of submissions put before the CAC
and industrial commissions can be
represented as fostering the democratisation
of union structures.

The fact that it is trade unions (not an
industry union) which are entering into
agreements such as the metal workers'
agreement should not be overlooked. The
centralised determination of awards for
trades in Australia has made possible the spreading of wage increases based on increases in productivity within some industries to workers in areas in which productivity has been slow to increase. The extent to which this has occurred has admittedly varied; but such a mechanism for distributing income generated in areas of most rapidly increasing productivity could not have existed had there been industry unions. Up until a few years ago, industries finding it difficult to pay the centrally determined awards were able to seek compensation by means of the import tariff.

What may be emerging, then, is a system of agreements centrally negotiated between trade unions and employer organisations that will cover more and more of the elements of workers’ standards of living. The backdrop to this system would be a continuing campaign to force federal and state governments to maintain, if not to increase, expenditure on social welfare and social consumption, to cut indirect taxes and to effectively eliminate income tax evasion, to enforce or enact legislation in regard to industrial safety and health, and to preserve by whatever means satisfactory physical and social environments. The ALP in opposition can be expected to endorse such demands, and to point to the evident success of the metal trades agreements in endorsing other such agreements.

The ALP in government would presumably act in respect of taxation, social welfare and social consumption in an effort to induce more unions to enter agreements with employers that at least reduced the cost of industrial disputation. If the next federal government were another conservative government, the system of centrally negotiated agreements could still develop but without the backdrop of the maintenance of the social wage. The big unions are hedging their bets.

Is it correct to make the centrally negotiated “social agreements” which are presently being discussed the central thrust of the strategy of the labor movement for the time being? Three important concerns which this central thrust may well push aside are (i) the pricing and investment decisions of large corporations, (ii) reform of the structure of government and of federal-state relations in Australia, and (iii) the growing problem of unemployment.

“Social agreements” between unions and employers may well involve some agreement as to the manner and timing of innovations in technology. But there are other corporate decisions which are of immense importance. It is hardly novel to observe that pricing decisions can undermine the value of take-home pay or that any reductions in indirect taxes may not be reflected in the prices of commodities in retail outlets. Presumably the observation has become facile in view of constitutional difficulties in the way of federal control of most prices and in view of the genuine difficulty of penetrating the logic of accounting procedures within large, multi-divisional and vertically integrated corporations.

The same, largely impenetrable, corporations are able to channel investible funds away from areas of social need, to relocate particular stages of the production of many commodities overseas, to channel funds surreptitiously from activities for which they have gained protection to other activities of greater profitability, in a broad sense to develop the nature of processes of production as they see fit, and, moreover, to decline to invest. Whatever the discipline of the market, it is not the discipline of the community, although if private employers in general had to pay explicitly for the health care of workers, for example, they might discipline the private suppliers of hospital and medical care and of other commodities to which physical well-being is sensitive.

There is a way in which the federal government can assert its standing as a party to pricing and investment decisions. In principle, that means bears some similarity to the practice of the Whitlam government in tying grants to the states to specific purposes.
For many centuries, women and children have been associated with spinning and weaving in one form or another. But it wasn't until mid-19th century capitalist development in Britain, when the old cottage-style, or domestic textile industry was replaced by mechanical devices, that they were congregated together in large factories.

New steam-driven machines promoted new divisions of labour and boosted production. This enabled employers to sack most males, with the exception of maintenance staff and overseers, and replace them with the much cheaper, flexible-fingered labour power of women, aged between 16 and 20, and children, many under the age of 10, who controlled all the processes of production.

The textile industry then held pride of place in British manufacture. But it soon became notorious for excessively long hours — up to 16 a day being common — incredibly cruel, unhealthy, sub-standard working conditions, near-zero wages and, of course, huge profits. In a nutshell, the period of capitalism's greatest progress was the period of the most brutal, sadistic exploitation of the working class, and especially degrading to the human rights and dignity of women and defenceless children.

In An Outline of European History, Maurice Dobb has this to say about that period:

The employers utilised a law of Henry VIII which provided that parish officers were to put pauper children out to apprenticeship; and they had children despatched to them from London and elsewhere, to work in their mills nominally as apprentices, actually as indentured slaves. These wretched children were worked anything up to 16 hours a day, being kept awake on night work by the whips of overseers — heavy iron sticks known as "billy rollers" — or by plunging them in tubs of cold water, or if the employers were "humane" — by being made to sing psalms.

A physician's report of the time declared that "the mill child has not a moment free..."
except for meal times, and never goes out into the fresh air except on its way to them. The factory system in Bradford has engendered a multitude of cripples”.

However, by the time the textile industry was transplanted from the Old Dart to Australia, trade union action and factory legislation had largely curtailed these cruel excesses and the 8-hour day had been legalised. Nevertheless, as we shall see, wages and working conditions in most Australian mills continued to chug along the old institutionalised Dickensian path.

The depression of the 1930s hit textiles badly. Many Australian plants either closed down or operated at half-mast. Unemployment was rife.

Paradoxically, World War II was the lynch-pin for the industry’s revival. By April 1940 both the sixth and seventh army divisions had been recruited and sent overseas. Huge and profitable government cost-plus contracts for supplying the armed forces began flooding in to stimulate the textile industry as never before.

Simultaneously, through government-sponsored regulations (The Female Minimum Rates Regulations and the Women’s Employment Board [WEB]), women’s wages began rising from a low of 54 percent of the male basic wage to 75 percent, and up to 100 percent of the male rate in many industries previously closed to females, transport, for example. But women returning to textiles, a traditional female labour industry, were expected to survive rising living costs on a miserly 54 percent of the male basic wage — not even the basic rate.

And because the textile industry had been declared under national manpower (sic) regulations as essential to war production, our wages were pegged and we were prevented from seeking jobs elsewhere for more dough. The imposition of this form of economic conscription played right into the hands of greedy textile barons, fully determined to resist all attempts to alter existing wage rates.

Communists in industry

When war started in September 1939 not too many communists were to be found in the textile industry. But the few stalwarts like Lindsay Mountjoy, Bob and Joyce Batterham and several others, aimed to unionise the industry; to encourage the plugs to unite and fight for wage hikes and humane working conditions; for more frequent union meetings and to democratise union elections.

And in June 1941 when Hitler lashed out at the Soviet Union, followed closely by the Japanese Pear Harbour horror, our agitation and propaganda was broadened. We now emphasised the changed character of the war and called for national unity and an intensified war effort by all working people; we also urged the union and government to increase pressure on the textile bosses to lift wages and amend the deplorable working situation, then assessed as a national blot.

But apparently our propaganda didn’t cut too much ice with the majority of textile workers and, towards the end of 1941, and again in February 1943, they thumbed their noses at all and sundry, three in their billies and went out to grass.

My involvement with textiles began during the 1941 strike. Being unemployed, I offered my services to the Newtown Strike Committee and assisted in the collection of money and food for family relief.

Maybe that strike inspired me to help
change the complexion of the textile industry. For shortly after, young, enthusiastic, politically green with a starry-eyed dedication to the Communist Party, Joe Stalin and the war effort, I joined the underpaid at Bond’s Knitting Mills in Camperdown. There, I quickly cottoned on to the meaning of rabid exploitation; and to what Karl Marx meant when he talked about a class of wage-earners with neither property nor hope of acquiring any — a class which in his phrase "had only its chains to lose".

At Bonds, for just over two pounds weekly, we were expected each day to slip silk waste from 1,728 stockings before being eligible for a bonus. Although not actually muzzled, silence combined with heads down and bums up was the unofficial order of the day. Needless to say, several of us failed to meet these austere requirements. And before the euphoria of reaching bonus level came, the little note in the light-on pay-packet arrived dispensing with our services — minus the golden handshake. And as union fees at Bonds were deducted from wages and paid directly to the organiser in the bosses’ office, no job delegates were around to question our dismissal or to intervene on our behalf.

Nothing daunted, I trudged over to the Australian Woollen Mills (AWM) in Marrickville and signed on as a doffer — mounting and taking down large bobbins — in the section spinning wool into yarn for Yankee soldiers’ uniforms. If the going was tough at Bonds, it took all my staying power to remain put at the AWM, despite coercive ball-and-chain manpower regulations.

At the AWM, 75 percent of the workforce were women, many the wives of enlisted servicemen rearing young families alone, and teenage girls on starvation wages. We adults yackered long exhausting hours — up to 12 daily — for the princely sum of £2/16/9 weekly including overtime.

Not having been cleaned since the era of elastic-sided boots and straw-decker hats, the huge departments in the plant were dark,
Textile workers

dismal and depressing, with overhead water sprays and underfoot hot water pipes keeping the concrete floor damp and the atmosphere moist. The ventilation was poor, the noise deafening and the place lacked stools, lockers, lunchroom, canteen and had inadequate toilet and washing facilities.

The rate of TB was high, colds, chest complaints, stress, fatigue and undernourishment were common. Standing up constantly resulted in varicose veins and swollen feet. And, for years after leaving textiles, my hands were plagued with frequent outbreaks of dermatitis.

Occupational health

Occupational health hazards, now recognised and compensated for, like bysinosis, a disease resembling silicosis of cotton workers, were also prevalent. Add this not inconsiderable little lot to no paid annual leave, sick leave or long service leave, and a picture emerges comparable with the squalid conditions in cruel mid-19th century British capitalism.

In contrast to Bonds' company union set-up, members at the AWM were scarcer than the proverbial duck's dentures. So, securing a receipt book and membership cards from headquarters, I set about getting the joint organised. And in two flips of a tiger's tail, the plugs in my and adjacent rooms were into the union and rearing to go. Being suitably impressed, the union organiser exemplified the lack of elementary democracy in the union by appointing me shop steward and not calling a meeting to let the plugs decide.

Nevertheless, a petition demanding a canteen, stools, change rooms, better ventilation and other urgent needs, circulated on the day, afternoon and night shifts, was highly successful. When presented by a departmental deputation, the startled manager couldn't believe his eyes and began the interview by questioning the authenticity of the thousand or so signatures.

Meanwhile, the union hierarchy, under job pressure and fearing another strike like the Black Death, had got their act together. A new log of claims was presented calling for an increase of six bob weekly in the male rate; the adult female rate to be 90 percent of the male rate, and a 20 percent increase for juniors.

Although not yet in force, the bosses had already agreed to one week's annual leave, one week's sick pay, and increased rates for certain classes of work. But the wage claims were well on the way to grief. When first presented to Justice O'Mara and given the arse by him, they were then referred to the full Arbitration Court on the question of whether an anomaly existed in respect to female rates because of a decision by the WEB which had fixed the female rate at up to 90 percent of the male rate.

The full Arbitration Court decided that there was no anomaly in respect to female rates and the union's claims were referred back to Mr Justice "boss-aligned" O'Mara, so began the dickering and farting-around saga, so typical of class-biased arbitration courts to this very day.

Time marched on and with it the growing frustration and anger among women at the court's delay in finalising our new award. A delay especially irksome to women still trying to scrape along on 54 percent of the male basic wage, knowing that their relatives and friends performing comparable tasks in nearby factories were receiving 75 and up to 100 percent of the male rate.

Well, how do you think they felt? They obviously felt like a Tooheys because, in February 1943, a thousand or so women spontaneously stormed out of the Alexandria Spinning Mills in defiance of the boss, the union and the government. The women immediately elected a strike committee and scouts were soon outside the AWM calling on us to join them. But, due mainly to my influence, "Winnie the War Winners" were in the majority at the AWM and my workmates shouted back "what about the war effort" and continued to work. The strike's spontaneity took everyone by surprise. But support for it was patchy and confined to women only in several large woollen and cotton plants.

Men who took over from women for the
night shift refused to join the strike and the knitting mills refused to be involved. However, in one case, 70 men were thrown idle because wool and basil workers declared the wool "black". Members of the Wool and Basil Workers' Union had decided during a previous dispute that where men handled machines usually operated by women they would not supply the wool.

The union top brass quickly moved in ordering the women back to work; old O'Mara danced up and down and stopped hearing our claims; the Labor government threatened to fine and/or jail workers absenteeing themselves from work; and the bosses took advantage of the situation to withdraw the gains already achieved.

But the women, angry and tenacious, were not to be intimidated by threats of reprisals. It took three mass meetings, plus assistance from Eddie Ward, then federal Minister for Labour, and Jock Garden, Liaison officer between the government and unions, before agreement was reached under protest to "return to work with no confidence in the union executive and we ask the Labor Council to inquire into the conduct of the strike".

As for me, I'd be the only woman on record who took the count at the Leichhardt Stadium for proposing to hundreds of irate workers that we return to work in the interests of defeating fascism.

What was the main issue?

Stable doors are quickly banged after the nags have bolted. But we certainly chalked up a few errors like — losing sight of policy on industrial disputes — best expressed at the time by Tom Wright, member of the CPA Central Committee and NSW secretary of the...
Sheet Metal Workers’ Union. He had this to say in March 1943 to Justice O’Mara in the Arbitration Court concerning the employers of 20 factories trying to dodge a decision of the WEB to award women 90 percent of the male rate:

While pledging ourselves to avoid stoppages of work which can only be harmful to the war effort, we warn the employers concerned that there is a strong feeling among women employees about the delay and that further delays will lead to serious disputes for which the employers will bear full responsibility.

A nicely balanced statement indicating political nous and flexibility in handling complex situations.

In contrast, we tended to over-emphasise uninterrupted production for the war effort, causing lines of communication with workmates to foul up. In turn, we lost sight of the main issue — the feelings of deep resentment among women who daily saw themselves getting poorer and farther behind in the thrust for more bread.

In general, our propaganda and tactics remained fairly static and confusing instead of being updated. For example, calling on the plugs to get into the union and fight while appealing for an uninterrupted war effort.

In retrospect, we should have been out in front giving positive leadership to textile workers in the 1941 and 1943 strikes. The arrogant “Pomme” bosses should have been thumped hard for holding up war production by stalling on wage increases. Crafty old O’Mara who was aiding and abetting the bosses by seeking loopholes in women’s wage rates regulations should have been exposed; the Labor Party, then in government, should have been called upon to honour its pledge to the International Labour Organisation that, if elected to office, it would legislate for wage parity. And the rightwing union top bananas should have been soundly indicted for their outright opposition to both strikes, their boss collaboration over the years, and their complacency and callous indifference to the workers’ needs.

Had we so acted then, assuredly women textile workers would have received at least 75 percent of the male rate for the job instead of the lousy 60 percent of the male basic wage reluctantly meted out to them by O’Mara’s boss-biased court in April 1943.

That was part of the action almost 40 years ago. Women in textiles now have the rate for the job — but what a rate! Spinners last year were getting roughly 167 bucks weekly, or around 4 bucks hourly. Weavers, considered the industry’s aristocrats, were getting slightly
more. Compare this token with the average weekly wage for males in NSW in June 1981 of 294-odd bucks and you get a real rat-shit rate for the job in the textile industry.

The major responsibility for this mockery of wage parity rests with the largely male-dominated rightwing union tall poppies. Their fear of struggle and strife with the bosses over the years has dominated their thinking. Now, it dictates their reluctance to fight to reduce the ever-widening gap between lower and higher paid industrial workers.

Women workers have a responsibility too, despite ethnic differences and language problems relatively non-existent until after World War II: responsibilities like becoming more knowledgeable and vocal about the policies and aims of their union; more assertive about their right to adequate wage rates; employment conditions suitable to domestic requirements; and being more aware and demanding of their right to proportional representation on job and union committees for the airing and realisation of particular needs.

From the very beginning of the modern textile industry, production has been handled effectively, and extremely profitably, in the main, by adult and junior women. We can be thoroughly optimistic about a future when the whole textile caboose — including management and administration — will be added to the control women already exercise over all the processes of plant production.
A response to Labor’s 1982 conference

The 1982 Labor Party National Conference took place under the theme of “Preparing for Government”. The conference provided some indication of the approach a future Labor government might take and as such it was full of mixed blessings for the left. In a week coloured by the Hawke leadership challenge, the overwhelming desire of dominant tendencies in the ALP to shape policies acceptable to corporate interests and the overwhelming influence of the opinion polls there was little of immediate gain for the left.

The 1982 conference has generally been considered a defeat by observers on the left. Some have spoken openly of their disillusionment, others have moved more easily to a position of cynicism about politics, others are just quietly angry or disappointed. But while it is true that the conference was dominated by a centre-right consensus there is much that can be taken up, either to oppose or to extend, by the left and its supporting movements. The conference decisions should be taken as seriously as we might have taken its theme. Firmly placed on the agenda now is the need for response and initiative in the period leading up to the federal election and beyond. The left must begin “preparing for government” as well. It needs to work out an approach to Labor in government that will neither become weak acceptance of partial reform or degenerate into sectarian opposition but seeks to encourage and support Labor initiatives while pushing them further. Seen in this light the 1982 Labor conference foreshadows problems, dilemmas and opportunities for the advancement of democratic and socialist campaigns.

Policy setbacks and advances

The left, which commanded some forty percent of the vote on the floor, both suffered setbacks and made some advances. This is clear in the area of policy determination, ostensibly the main task of the gathering.

The policy defeats received the most public attention. Notable among these were the weakening of Labor’s anti-uranium stance, the refusal of conference to take a strong position in support of a tax on capital gains, the retention of the conscience vote on abortion and the failure of moves to amend economic, minerals and energy and foreign policy platforms. These policy defeats confirmed the current centre-right domination of the ALP. For example, a left amendment committing Labor to “maximise Australian and where appropriate public ownership and control” of resource development was soundly defeated in favour of Minerals and Energy spokesperson...
Keating's proposition to "maximise Australian ownership and control .... while recognising the continuing role to be played by foreign capital in the exploration and development of Australian resources". Similarly, the conference rejected the proposal for a "National Coal Corporation" to "provide a Labor government with direct access to the coal mining industry". Conference ensured that Labor's general approach to the problems of the economy would be strictly one of economic management with a measure of planning and regulation but very little in the way of public intervention.

The major setback for the left occurred with the passing of the long addendum to the Party's uranium policy moved by Victorian state secretary Bob Hogg. The new Labor policy on uranium, while raising some important matters such as compensation for displaced workers and Aboriginal land owners and the need for stringent safeguard requirements, is clearly a much weaker policy than the previous unequivocal commitment to repudiation of mining contracts. It opens the Labor Party to pressure from the pro-mining forces inside and outside the party and puts the broad anti-uranium movement on the defensive.

Telling points

Nevertheless, some telling points were made in the uranium debate. This setback for the most significant movement in recent times within the ALP illustrated the weaknesses of the left and much of the "woolliness" of its thinking. As Hogg pointed out in debate, Labor had never properly considered how to implement its repudiation policy when in government and it had not come to terms with the threat of destabilisation and subversion against an anti-uranium Labor government. He drove this point home, stressing matters not adequately considered by those who sought to defend the old policy at all costs, when he said:

We have no strategy not to be subverted, if it is in the interests of those that want to subvert us. I know what Stoessel (US Deputy Secretary of State) said to Bill Hayden and I know its implications. We have no strategy for those problems. That is also a concern that I have. I get back to the one final point and I refer to all parliamentary members here today.

The left within the ALP and the anti-uranium movement as a whole have not taken these dangers into account. Reactions to the new and undoubtedly weakened policy have not moved far beyond anger and frustration at the nature and manner of that change. However, this anger and frustration now makes possible a reassessment and reorientation of the left's approach. This response must be channelled responsibly, patiently and democratically towards the building of a stronger and more sophisticated movement, one that develops a new, comprehensive and anti-uranium policy that takes into account the difficulties and dangers facing Labor governments in Australia.

Less negative

This approach, more useful and less negative than wallowing in recrimination and furiously pointing accusing fingers, can be used to understand the gains made by the left in other policy areas as well. Most analyses of the conference have neglected these gains, made through greater and more detailed contribution to platform preparation. As a result, many of the actual Party platforms adopted mark a significant improvement to those of 1979. This is the case for example in the areas of education, industry development, urban and regional development and the environment.

Labor's new industry policy warrants left attention in this regard. It commits a future government to broadly based and strong manufacturing and service sectors assisted by a degree of planning, co-operation and co-ordination with the trade union movement and the development of an "industrial development strategy" which stresses diversity, stability, growth and an equitable policy on prices and incomes as components.
A policy such as this provides the opportunity for left intervention which seeks to extend and open up the processes initiated by Labor.

Leadership battle

Early in the conference delegates began to refer to the “hidden agenda” operating below the surface of policy debate. It soon became clear that the media popularity poll contrived Hawke challenge to Bill Hayden’s leadership of the Party was dominating all events. The movements and motives of all leading figures were soon explained away according to the leadership question. The manner in which this issue came to predominate above all others in the closed hot-house atmosphere of the conference cannot be stressed too greatly. All key debates — those on uranium and capital gains most especially — were shaped by the seemingly irrevocable logic of the Hawke challenge.

With the conference well past and with Bill Hayden firmly installed as ALP leader, the importance of that battle now seems exaggerated and misplaced. This brief Comment is not the place to review the details of that battle — for example, the role of the media and other outside forces, the position taken by trade unions, the unilateral actions taken by some figures on the Labor left, etc. — but it is important to come to some understanding of the forces at work in and the consequences of the leadership battle. This understanding can best be developed around five key points, all of which the left must respond to.

(1) External interference in ALP affairs

The Hawke campaign was linked to a large degree of media and other support outside of the Labor Party and the labor movement. The intervention of corporate figures and media speculators — ranging from Alan Carroll to Phillip Adams — is, of course, to be deplored, but it must be counted as a significant and difficult element in Labor Party affairs.

(2) The opinion polls

Related to this is the role that the opinion polls have played in generating the pro-Hawke campaign. While the danger always remains that the labor movement will be mesmerised into inaction by polls of doubtful method and credibility, it is just not good enough to write them off, as the left has done, or infer that lack of popularity equates with effective leadership, as Bill Hayden has done. The polls remain a useful guide, indicating something of the effect of Labor’s policies and leadership presence in the community.

It remains a fact, unpalatable as it may be to many, that Bob Hawke is the most popular mass figure in Australian politics. Hayden’s recent surge in the polls is to be welcomed but the continuing support for Hawke will have to be reckoned with in the not-too-far-distant future.

(3) Tendencies within the ALP

The leadership battle enables us to see the forces and tendencies within the ALP more clearly. Hawke has been able to bring the right of the party in behind him. The newly forged wider alliance of the right, focussed by the Keating/Hawke agreement, is now a major factor in ALP politics. Although not coming from a well-defined group in the party, Hayden has managed to gain the firm support of the centre, a grouping that has not visibly coalesced for some time.

These developments, like everything else at the moment, carry mixed blessings for the Labor left. A newly solidified right could move against the left, given sufficient opportunity, while a reconstituted centre provides a chance for the left to broaden its base of co-operation and support.

(4) Mobilising social forces

Despite Hayden’s win and despite the possibility of a strengthened centre grouping within the parliamentary ALP, the current leadership shows little inclination or ability to mobilise sections of the community in support of Labor initiatives. The rightwing tendency has no problem, however, in drawing corporate support for its aims and ideas.

There is an extra complexity in the position of Hawke and his backers on the right. Hawke
has expressed a public and personal commitment to encouraging a national consensus and co-operation between labor and capital. He has been relatively successful in gaining support for and encouraging this approach.

The left will need to bring a strategic and mobilising conception to Hayden’s compassionate and socially conscious platform. In confronting Hawke and the right, it should seek to exploit the contradictions within his consensus view of Australian politics, especially with the aim of strengthening the labor movement’s place and influence within the consensus. At this early stage such a strategic approach has been indicated only within some trade unions, most particularly those promoting the campaign for a negotiated social agreement on wages, prices, the social wage and economic policy.

(4) The immediate future for Labor

The way in which the leadership battle worked itself out, especially with Keating moving strongly against the left, forced all those involved into rigid and uncritical positions. It became, therefore, a firm left position to support Hayden and oppose Hawke. The ALP rank and file and many movement activists made their support of this very clear. But as a result of Keating’s provocation the left moved too far too easily and comfortably in behind Hayden and in opposition to the right. The very ease of these moves allowed many problems to be ignored and hard questions to be put off. Some of these have been mentioned but the most important is the fact that Bob Hawke is now the logical and accepted successor to Bill Hayden’s leadership. Whether this succession takes place is not an issue here. The fact remains that on all current indications an anti-left Hawke may take the reins of the ALP with a committed and ideologically able Keating in the wings. The Labor left and the forces supporting it need to confront that possibility now.

Reform and reconstituting the centre and the left

Labor has ended its 1982 conference and is moving towards government with its internal forces in a state of flux. Many positions have yet to solidify but three trends are evident: (1) a realignment of the right has occurred; (2) an ill-defined centre-force has emerged; and (3) the left, although it has signified its importance within the parliamentary party, is operating largely without focus and with a still-emerging leadership of younger figures. In this context it seems that the left is necessarily looking toward a period of reassessment and rebuilding. Unfortunately, it will have to do this while, at the same time, coping with Labor “preparing for government” and perhaps in government. If Labor wins the next election the centre-right view that predominated at conference is unlikely to allow the government to push ahead strongly during the difficult economic times that lie ahead.

A concept of the process of reform and its consequences combined with a campaign to strengthen the co-operation of the centre-left will be the most useful tools for developing the left while at the same time supporting the Labor government.

Given that Labor will neither be willing nor able, in a political or financial sense, to initiate and fund a great many of its proposals, it seems obvious that the labor movement will be confronted by the problems of an austere Labor government.

The concepts of movement-building reforms and resource-reallocation reforms are worthwhile here. Movement-building reforms mean those demands, gains, changes or programs which expand the capacities, confidence, political maturity and organisational cohesion of the labor and social movements. Resource-reallocation reforms mean those changes which redistribute wealth or government facilities to the working class, poor or disadvantaged.

In a period of left reassessment and Labor government it will be movement-building reforms that will be the most crucial, the most
possible and long lasting. Labor's industry policy, especially those elements which open up the possibility for greater trade union rights and responsibilities, provides ample opportunity to seek reform of this kind. Further, it allows the left to intervene in the area of greatest consequence for Australia's overall development.

Similarly, an approach which seeks to extend the anti-mining elements of Labor's new and contradictory uranium policy, while attempting to win support for a strong policy, would be a mobilising and movement-building way of working.

Labor in government federally (and perhaps in four states) will provide the possibility for change. The left's ability to build on the current parliamentary party and the labor movement is critical. So, too, is its ability to draw the centre into a firm and creative approach to reform.

The centre of Australian politics and the centre of the Labor Party has for too long been disarmed ideologically and organisationally by the strength and commitment of the right. Since the defeat of the Whitlam government a conscious and committed reformism has been absent from the political scene. Australian politics has been polarised at a time when polarisation is an immobilising force for the vast majority in the community. Politically conscious reformism could provide an opening and a way out of that impasse while recognising the importance and contribution of a more advanced left.

The leadership victory of Hayden, the associated re-emergence of the ALP centre and the prospect of Labor in federal office, signals the chance for the reconstitution of a definite reforming ideology in Australia. The left has a responsibility both to assist in the co-operative development of that ideology and to campaign for its extension and expansion. There is much to be gained in such an approach.

— N.C., 16.8.82.
(contributed)

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I. Is there a third way?

Giovanni Berlinguer represented the Italian Communist Party at the 27th National Congress of the Communist Party of Australia in June 1982. He is a Deputy in the Italian parliament and a member of the Central Committee of the PCI. He is well known for his writings on industrial health.

During his visit to Australia he participated in a meeting in Melbourne on June 15, 1982, with representatives of the Japanese Communist Party on the theme "The Future of Socialism — Is there a Third Way?"

ALR reproduces here his introductory remarks.

First, I would like to say that there is a glorious past of socialism. Despite errors and various mistakes it is certain that the October Revolution and other revolutions contributed very deeply to change in the world. I may say paradoxically that the revolutions were always made by those who were the most heretical vis-a-vis marxism and vis-a-vis the previous revolutionary experiences.

Marx said that revolution would occur in the advanced and industrially developed countries like Germany, France and Great Britain. But the heretic Lenin showed that the revolution could begin in quite an underdeveloped country where there was a proletarian basis, but where the proletariat was a minority of the working classes and of the population.

The second big heretic was Mao Tse-tung because all marxist tradition said that the revolution would be led by the workers, by workers in industry. But, in fact, the Chinese revolution had as its fundamental force the peasants. Even more heretical was Fidel Castro, because all the documents and the experiences of the revolutionary movement said that revolution could not begin and continue without a revolutionary party. Fidel Castro began the revolution with a boat — with a group of people who could not be
identified with a political party as we traditionally understand the word. Only in a second phase was contact with the Communist Party of Cuba established and a new party created.

I would like to state that our main hope is the next group of heretics.

Everybody knows that in the past there were different phases of the revolutionary process. The First, Second and the Third Internationals each made a very important contribution to the growth of the working class movement and of the socialist and communist parties. But now, due to this growth, and to the development of other revolutionary forces outside the traditional group of the Third International, a new situation has been created. There cannot be any centre or any organisation which pretends to include all the revolutionary forces acting in the modern world.

Any attempt to create such an organisation would simply limit the development of the revolutionary process, and not encourage it. This is the practical experience.

On the second point: Is there a third way? In the lexicon of the Italian Communist Party we say that we are trying to follow a way that does not correspond to the Soviet model nor to the social democratic tradition. But, in fact,
it would be more precise to say that there can be a third way, a fourth way, a fifth way and many new ways to socialism, according to the different historical, economic and geographical conditions, always having in mind as a necessity the creation of a broader international solidarity of all the forces which, in different ways, strive for socialism.

In fact, the tendency which prevails in too many cases, maybe almost always, is that when a party has made a revolution it has always had the desire to affirm that such a revolutionary process was the only one possible. Sometimes they insist on this idea, trying to influence, even heavily, other partisan groups to follow this idea. This has created many difficulties and has sometimes paralysed and sometimes divided the working class and the revolutionary forces.

Of course, if this tendency to export the model of revolutions which have already been made, completely or incompletely, is dangerous then it would be even worse for us to try to export to other countries a model of a revolution that we have not yet made.

Therefore, I do not want to devote the second part of my introductory speech to explain to you in Australia how to put into practice euro-communism. It would be a little difficult also for a geographical reason. But more precisely I want to say what is our policy, our strategy and experience.

I want to underline four main points, in a necessarily short summary, which characterise our action and our strategy.

**Transforming the state**

The first one is the tendency to transform the state. This is, to a certain extent, different from the traditional thesis that is found in Marx: that the new classes should break the state, smash the state. In our opinion and experience the state is no longer only a management committee of the bourgeoisie. It has many functions that correspond to the general interest while the power of the bourgeoisie over the state remains dominant.

In Italy, in particular, the state is the result of struggle — including armed struggle in the period of the resistance against fascism — and is therefore characterised by the strong presence of the working class movement, and of domestic forces. I'll mention just two points about our experience. One is that in Italy we have won very great powers for local authorities and there is strong participation of the leftwing forces in municipal and regional councils. Many of the big cities of Italy are administered by leftwing forces and have a socialist or communist mayor: Turin, Milan, Venice, Florence, Bolgona, Rome and even Naples which is a very difficult city from the political and social point of view. As a result there are improved public services and there is also a very broad democratic experience for the population.

A second experience, which is quite unusual, is the attempt to democratise the police. During the years after the war there was a very strong attack on the working class movement. You have lived the same experience — during the Cold War. In strikes, the police fired against the workers — many were killed — and this lasted until the 1960s. The spontaneous tendency of workers and of youth in the 1968-69 student movements was to say that the police were fascists.

Our party opposed this definition saying that the police were directed towards repression but called on the policemen, who came mainly from the poorer classes of society, to unite with the workers. Gradually, with the greater development of democracy and the weakening of the repressive tendencies of the state, a democratic consciousness developed within the police. They began to form a union; after many years of struggle, they obtained a law according to which there now is a police union with all the usual rights except the right to become members of the central trade union and the right to strike. The workers of all other categories say that if the police need to strike then they will do it for them.

It is also a big point to have a police force of which more than two-thirds are members of
This is quite significant because this can help co-operation between the population, the workers and the police. This was one of the key points for the success Italy obtained in the struggle against terrorists. Such success would have been impossible without co-operation between the population and the police.

Of course this is not sufficient: local power, police and other sectors I haven't mentioned are not sufficient. It is also necessary to participate in the leadership of the government. And this is the problem we face now. Without participation of the Communist Party in the leadership of the government, the transformation of the state, even the maintaining of a full democracy is becoming difficult. And it is not sufficient even to have communist ministers, because there are problems of the transformation of the state apparatus, of raising the consciousness of the employees, and of changing the daily work of the state apparatus which is a very difficult task.

Nationalisation

My second point concerns the economy. You know that the French government carried out many nationalisations and this is in the program of many communist, socialist and labor parties. In Italy, the situation is quite different because the main enterprises are already public property — the banks, energy, transport, the steel industry, a great part of the chemical industry and so on belong to the state either directly or through shares.

The problem we have now, to use a simplified formula, is to nationalise the nationalised enterprises. This means transforming what is being used for private interests or for the interests of the dominant parties into an instrument to solve the problems of the country, to develop the economy, and also to lead the other sectors of the economy in a mixed economy which should include a private sector. In Italy, there...
is a very important development of middle and small enterprises which constitute the greatest part of Italian economic life, and there is a growing sector of co-operatives. The National League of Co-operatives, which is a leftwing organisation, with communists, socialists and so on, has the fourth largest budget of all Italian enterprises. This is also an instrument to solve problems, to develop the economy and to educate people about democracy.

My third point concerns alliances. In the marxist tradition, alliances were always interpreted as alliances of productive forces. The general scheme is, as everybody knows, that when new productive forces are hampered in development by the old social relations of production they have to break this cage and go through in order to ensure new development. It was like this in the bourgeois revolution and in the proletarian revolution in Russia. New experiences were added to marxist theories in this field.

First of all was the Leninist experience of alliances between workers and peasants. Then other countries, particularly in the third world, spoke of alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie. But now there are new problems in the field of alliances — two in particular.

The first is that there are forces which are not productive but are very important and necessary for the development of the society. Let us speak of education, health, scientific research, public administration and so on. These forces tend to be as numerous as the working class and sometimes more numerous. What should we do? How should we consider them?

In our opinion, we should consider them as potential revolutionaries on the same level and together with the working class, because there are a lot of contradictions in their own activity, in their own conditions. Not only in material conditions - because in the present era it is not necessary to be hungry, to have many children or to be proletarian to become revolutionaries. There are many, many new reasons to become revolutionaries. We should understand this and appeal to those
forces on the same level as the working class. Of course, the working class has tradition, organisation, needs which we should put in the forefront of our attention.

Marginalisation

The other point is that modern capitalism produces marginalisation and confirms and broadens certain forms of oppression, which does not mean exploitation. Oppression is not only economic exploitation. Let us take women, for example; even if they are not exploited they are oppressed. And the position of male workers vis-a-vis women themselves is sometimes ambiguous; they are oppressors while being exploited. We should understand this situation.

The traditional attitude of marxists and the communist parties was that such problems would be solved after the revolution. In fact, they must be solved during the revolutionary process, otherwise the revolution will not come or will be an incomplete revolution. And the position of marxism towards the marginalised groups of the population was even worse, was even more negative. If you read Engels, for example, the proletariat should never be in contact with the lumpen proletariat which is always an instrument of the bourgeoisie, available for any form of provocation or any adventure. Indeed, we have the experience that the alliance with the lumpen proletariat is possible.

Let me use a rhetorical expression: one of the political miracles in Italy is that the Communist Party has 40 percent of the vote in the city of Rome where there is not one single big industry. The greatest factory in Rome is the Vatican. There are some industries of two, three or four thousand workers out of a population of three million, ands there are building workers, transport workers and so on. There was, particularly after the war, an enormous mass of the population marginalised: lumpen proletariat and persons who had come from different regions of Italy just to live there because Rome was an open city and they could escape from the bombing. They were without food, without homes, without anything.

One of the tasks of the Communist Party was to work to improve the living conditions of this population: to find homes, water hygiene, a job for them. Through such struggles an alliance was created. Many of them supported the Communist Party, became workers, voted for us. And this is why in the city there is a very strong communist organisation and leftwing local government.

There is another theoretical problem about alliances, but I want only to cite it. Capitalism does not only hamper the development of productive forces, but sometimes it helps their development. It is not always a limitation. But what is new today is that capitalism is developing and compelling other countries to develop an enormous disruptive force which is exactly the contrary of productive forces. We see the disruption of life, the arms race, the disruption of the environment, the disruption of human rights.

If we consider the peace movement, the environmental movement and others, we see that they are not working for the development of productive forces. They are against the disruptive forces which capitalism has created in the modern world. So the problem of alliances becomes much more complicated. The forces which are interested in the struggle for peace, for the environment, against marginalisation, for human rights, can contribute, together with the working class, to the struggle against capitalism and for the transformation of the society.

Struggle and organisation

Finally, the fourth point I would like to underline is the relationship between struggle and organisation. In this case, the experiences are very different from continental Europe to Great Britain to the United States to Australia and so on. Class struggle exists everywhere. Political struggle exists. In the United States there is class struggle, political struggle. It is mainly political struggle on single issues and it has sometimes tremendous positive effects. I am reminded of the
enormous contribution the population of the United States made to the struggle against the war in Viet Nam. But after the issue is closed the forces are abandoned and everything finishes. New issues are raised and new committees are created. But the leadership of the bourgeoisie is not interrupted. Therefore it is necessary that the revolutionary classes, the progressive forces, create one or more organisations which go through the various problems, have a general program and can lead the struggle for democracy and socialism.

In our experience this organisation is a mass party. But I would like to underline—in order not to be criticised by anybody for being a party superpower, because there are not only states but also parties that can have the same attitude—that this problem of a mass party is not only a problem of the number of members. It is more a problem of the quality of work. It means a party which tries to be present in any situation and in any group of the society. A party which tries to be open not only to very, very active members but also to those who cannot be very, very active members. A party whose approach in the Anglo-Saxon terminology is called “problemsolving”. Not only making propaganda, and education, but also problem-solving. This is why we try to co-ordinate mass action and social struggle with the work inside the institutions through our representatives and our work to organise and educate. Education means experience, information, and countering the negative actions of the mass media, a presence in the mass media, and the party having its own contacts with the population.

These experiences may be very different from country to country. I have had only the opportunity to present some of our own experiences.

But despite the fact that we do not consider our policy as a model to be adopted elsewhere, we think that there are two principles which may be necessary to take into consideration everywhere.

One principle is that each party, organisation or movement should be autonomous and independent. For two reasons. Firstly, to adhere much more to the national and local reality. And, secondly, to build international solidarity on a more concrete and broad basis.

The second principle is that, in capitalist countries, democracy is not only the most favourable ground on which to struggle for socialism; it is also intrinsically of value to be kept and broadened before, during and after the victory of socialism. Maybe we adopted this principle because Italy was the country which created and, unfortunately, exported fascism. Therefore, having lost our freedom for twenty years, we are very careful to keep it by all means. But there are also principled reasons to adopt this course.
The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place in February 1956, nearly three years after the death of Stalin. At the time of the Congress, the main interest as reflected in the western media centred on the new emerging Soviet leadership, headed by the ebullient Nikita Sergeievich Khrushchov.

But the Congress turned out to be far more than a ritual for parading new leaders. It dealt in a new way with such questions as the possibility of preventing world war, socialist democracy, diverse roads to socialism including peaceful transition, relations among socialist countries and overcoming the consequences of the "cult of personality" of Stalin.

And a time-bomb had been set ticking at the Congress. At a "closed session" from which foreign delegates and journalists had been excluded, Khrushchov had delivered his famous "secret speech". News of this speech at first gradually filtered out until, by a process that is still unknown, the New York Times obtained a copy and published it in full.

The "secret speech" was never published in the USSR, but it was read out to closed meetings of party members. Outside the USSR its publication had an electrifying effect on communist parties, revealing as it did something of the enormous power that had become concentrated in Stalin's hands and the abuse of that power.

Reactions to the 20th Congress included resentment that the revelations should have been made at all, attempts to stifle real discussion on the implications of the Congress, disillusionment and an exodus of members from communist parties, revealing as it did something of the enormous power that had become concentrated in Stalin's hands and the abuse of that power.

The following article is a reflection by veteran Italian communist leader Gian Carlo Pajetta, written at the time of polemics earlier this year between the CPSU and the Italian Communist Party. It was published in the Italian communist weekly journal Rinascita of March 5, 1982 and has been translated and edited by Dave Davies.

The 20th Congress of the Soviet communist party — even if it has been deleted from the history books in several socialist countries — represents a turning point which cannot be removed or forgotten.

Its great importance, the hopes it raised and dashed, are being felt today in current events. It is felt in the state of more or less latent crisis in those countries which did not want to proceed along the road opened up by the 20th Congress and make adequate use of the break it made.

The Congress of 1956 was certainly a trauma for the whole communist movement: because of the way it was conducted it came as a complete surprise. Even the way in which Khrushchov's "secret speech" came to us was strange, because it was not known how it
The clumsy way in which the crimes of Stalin were revealed and condemned were of concern to some as a sign of "crudity" and a lack of analysis of the causes and methods behind the degeneration of the life of that system. But it is difficult to imagine how the 20th Congress could have had a decisive effect or brought about a real turn in events without it happening as it did, with all its clumsiness and "crudity".

But for the Italian communists (and, I believe, not only for them) one thing was clear. In order that such a trauma should have a salutary effect and help work out a different perspective, it was not just a matter of correcting some errors or of making condemnations in vague terms such as "cult of personality" or pointing purely to individual responsibility (of Stalin, Beria, Abakumov or others). It was necessary to look back with courage, to comprehend the historical origins and the reasons for what Togliatti called precisely the degeneration of the system.

A quarter of a century later we must say that those responsible for the policies of the socialist countries have not gone ahead along the road but have, in more than one way, gone backwards. If Khrushchov’s denunciation seemed to some to be "crude" or inadequate, today in those countries it seems even illicit, an episode, a personal initiative which is better forgotten.

At the same time, someone (perhaps regretting that the "secret report" had revealed those terrible truths) reproached the Italian communists for wanting to probe and uncover events of a past that was too recent and too fresh; today that past is regarded as "too distant" to be talked about. The name of Khrushchov has been deleted. How many people know that in the film of Togliatti’s funeral that we presented to the Soviet comrades, the frames showing the then General Secretary of the CPSU lifting the coffin have been cut?

**The need for change**

The 20th Congress was not a passing event. Three years previously, at the time of Stalin’s death, it was immediately clear to the Soviet leading group that things had to change. Moreover, I believe that this conviction of a need for change had already matured during the last period of Stalin’s life.

In any case, it is certain that in 1953 the idea that there had to be a change asserted itself within the leading group as a whole. (This was said even by Molotov in information which must remain confidential.) It was not just a matter of a return to legality, of seeking to emerge from a state of arbitrariness and generalised terror. It was to reform economic management, social relations above all in the countryside and policies on national minorities. (In the previous years several autonomous republics had been abolished.)

And yet, in those years, the problems were confronted only with partial measures, without going to their roots. That which was positive, and it was not just a little, seemed fragmentary, partial. The fundamental problem, moreover, could only be resolved with wide publicity, with popular participation and collaboration — in short, by making the whole country jointly responsible. Besides, between 1953 and 1956 one continued to speak of the Soviet Union and its internal life in a way that was substantially identical with the past.

Between 1953 and 1956 there were neither public statements nor more profound changes in Soviet society and no real democratic participation took place. The responsibility for this must fall back on the Soviet leading group and the explanation is to be sought in its divisions, in the way the country had lived for so many years, and in the way its government was conceived.

A certain share of the responsibility regarding the Italian response in those years
belongs to us, the Italian communists, because of the way in which we continued to represent the Soviet Union and for not grasping that those first signs of the post-Stalin "thaw" had to be better understood, to be matters of information and explanation. We are still feeling the effects of that share of the responsibility today in our party.

A quarter of a century later the problem is not one of celebrating a great liberating event, despite those who would consign it to oblivion. It is a matter of understanding why the change did not make way for a real and lasting process of democratisation and of development of Soviet society.

At first, the liberating elements of the 20th Congress seemed to be favoured by the existing situation. For example, there were real signs of a reduction in armaments in 1956 in a situation which even included a kind of convergence between the USSR and USA to stop the Suez war. Also, relationships with other socialist countries were considered from a new viewpoint, with open talk of wishing to respect to a large degree their political and economic autonomy (even if 1956 was the year of armed intervention in Hungary).

In 1955, a year before the 20th Congress, Khrushchov had made his trip to Yugoslavia and repudiated the calumnies against the Tito "clique". There was an effort to facilitate relations of equality with the Chinese communists; there was the approach to Egypt and India. All this tells us what kind of international framework was sought at the time and which seemed possible in accord with the new elements put forward by the 20th Congress.

Inside the Soviet Union

Yet, as regards the internal situation in the country, the fact remains that the innovations remained largely disjointed and impulsive, never managing to tackle the problem of really democratising Soviet society in a coherent way.

• Khrushchev before Lincoln's statue

For example, a reorganisation of the economy and its management apparatus was
attempted on a regional scale (with economic councils) to break the centralism of the ministries. But in the factories, at the point of production, the problem of the participation of the workers, their more direct responsibility in management was not confronted. Behind the concept of "collective leadership" (which at first served essentially to hide the divisions in the leading groups and maintain a precarious balance) it was believed that a wider degree of tolerance could be maintained together with a large degree of party control over the police (until then practically all-powerful) to overcome the arbitrary way in which the system functioned.

Certainly, this relative normalisation of social life was quite different from the nightmare which had weighed on Soviet society for a long time. However, the fact remains — and today it is necessary to recognise it — that such a normalisation retained some important aspects of the system of the preceding period.

Let us consider the flourishing of culture and literature which took place in those years of the "thaw". For example, Solzhenitsyn's book on the concentration camps One Day in the Live of Ivan Denisovich was published and praised. But that was due to the personal intervention of Khrushchov and not to a different conception of freedom of expression and the right of citizens to communicate with each other. The struggle against the "anti-party" group and the removal of Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, Shepilov and others was carried out (and how could it have been done otherwise at that time?) by an appeal to the Central Committee, which was unanimous. But perhaps the Central Committee was not completely, but only formally convinced if, a few years later, it was to be unanimous in abandoning Khrushchov.

It was, however, a period in which new forces emerged, new hopes inside and outside the USSR were awakened and a revival of the world revolutionary movement was recorded. This vehement demand for a new direction was made in an emotional way. (At the end of his speech at the 22nd Congress (1961), Khrushchov called for the building of a monument in memory of the victims of Stalinist terror — a monument that was never to be.) If this demand for change was gradually exhausted and almost extinguished, it was due partly to the fact that Khrushchov did not have around him, nor did he seek, capable people disposed to follow him. But certainly not only for this reason.

Today we can understand what we did not understand then; that it was not just a matter of penetrating some "degenerations of the system" (to use again Togliatti's expression) but also those elements of the system which had permitted or, moreover, brought about those degenerations. In other words, what was never confronted was the very problem of the organisation of social power, commencing with the factories, the local Soviets, through all the organisations of the party, up to the Central Committee, and to the Supreme Soviet. It was a matter of questioning also the way elections were
conducted, to give citizens the chance — which they did not have and do not have today — of really choosing their own representatives and investing them with authority. This authority was not, and is not, recognised because it is not enough to have elections which are really a kind of installation.

So a quarter of a century later we should neither celebrate nor still less condemn the 20th Congress, but try to understand how we can go more deeply into the limitations of this attempt to emerge from the nightmare of Stalinism. In this regard, we should again recall the position of the Italian Communist Party not only at the time of the 20th Congress but in the following years.

Facing the problems

Some people then talked (and some have gone back to talking) of Togliatti’s “annoyance” in relation to Khrushchov, or of his residual Stalinism. Certainly we all came through that experience and our behaviour then could be related to that tradition. But I think it is enough to refer to Togliatti’s last piece of writing, the famous *Yalta Memorandum* (1964), prepared for a meeting it was hoped to have with the Soviet leaders (and of which he had informed the leadership of the party). This document was not concerned with protesting at the way in which the 20th Congress had revealed the crimes of the past and abandoned the method of presenting a too rosy picture of socialism.

The *Yalta Memorandum* instead called for a more decisive following of the road of the 20th Congress, pointing out the hesitations which were apparent. The problem of democracy was posed explicitly, as was the problem of relationships with other socialist countries in the context of the hostile gesture towards the Chinese in depriving them of Soviet technicians. From that time our party initiated, although not always with the necessary incisiveness, an elaboration and an investigation of the problems posed by the 20th Congress, and we have never abandoned it.

So we cannot go back, either with respect to positions taken then or still less with respect to those acquired in the course of time. If today, rather than celebrating that Congress, we prefer an historical consideration which also goes into its limitations, the limitations of the person Khrushchov, the limits of that “failed revolution” without heroes (also because many who perhaps could have been the heroes could not take part), we have to say that there was not the courage then in the USSR to talk more openly to the country, to allow the men and women to decide more freely, to give life to a real political democracy. "Gulash socialism" (this was Khrushchov’s vivid expression) is certainly not something that can satisfy a people who have waited patiently; it is not for the General Secretary or the Politburo alone to guarantee it; the people must be involved in deciding on what kind of socialism and even what “dish” is to be on the menu.

The 20th Congress, even with its limitations, is now a part of history even if there are those who would like it forgotten. It is strange indeed that *Pravda* which published the *Yalta Memorandum* word for word after Togliatti’s death, replies to the Italian communists today, when we offer criticisms and point out errors and limitations in the policies of the Soviet communists, with phrases about the socialist reality which could have been copied from the captions on the rosy pictures of the Stalin epoch. When we say that the USSR of today is not the same as a quarter of a century ago, it is stating the obvious.

And if, in fact, things have changed, then they have changed so much that the contradictions today seem more glaring.

Things have changed so much that one cannot stand still, and what Togliatti demanded in 1964 on the eve of his death, with weighty words like “stagnation” and “delay” must now be demanded with new terms. When we say “phenomena of regression” it is precisely this that we mean.

Our words belong to those who have believed in the October Revolution, in the
importance of the USSR in the Second World War and also, with that degree of utopianism that distinguishes the revolutionary, those who believed in the 20th Congress.

But today, our polemical position in relation to the CPSU is linked also to the conviction that crises are produced when social forces cannot tolerate the burdens of the present and are not satisfied with comparisons with the past. The result is that the political inertia of those responsible leads to a breaking point as much as does the just impatience of those who know that history does not stand still.

Putting Victoria on the rails ....

— Julius Roe interviews John Alford

Julius Roe interviews John Alford on the industrial strategy of the Australian Railways Union (ARU) in Victoria.

What is happening to the Victorian rail industry?

A lot of very serious things have been happening to the rail industry in the past few years. Basically, you could describe it as a restructuring rather than just a cutting back or running down.

There are, of course, major areas of the system that are being reduced: those parts of the service that meet the needs of the ordinary people. I am talking about the passenger services, both suburban and country, and about the small freight services that are used by small business people in country towns. These services are all being cut back, staff are being reduced and, generally, such services are being run down and made more inefficient.

On the other hand, however, there are some areas of the railways that are receiving a boost. They tend to be those areas that meet the needs of large corporations, particularly the freight-forwarding companies. Here we have seen new investments in track up-grading on the main lines between Sydney and Melbourne, and Adelaide and Melbourne. We have seen investments in major container terminals and in new freight vehicles. We are also seeing investments into areas such as bulk freight, and particularly grain, fertiliser, cement and the like; they are getting a boost.

So, really, what it amounts to is a shift of resources away from ordinary people towards large companies, and it is affecting staff very seriously in terms of their job prospects.
How are you seeking to change this?

Obviously, it is not a simple process to tackle these massive changes. One of the problems we run up against is the very scale on which they occur. If we were to resort to the normal knee-jerk or piecemeal reactions that we often see in the union movement, we would be completely behind the eight-ball. What we have to do is look at how those normal reactions can be harnessed and wielded in a way that is really going to have an impact.

Industrial action is a key strength of a union, but strength also lies in the knowledge and experience of members on the job. What we have to recognise is that the management has long-term plans in the industry which give it a strategic advantage in terms of prior knowledge and in terms of having an overall view of where it is going. We found it necessary to seek to challenge what management is doing at that level rather than aim our actions at the mere effects or mere fact of the cut-backs. So, really, we have to get to the sources, and the sources are those long-term plans.

We are looking at developing our own
long-term plans for the future of the industry. We are seeking to develop an alternative for VicRail — not one that is formulated in the rarefied back rooms of a few theorists, but one that is the property of the whole membership of the union. So what we have done is to hammer out a campaign strategy of putting forward and pressing for an alternative for VicRail that has got four basic elements.

First, enlarging and developing workers' knowledge and understanding of their own industry. We are seeking a workers' investigation of the industry that draws on the knowledge that workers have of their own industry.

Second, developing detailed alternatives to management plans, alternatives that take into account the interests of the community at large and of rail users as well as the needs of workers in the industry. Those alternatives are posed against the plans that management and government have.

Third, developing new forms of action — action which really looks at the strategic situation of the industry, seeks to maximise the impact on the big companies that benefit from management plans and minimises the impact on the general public and the community at large who, after all, are fellow workers, and who tend to rely on parts of the service. And that is a process that again involves very much rank-and-file participation in formulating ways of taking action.

Fourth, build stronger links with the rail-using public. Because we provide a public service, there are points at which our members come into contact with the public, and are able to reach out to them. We are seeking to spell out the ways in which the interests of our members coincide with those of the public.

I would like to discuss each of those four elements. The first element, which is the enlargement of workers' knowledge about their own industry, gives workers an incredible lift in their confidence, and confidence in their ability to do things about the industry. But exactly how have you gone about the enlargement of workers' knowledge in the industry?

Often it has been a fairly mundane and humdrum sort of process although, in fact, I think it is quite an exciting process. You often see labor movement research that really does not involve much more than people who are academically trained delving into government reports and other heavy documents, and coming out with very profound critiques of what is happening in an industry and what might happen. Our process in the ARU does not really involve that, although there is some research by experts.

The more important part of our process involves drawing knowledge from the place where there is the most of it, and that is in the heads of railway workers themselves. Railway workers, from their own daily life experience on the job, know what is going on in their industry, and they have an incredible pool of collective knowledge about their industry; far greater than any management or, indeed, any union leadership could have. The task for the leadership of the union has been to bring out that knowledge and bring it together in a way that is of use, in a way that makes it into a weapon in the ongoing battle with the management.

And a lot of people aren't really aware that they have that knowledge?

There has, in the past, been the view, "Well, I'm only a worker, and I don't really know, and the management knows this and knows that", but that is something that has broken down as the process has got underway. We have made use of a number of simple practical techniques to do that. Very often, we have drawn on surveys conducted and with people from off the job. From these surveys we have got basic information about what is happening in parts of the industry. We have conducted seminars and schools and a range of trade union education activities with an orientation to a particular problem facing a particular part of the industry.
We have done a lot using the actual financial and organisational resources of the union; to book delegates off, to pay their wages and send them off to carry out an investigation, to go around and do a survey.

There has been a very good example of that in the country freight area which is under threat, being run down. We had delegates from the Melbourne freight terminal, the big central terminal, design a survey to look at all the basics of staffing, of handling equipment, of terminal standards, of levels of business, of wagon allocations and all the nitty-gritty of what affects freight. They formulated the questions in a way that were relevant to them. We booked them off and they went around and conducted a survey of most of the 35 regional freight centres in the country area, and drew out an incredible amount of information, a solid picture of what was going on there. And that was a very good basis for further activity to place demands on VicRail to do something about the running down of small country freight.

And this process the leads on to the development of alternative plans?

Exactly. Again, because every day railway workers have the job of making the system run, of piecing it together, of overcoming hassles and breakdowns and all the rest of it, they have got very clear ideas about what you can do to solve particular problems. We have found an incredible pool of creativity and imagination about the improvements that need to be made among members on the job. Often, these will be at a very specific level. There will be propositions put up about how to change the parcel-loading arrangements at a particular station, or reorienting the signalling practices or whatever. But what we are able to do by the process of having schools, discussions and meetings between delegates from different areas, is to have workers learn about what is happening in another area and take a more overall view.

We began by putting up alternatives for particular sections of the service such as a line, or the freight business, and gradually we are seeking to draw all these together into bigger and bigger alternatives for the system as a whole.

Perhaps the most useful example of that was on the Warrnambool line where the government was threatening to shut down the service. We conducted a survey of passengers asking them what they thought about the service, and what they thought needed to be done to improve it, and we got our delegates together from all along the line, from all the grades, from station staff, guards, signal people, track labourers, etc. They looked at what the passengers were saying and drew up a list of proposals for improving the service to overcome the problems that the passengers were complaining about, and that was a very realistic list of proposals. There were things on that list which VicRail could do within a matter of days if it really wanted to. We then developed the list into a full-scale alternative which those workers further investigated. Together, we worked out what they would cost, and how they could be implemented. An alternative plan for the Warrnambool line was then circulated in all of the local areas.
And that, in itself, is an example of the third element you were talking about, which is new forms of action. One of the new forms is the circulation of these alternative plans to the travelling public and the press and so on. That, in itself, is a new form of action, isn't it?

Well, it is something that you don't normally see in industrial circles; this process of reaching out to other groups in the community as a normal part of industrial activity. But I think the new forms of action go far beyond that, and we have found that the crucial aspect is that of railway workers recognising their strategic position in various parts of the system, and being able to take action on that basis.

I have indicated we have found that actions which aim at major freight services — corporate freight — have a very big impact, not only on VicRail's balance sheet but also on the government, because the freight forwarders immediately get on to the government and say: "Listen, settle this dispute no matter what; we don't care what it costs you." And, of course, they've got a lot of clout.

At the same time, we can work out ways in which action can avoid hitting the ordinary rail user, the passengers and, in some cases, the small country freight users, and thereby seek to keep them on side and prevent the formation of a backlash.

Our classic experience in that respect was in 1981 when we had a major dispute concerning our demand for public inquiries into country line closures. As lines were being shut, we placed bans on trains, on passenger trains, at the end of particular lines and, in effect, held them hostage in support of our demands. We had widespread community support for that because these were the last trains due to run as passenger trains on those lines. But we found that, as we stepped it up, the real pressure we could apply was when we began to seize corporate freight trains all over the state. We placed bans on some 35 freight trains and we began to picket the central freight terminals in Melbourne, and the moment we started to apply the screws there the government came to the party. We won that dispute 100 percent.

That's on one side. An experience on the other side was during 1980 when the government was seeking to raise fares at the same time as they were continuing to run down the services. We decided that we would do something about it, in particular to make the point that people would get a worse service for higher fares. We had our delegates come together to look at ways of improving the services, and particularly of cutting out all the cancellations and delays. We put up a simple 11-point plan for that which wasn't going to cost very much at all. In support of that plan, we, together with the tramways union, staged a protest on the day the fares
were due to rise, where we refused to collect any fares at all, as an action to draw attention to our demands. So we gave passengers on the entire railway and tramway system a free ride for the day. Instead of a ticket, what the passengers received was a pamphlet spelling out our demands for improvement of the service and inviting them to fill in a form supporting our demands. The day was an unparalleled success. There was massive support from the public all over the system and VicRail was not game to seek to take action against us. Between the two systems, some 28,000 passengers filled in the forms. It was noteworthy that, within a month of that action, the Premier had allocated $2 million for a series of systems improvements which were almost identical to those we had put up, even though he did not acknowledge our role in that.

Using that form of industrial action is one aspect of building stronger links with the travelling public and the freight users, and since then it has been further used in the tramways industry. But what other ways does the union use to go about trying to build stronger links with the public?

There have been many aspects of this but, basically, what we're seeking to do is spell out how our interests substantially overlap, even if they don't totally coincide with, the interests of the rail-using public. The government is always trying to set us apart from each other by saying that railway unions are opposed to improvements in efficiency, that the system costs a whole lot of money because of wage costs and that we have to make cuts for the benefit of the taxpayer at large. We've sought to demonstrate how that is not true.

All our alternatives for improving the passenger services seem to bring out one fundamental point again and again and again: when you look at a way of improving a passenger service you're also necessarily looking at ways of employing more staff, because meeting the needs of passengers is necessarily a labour-intensive process; because only more staff can actually help passengers, provide them with information, take care of their safety and all the rest of it. That's a message that has been getting through fairly strongly. The Train Travellers Association and other organisations endorse our stand on that position whereas, previously, they were fairly prickly towards us and would often attack us over industrial action.

We tackled the Liberal government theme that railway deficits need to be cut back by conducting a number of studies which have demonstrated conclusively, with hard statistical evidence, that railway deficits are a very economic way of meeting the community's transport needs because,
although you pay for a rail or, indeed, a tramway or bus system, in fact you pay a lot more for alternative means of transport, notably the private road motor car. This is because the private motor car has a whole lot of hidden social costs such as the cost of road construction and maintenance, the cost of road accidents, the costs of pollution, the costs of oil depletion. All these costs, when you actually put a hard dollar value on them, as our studies have done, show that the costs of public transport are much less in toto compared with those of private road motor transport.

You’ve talked about how these alternatives are being developed in particular areas, but how far developed is the overall plan for VicRail that you mentioned at the beginning?

We’ve found that the process of doing that is taking a lot longer than we’d originally envisaged. Part of the problem has been the ongoing rush of the campaign particularly against the Lonie Report which recommended massive closures throughout the system. We’ve been involved in that campaign in a very frenetic fashion for virtually the last 18 months. Now we’re able to raise our heads above water and start to look at the longer term and we’ve decided to take an approach which is more oriented to key sectors of the railways.

We’ve found that it makes sense to begin to look at the largest business that VicRail’s involved in, the grain traffic, which makes up about 30 percent of VicRail’s total freight traffic and is a massive part of its overall activity. What we’re seeking to do here is to involve the various grades of workers in looking at some of the operating problems and to come up with a proposal for a better way of handling grain — not just because we want to see grain handled better, but also because it has profound implications for the rest of the system. When the grain harvest is at its peak every year, it really affects the country passenger and the country freight services quite substantially, it creates a drain on locomotives which affects the country passenger trains and it creates shortages of wagons which affect the small country freight. In both cases you have delays, cancellations, reorientation of the service and so on which drive customers away, and it’s usually not business that the railways get back. We think it’s important to do something about that and the key to it is an improvement in the overall efficiency of grain-handling. We are looking at ways in which the peak can be eliminated, or at least damped down and spread further over the year. This will probably mean some reduction in overtime for some of our members, but at the same time it will mean an increase in working stability for our members generally, with more guaranteed employment throughout the year, and less dislocation and spasmodic work patterns.

We’re looking at a number of things: the discharge points of various silos, and silo capacity; the wagon fleet; how the wheat traffic relates to the superphosphate traffic, which is usually heading in the opposite direction at the same time as the grain is coming in; and exploring the possibility for a multi-purpose wagon which can have back-loading to cheapen things substantially for VicRail and, of course, we are looking at timetables and working practices.

Already, we’ve found that there are substantial opportunities for improvement of the service in ways that aren’t necessarily going to disadvantage the employment prospects and working conditions of our members and, of course, there will be the overall improvement for all our members of having a better-run system.

I’ve found that in adopting this sort of strategy the enthusiasm of workers for action is raised which is, of course, a good thing, but it also raises people’s expectations of what can be achieved simply because you’ve got a strategy. Sometimes these expectations can’t be fulfilled because of the nature of the rest of the industry, or other areas not being so developed, or because of the consistent attacks from the employer, and that can lead to a whole number of problems. Has that been the experience in the railways?
Only partly. The problem has been there but whether it has been a serious problem is doubtful. Really, we haven’t found there has been that raising of expectations because often it’s been a fairly major effort just getting things going, to enthuse people about doing certain limited things. It’s still a reality that the overall conception of the strategy is not something that is widely held throughout the industry, although there is an appreciation of the approach in wide sections, and that was certainly demonstrated during the major country closures dispute last year.

But in those areas where the strategy is understood, I don’t think the question of unreal expectations arises because the union leadership has always been very careful to make sure that, as campaigns develop, we don’t have the leadership getting far ahead and promising the sun, moon and stars. In fact, precisely because this activity involves people at the rank-and-file level, precisely because people at that level are the key participants in the whole thing, then there’s a fairly realistic understanding of what is achievable and what is not achievable. Instead of having a situation where rank-and-file people might be unrealistically expecting:

"Oh, we’re going to win this or win that", and “the union leadership is away negotiating and we’ve got a good chance because of this or that action”, they are closely involved in those testing situations and able to see what we’re up against.

For instance, we never go into negotiations with management without having relevant representatives involved in those negotiations so that they’re directly able to see for themselves what sort of situation we’re up against and, in any negotiations with management, it’s usually quite clear how possible it is to get something.

When you were talking about the question of building links with the public and building support from the public generally for the campaign to save and improve the industry, you didn’t deal with one of the problems which people often raise: that as a trade union you still need to use action such as strikes and bans of various kinds. People say that the use of these can undo all the goodwill that you might have generated from the public.

Indeed, that can happen. It’s a matter of the level of consciousness of the people on the job and of what has gone on before. We’ve found in certain areas, because we have been involved with the community, closely discussed what our position is and what we’re asking for, that there is an understanding when we take particular action.

The classic example was in South Gippsland where there had been a lot of prior activity, with our delegates involved in local community committees about the need to save the Yarram rail line. When we got to the stage where hard action had to be taken, that would normally have been anathema to country folk who are basically very conservative, but not only did they not attack our actions, but actively supported them. The community helped by donating food, resources etc. to our picketers on those country rail lines, and by holding fund-raising barbecues and other back-up activities because they had been involved before in the discussion, in the “proper channel” part of the
process. Having exhausted all these channels it then came down to a recognition that the only thing left was to take some action.

In that case, the course of action didn’t really disadvantage anyone. However, you also get to a situation where the kinds of action need to be looked at: there are situations that arise where there can be actions that disadvantage people. We’ve found that even when the issue is wages and conditions there is now a much greater awareness on the job of the range of actions and possibilities for action open to unionists, almost as a matter of course there is a consideration of how particular actions are going to affect our standing with the public.

It was fairly apparent last year, prior to the recent round of wage rises of which we were part as well, that we were going to have to go into an industrial campaign for a pressingly necessary wage rise. As it turned out, we managed to reach agreement without any industrial action because the government seemed to be willing to grant pay rises for reasons of its own. If that had not been the case, we would have staged such a campaign. What seemed notable to us, at the time, was that the expressions coming from the various job representatives was that we needed to look at new types of tactics in respect of the wages campaign, similar to the ones that we had been engaged in on the future of the industry. We are willing to look at selective bans that hit freight borders and to consider ways of maintaining public support during actions, and all the rest of it.

The other aspect is that even when we do get to a stage of action that might disadvantage people we have paid considerable attention just to the simple process of getting our message out to the public. This is done either via the direct contact that a number of our members have with the public, e.g. station staff actually explaining the issues to the public when an action is taken or when, as a matter of course, a delegate suggests that we do a leaflet to explain why we’re taking this particular action. These steps don’t eliminate hostility but they certainly dent it.

Another aspect is that we’ve taken great pains to make sure we really get our message through to the media. Over the past couple of years we have built up our own relationship with the media and we pay a lot of attention to it. We hammer it. A lot of people say you can’t get through to the media. We think you can if you keep hard at it. The media hasn’t been all our way, but neither has it been as hostile as it has been in the past.

So it’s certainly not a matter of backing off from industrial action or urging the members to rein-in their activity. Rather, it’s a matter of the way you organise the activity and the way you try to get the message across.

Certainly. We make no bones about the fact that we’re a militant union and there’s no way we’re going to change from being a militant union. However, we also like to think that we’re a union which is thinking strategically.

How has the campaign around saving the industry, and improving the industry, affected the union itself?

Overwhelmingly positively. There have been one or two negative aspects but they’re certainly not the fault of the campaign. It certainly meant that the union has been in the firing line as far as management and the government are concerned. Basically, they engaged in a sustained attack on us at all sorts of levels over the past year or two. One of the most serious actions they took against us was the removal of payroll deductions for union dues which has made the work of the union difficult. But the positive aspects have far outweighed those: we’ve had a flowering of involvement and of activism within the union. Three or four years ago the situation was that you had an active and fairly competent union leadership but it wasn’t really backed up by a circle of activists from the various job areas and, indeed, it was often the case that it was hard to think of who might replace someone who was about to retire or resign.
We now have a situation where there's a large number of activists who are running their own sections of the union in a very competent and often exciting way, and who have really begun to organise themselves at the job level. In the past, a lot of the section, division and sub-branch positions in the union which were up for election were unfilled, but now nearly all of them are filled and usually there are contests for these positions; this indicates a greater interest. You also have a situation where there are a growing number of activists who are aware of the strategy. They grasp it, independently advocate it, and put forward ideas about what can be done. I think that, in terms of the life of the union, the campaign has meant a real explosion of potential. As far as I'm concerned, that has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the whole campaign.

In the 1979 wages campaign, which was one of the first times that these new tactics of hitting the freight forwarders were developed, there was considerable difficulty in getting sufficient members of the rank and file to participate in the prolonged picket lines. Would you say that this situation has dramatically changed?

It's certainly changed to a considerable extent. What's important there is that these new tactics have now gained much wider support. There is, again, that view of what's strategic and what's not strategic. I suppose, also, that perhaps the best indicator of how the whole approach is perceived by the membership at large was the result of the election for the whole branch leadership last year which was held at the same time as the country closure dispute. This was the biggest and most serious dispute that the union had been involved in for years, with chaos and stand-downs occurring all over the state over a four-week period. The election resulted in the re-election of the leadership, against the rightwing ticket, by the highest majority that the leftwing leadership had seen in 25 years: in fact, there was a 2-1 vote in support of the leadership. I think that, if anything, indicates the way in which the rank and file of the union have seized hold of this approach.

Has the campaign affected relations between the different unions in the rail industry?

By and large it's meant a much greater unity within the industry and this was given a big boost when the campaign broadened under the auspices of what is called the Labour Transport Campaign. This comprises all the rail and tram unions and the parliamentary Labor spokespeople on transport. We had an ongoing campaign in which we appointed a full-time co-ordinator to liaise between the unions. That activity, and some associated activities, have meant a much greater unity of action between the unions. That was certainly the case last year where, in particular, another major union in the industry, the Australian Transport Officers' Federation (ATOF) was closely involved with us in the country closures dispute. They were also in the non-collection of fares day.

The relationship with the ATOF is interesting because it is a "white collar" union covering salaried officers who can be members of either our union or the ATOF. Traditionally, we have had fairly difficult relations with them because we compete for members. We had managed to sort that out a bit and, in the course of this campaign, have developed a much better relationship. I think that arises out of the situation that they find themselves in: traditionally, management would appeal to them as being close to management and tied to management but, increasingly, as the rationalisation of the industry rolls on, management has hit them as much as it hits the "blue collar" workers and you find that a clerk can no longer be sure about his or her future, no longer be sure of having workers to supervise. So they have become as concerned as us and, consequently, they've become much more militant. We've seen a new leadership in the ATOF which has a more positive and progressive approach and we are able to co-operate with them very well.

The other major rail industry union has been a different case. The Australian
Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen (AFULE) has a tradition of militancy. Quite naturally and appropriately, that militancy is based on a membership which is one section of the industry, namely the drivers, and there is, I suppose, a craft orientation implicit in their approach. With the Labour Transport Campaign, we've had a fairly good working relationship with the AFULE, as we have traditionally, but with the rationalisation the management has sought to exploit the differences of interest that objectively are there between us as unions, by trying to divide drivers from the rest of the industry. I think that, because of the relationship in the LTC, the management hasn't been as successful in that as they would have liked, although there have been occasions of friction. That's something which we have to continue to sort out between us. We've found that, by and large, it's less of a problem when we talk to each other than if we each go our separate ways.

The strategy that you've outlined certainly is all very well in terms of defending members' jobs, saving the industry and even improving the industry, but what relevance does it have for the labor movement as a whole, and how can it contribute to any form of fundamental social change?

I think it does have some relevance to the labor movement as a whole; not as some neat model which has to be taken holus bolus and applied elsewhere, but in the sense of certain basics that, frankly, I don't think the labor movement has really come to grips with yet. These basics are to do with the traditions and practices and habits of the Australian working class: I think that what our strategy is doing is spelling out in a practical and realistic way, without posturing, that it is possible for workers to have a say about the overall direction and orientation of their industry; it is not the god-given right of management. What it is doing is challenging management prerogatives, and that's really a fundamental thing to do because it gets at the structure of power relationships in our society. We're doing that in a way that expands the confidence and the feeling of ability to act that workers have, and not in some way where the workers are led up a garden path and left without any practical way to go. I think that practical aspect is a very important thing that needs to be emphasised.

I think also it shows the way in which the labor movement, or sections of the labor movement, can relate to other parts of the community. Our attempt to forge links with the rail-using public is not something that applies only here. There are a whole lot of other areas where workers can reach out and establish links with their community and to do that gives an extra dimension to their industrial activities. What we're really talking about, I suppose, is the working class being able to assume a greater confidence, a greater capacity in developing its own subjective or internal capacities and, at the same time, assuming a leading role in society. It's about the working class becoming a moral force in society, a group that has a say for the betterment of society.

NOTE: This interview was recorded just before the state elections of April 3, 1982. Since that date, Victoria has had a Labor government to which the foregoing comments do not apply. On the contrary, it has widened the possibilities. — J.A.
In 1978 the relationship between technological change and employment under capitalism became the centre of a major industrial dispute when technicians working for Telecom Australia took industrial action to try to stop the installation of a new telephone exchange system. The issues raised during that dispute included: the elimination of jobs; the deskilling of the majority of jobs that remain; the increase in managerial control in the workplace; and the import of foreign technology and the neglect of research and development of Australian technologies.

One of the consequences of the public interest raised by this dispute was the establishment in 1979 of a Committee of Inquiry into Technological Change in Australia. Perhaps predictably, the committee (on which the federal secretary of the Telecommunications Employees’ Association was “balanced” by the Vice-Chancellor of a major university for science and technology, and the manager of a local affiliate of a Swiss-based aluminium company) produced a report in 1980 which glossed over the concerns publicised by the Telecom technicians, and settled on a position that the process of technological change was inevitable and, in the long run, would be beneficial to all.

One of the most serious defects of this report was its failure to point out the growing dependence of all sectors of Australian industry — agriculture, mining, manufacturing, tertiary sector on decisions with regard to the development and/or introduction of technology being made by multinational corporations. Expenditure on research and development in the private sector declined considerably during the 1970s. While the government sector continues to fund a very high proportion of research and development, much of this is devoted to basic scientific research related to the agricultural

(Based on a paper delivered at an international round table conference in Cavtat, Yugoslavia, in 1981.)
industry. Another view of the government’s lack of enthusiasm for sponsoring Australian science and technology development can be gained from comparing the approximately $115 million it allocated for such programs in 1979-80, with the $507.6 million effective cost of its investment allowance in that year.

The highly optimistic, and technologically determinist view of the government is now being increasingly opposed by the trade unions on the basis of growing numbers of studies being undertaken of the concrete effects of technical changes in workplaces and communities within advanced capitalist countries. The widespread introduction of computers into the labour process in most industries has quite clearly been the major technical change of the 1970s. Its effects on employment in Australia have been significant.

Employment Implications of Technical Change in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s

The shift towards tertiary-trained occupations

The most noticeable trend to be observed in the changes in occupational structure recorded in the last three Population Censuses has been the increase in "white-collar" occupations, and the corresponding decline in "blue-collar" ones. Large gains have been made in the professional white-collar category which includes teachers and engineers with university degrees, and in the para-professional (technician), clerical and sales occupations, while substantial losses were experienced in the relatively unskilled labouring jobs.

These changes are best described as the result of the transition from experience-based to science-based technologies. Organisationally, this has meant a shift within primary and manufacturing industries from production work to maintenance and central services work (the latter including research and development, engineering, financial planning and training functions), as the actual tasks of production have been mechanised and/or automated.

In the tertiary sector — both public and private — most of the workforce can be categorised as "white-collar", but even within this broad category there appears to have been a shift to a slightly greater proportional increase in the senior managerial and professional positions. This has mainly resulted from the growing establishment of separate electronic data processing departments, and the setting-up of elaborate work studies. Time and motion study, organisation and methods and management training groups within individual companies and government departments. There has been a corresponding decline in the routine clerical functions, as these have been computerised.

While the 1970s saw a sharp pruning of the labouring jobs in the rural, mining and manufacturing industries, the 1980s are expected to see a massive decline in clerical and sales operations in the finance, commercial and public administration sectors as a consequence of the massive investment in computer and communications technologies in the late 1970s.
The question of skill

The elimination of unskilled labouring jobs and the shift towards tertiary-trained occupations has been the basis of the much-vaunted claim by employers that computerisation has led to the need for increasing skills in the workforce. This claim should only be substantiated by a close examination of the concrete tasks people perform in their work, and not by resorting to statistical analysis based on broad occupational classifications — on which most of the employers’ arguments have rested.

There can be no doubt that the mechanisation and automation of production processes have led to a reduction or a complete elimination of the human skills involved in such production. The continuous casting process in the steel industry, for instance, has eliminated almost a dozen different operations: ingot casting, ingot reheating, blooming, slabbing, and connected materials handling and transport operations. The skills that the operating staff had to learn, often through years of experience, based on their direct observations of changes in, e.g. the colour, sound and heat of materials, are now transferred to machines which can sense, test and monitor such changes. Human judgments are increasingly based on the reading of instrument indications, interpreting their meaning and their interrelations, and drawing conclusions from them. “The sources of data for decisions have been moved from furnace, converter and rolling train to instrument panels and control pulpits.”

Mechanisation and automation thus require the workforce to reach some level of literacy and numeracy to understand the meaning of instrumentation and respond correctly to its signals. However, automation has also tended to simplify and trivialise many of the human decisions that remain to be made within the labour process. Operations work often just means sitting around and waiting for a light or buzzer to warn of a malfunction. Clerical workers merely have to respond in a routine way to standardised procedures and instructions.

While at this stage it may appear that the need for greater numbers of technicians, engineers, researchers, financial and computer systems analysts, etc means that higher levels of skills are exercised, much of their actual work has already been formalised and standardised through computerisation. In the near future, the process will be greatly intensified when the use of computer numerically controlled lathes and computer-aided design systems becomes more widespread, and when the more reliable new-generation machines with microprocessor controls of fewer moving parts are introduced here. As the Telecom technicians noted, there is great potential for maintenance work to be deskilled to the level of removing a defective module and slotting in a new one. Engineering design and draughting work is also rapidly being automated. Effective computer control is seen as a substitute for a lengthy training and skilled manpower.

There are some exceptions to this process of human deskilling and that is at the higher levels of management. Here, decisions are now made on the basis of much greater volumes of information than ever before, made possible by the computerisation of the results of each section or branch or department of the labour process. This has led to an increase in management training in techniques of work measurement, and planning, programming and budgeting based on — often — daily reports of output, performance, achievements of targets, etc.

It is common to find that while most areas of industry are working shorter hours through a drastic reduction in overtime or the achievement of a 35-hour week, senior management staff are working longer hours than ever to keep up with the floods of information with which they are inundated. While some exceptions to the rule can be found, the way automation has been implemented so far in Australia has led to a much greater centralisation of information, decision-making and, consequently, power and control within the workplace.
The intensity of work pace

Computerisation has led to a speeding-up of most work processes in the 1970s, and especially in the "information sector" previously considered immune to "speed-up". Not only has the work pace been increased through a more accurate control of manufacturing processes, but the tolerance of timing between one process and the next has been dramatically shortened, so that there is greater pressure to rectify malfunctions as quickly as possible in order not to disturb the regularity of the workflow. In the banking and insurance industries, workers are generally paced by their machines. The average time taken to perform a transaction is very much less than before. Machines are generally much faster, more consistent and more reliable than people to work with (except when they are not in working order, which can still be quite frequent) and workers experience much greater stress when having to continually respond to such a work pace. Computerisation has also led to greater use of shift work and weekend work for "white-collar" as well as "blue-collar" workers.

The greater capital investment in labour processes and the greater management control over them has certainly increased the responsibility of all workers in a computerised industry, to work fast, consistently and accurately. Employers have attempted to equate this increase in responsibility with an increase in skill. However, the discussion on deskillling above should make it clear that such an equation is illegitimate.

Job satisfaction

As "work" becomes trivialised and routinised for more people, at the same time as its pace and responsibility intensifies, there are good reason for questioning the ability of the new technology to improve working life and make it more enjoyable.

As for the health and safety of work, there are certainly cases where automation has allowed workers to be moved away from dangerous, excessively hot or cold or polluted work environments and into air-conditioned control rooms or offices. However, workers are also discovering harmful health effects associated with continuous operation of such new equipment as word processors and visual display terminals, and work in air-conditioned atmospheres. The use of science in the service of capital to create new materials, chemicals, products and technologies has resulted in the proliferation of many substances and techniques in the workplace long before adequate knowledge of their possible toxic effects can be established.

Homogenisation of work

The main effects of computerisation on the organisation of work have been described as: optimisation, standardisation, formalisation, and specialisation. As computerisation spreads, these effects are being felt across all industries to the extent that the differences between them are beginning to evaporate while similarities grow. For instance, one can anticipate a time when, to all intents and purposes, the steel, coal and finance industries (say) will be the same because they will be staffed by crews of repair and maintenance workers whose tasks are to monitor and service machines; and groups of planners and decision makers whose tasks involve a response to regular reports on their visual-display terminals on production targets, output, sales and investment options.

Maintenance work is essentially the same, whatever the industry, and clerical work is increasingly becoming so as it consists more and more of a feeding-in of information to the computer, and a reaction to what the computer presents as a result of its processing of that information according to predetermined rules. The content of the information tends to become irrelevant to the mass of clerical workers who have to process it. Already one can see a merging of the communications and computer industries; and the expansion of electronic funds transfer systems will break down some of the divisions
between the finance, retail and communications industries.

This homogenisation of work can theoretically lead to a greater flexibility in the organisation of work. Whereas the organisation of production work is relatively inflexible, being based around fixed structures such as ovens, furnaces, mills and mines, the organisation for maintenance work can take varied forms, ranging from extreme centralisation to extreme decentralisation. The move by many companies to divest themselves of some construction, maintenance, cleaning, and other such operations and to use contractors and sub-contractors instead is one indication of a shift from a centralised to a decentralised organisation of these functions.

Computer technology can also theoretically allow clerical and some engineering work to be performed in the home instead of in a centralised office. A move in this direction is already under way in the US.

The choices as to whether centralised or decentralised work organisations are adopted will tend to be made along the same political/economic lines as those which decide which new technologies are researched and developed, and how they are used. While the gathering together of workers in factories was an important means by which capitalists in the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century asserted control over workers and their product, it seems technically possible for them now to control work done in the home through monitoring systems built into the machines, and at the same time benefit from the considerable advantages they can reap from keeping workers isolated and, presumably, non-unionised and unorganised in their homes.

The sexual segmentation of work

While the processes of mechanisation and automation in the rural, mining and manufacturing industries have mainly affected males (purely because they have traditionally been stereotyped as "male" work), the computerisation of the finance and other "white-collar" industries such as retail trade and public administration can be expected to have a devastating effect on the job opportunities of women who have, in Australia, been segregated to a great extent in these clerical and sales occupations.

The decline in job opportunities overall appears to have revived traditional prejudices against the paid employment of women (especially married women) on the grounds that they are "not worth training because they leave to have babies". The rapid increase in female unemployment is already becoming marked. There are great dangers that the process of women's liberation, supported by the growing economic independence of women during the 1960s and 1970s, will receive a major setback because of the effects of technological change.

Social Implications of Computerisation

Predictions of the social impact of computerisation under capitalism are now surprisingly similar, whether made by researchers working on behalf of trade unions or computer scientists themselves. They forecast a society divided into those without work, poor and alienated; those "lucky" enough to have (degraded and deskillcd) work and whose fear of being unemployed keeps them little better than slaves; and the small group of controllers whose decisions affect the membership of the other two groups.

The greatest social impact of computerisation (combined as it will be with the effects of the severe recession of the 1970s, and the international restructuring of industry) will be that of large-scale unemployment or under-employment. The
The irony of the situation is that while thousands are laid off work, those who still have jobs have to work under greater pressure.

Computerisation has led to the elimination of many of the jobs which served as training ground for young people leaving school. The exploitation of youth in part-time casual work in fast-food outlets and supermarkets is widespread. Under such working conditions they will be isolated from the opportunity to learn from experienced trade unionists how to work collectively to better their conditions and pay. For school-leavers the prospects of a future based on either unemployment or super-exploitation can lead to drug-taking, violence, apathy and/or suicide. Since there are no adequate social planning mechanisms under capitalism, often the training a young person might be given is useless after the training period, because jobs are only available for those “with experience”.

For older people suddenly retrenched, or whose skills have been made redundant, the trauma can be very great. The concept of life-long education has been peddled by a variety of authorities — governments, employers and educators. For people in such positions, retraining doesn’t constitute any sort of threat and may even be welcomed as a relief from a job that has become routine. However, it is usually the people least confident about, and competent at, schooling — working class people, immigrants, and more often women rather than men — who are forced into the intolerable position of having to train or retrain, often at their own expense, or else to live an impoverished existence on the dole. The recent cuts in education expenditure announced by the federal government make the promises of retraining and life-long education even more of a mockery.

For the young and old without jobs, and for those in employment whose work constitutes no form of enjoyment or challenge, but is purely a source of income better than the dole, there is generally no question of choice in their way of life. The lack of equity in this case is a result of a prior situation in which decisions about which techniques are to be developed and how they are to be used have been taken by small groups of executives in the head offices of large corporations. In planning for the future of their own enterprises, these planners do not (have to) take into account the overall social impact of such decisions spread across many or all enterprises.

The other major social concern about computers is related to the question of privacy. In an excellent analysis of the question, Kerstin Aner of Sweden has noted that:

Privacy is not an ancient and eternal idea .... The concept arose with the bourgeois family and the modern press. That is not to say it is not a necessary concept or demand in our age, but we must see it in perspective. The important danger about invasion of privacy by electronic means is that it is a mass invasion, and that it cannot be returned on the snooper.

This inequality of access to, and control over, information is what the struggle is really about, not so much about control over details of one’s individual private life.

Implications for socialist theory and practice

These effects of the present stage of capitalist scientific and technological development serve to confirm the view of the early British philosopher of capitalism, Andrew Ure, expressed in 1835, “that when capital enlists science in her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility”.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the results of decisions which are made to allocate resources to research and development of some technologies (e.g. nuclear power) and not others (such as solar or wind power) systematically enhance the power of the ruling class and correspondingly weaken the working class. Similarly, the combination of the introduction of new equipment with management processes that divide jobs into the many with limited
understanding of the overall operations of the industry, and the few with a high degree of power and control, are serving to weaken the knowledge and control over the labour process of the working class, in the interests of the national and multinational ruling class. This class nature of scientific and technical development is now becoming more apparent to wider sections of the Australian labor movement.

Such a view of the political nature of the design and use of science and technique is directly opposed to that held by Lenin in 1918: "The Soviet Republic must at all cost adopt all that is valuable in the achievements of science and technology in ... the field of analysing the mechanical motions of work .... We must organise in Russia the study and teaching of the Taylor system and systematically try it out and adapt it to our own ends". Such a belief that there is a "rational" or "scientific" method of organising work based on the division of labour that is somehow neutral of class power was wholeheartedly rejected by Australian workers represented at a federal unions' conference on technological change held in March 1981. Their statement included the following passages:

Conference draws attention to the increasing use of new technology and "systems engineering" to impose worker subservience to the machine; "built-in" surveillance; time and speed control over the worker; fragmentation and greater division of labour including mental labour; dehumanisation of relations between people and the workplace; inadequate health and safety protection; low standard ergonomics; both subtle and direct attacks upon unionism and solidarity.

Conference sees this as an example of the employer exercising class power in the workplace and an attempt to remove any vestige of workers exercising any control over their work; all in the guise of technology and systems engineering. It is an aspect of technological application that should be rejected, as time-and-motion study and so-called "scientific management" Taylor systems were rejected in the past.

The political, economic and social consequences of the present developments can be highly dangerous both for the
prospects of democratisation and liberation of society through the agency of the working class and its allies, and for the very survival of humanity. As we have noted — and in contradiction to Marx and Engels' hopeful views in the *Communist Manifesto* that "The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association" — the new technology can be and is being used to atomise, weaken and disarm a great proportion of the working population. Technical surveillance and social control methods are increasing in power and sophistication by the day. The sheer magnitude and entrenched nature of the combined efforts of scientists and technologists in both power blocs to use their skills in support of warfare tends almost to pre-empt the possibilities for redirecting science and technology in more socially useful and desirable directions.

And yet, a more dialectical analysis will show that within these developments, more hopeful possibilities exist. The degradation of much intellectual work has contributed to a process of radicalisation and politicisation of many technical and professional workers in Australia. Attempts to atomise these workers as well are being resisted in a highly creative and conscious manner. In the past few years, "white-collar" unionism and female unionism has grown dramatically, both in numbers and militancy. More and more, white-collar unions are recognising a unity of interest with their blue-collar counterparts and are seeking joint action. There are moves for combined action between public and private sector workers. Organisationally, these are resulting in mergers between the "peak" union councils of blue-collar workers (the Australian Council of Trade Unions), white-collar private sector workers (the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations) and federal public servants (the Council of Australian Government Employees' Organisations). At another level, telephones, planes and computers are being used to unite workers nationally, and internationally too.

Potentially, one of the most important developments, as far as the prospects for socialism are concerned, has been the spread of Workers' Research centres and similar organisations throughout Australia — organisations which bring together politically committed research workers, and workers in the manufacturing, transport, communications, energy and other industries, to jointly investigate questions such as the ownership, control and direction of their industries. Through this process of joint research and action it is hoped that the barriers between manual and mental labour, basic to all class societies, can begin to be broken down.

The computer is perhaps a unique symbol of the dialectical possibilities facing humankind at this stage of its history (or pre-history). Being a means of storing, processing and transmitting *information*, a means by which ruling class ownership and/or control of the means of production is legitimated, it offers a future of either increased centralisation of control and power (the capitalist scenario) or a decentralisation of information and a diversity of power structures at various levels — local, regional, national and international. The latter is the form which communists in Australia now believe is the most desirable and necessary for the socialist movement to take.

The process of deskilling to which the computer contributes, and which most unions decry at present, perhaps also has its dialectical opposite that is highly favorable to the long-term achievement of communism. This is the breakdown of "professionalism", intellectual secrecy and elitism, though, for example, computer-aided diagnostic systems which allow accurate self-help in health matters, or computer-aided design systems which will allow communities to quickly learn planning and decision-making skills, and have equal and universal access to planning data. The rapidly-reducing costs of computer hardware now appear to make the widespread availability of this technology possible throughout the world, thus breaking
down the divisions between the information-rich and information-poor, both within nations and across nations.

In order to block the capitalist scenario, the state ownership and control of the means of production is certainly necessary but not sufficient — a conclusion that is becoming apparent to communists in both the advanced capitalist countries, and in Eastern European countries. There is an urgent need for socialist systems analysts and computer programmers to develop appropriate software for the new technology — appropriate, that is, to the conscious aim of socialising the power of appropriation of information and decision-making concerning the natural and social environments.

It seems possible that it is only now, in the computer age, that the vision of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* can become a reality:

This "alienation" .... can, of course, only be abolished given two practical premises. For it to become an "intolerable" power, i.e. a power against which men make a revolution, it must necessarily have rendered the great mass of humanity "propertyless", and produced, at the same time, the contradictions of an existing world of wealth and culture, both of which conditions presuppose a great increase in productive power, a high degree of its development. And on the other hand, this development of productive forces .... is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced; and furthermore, because only with this universal development of productive forces is a universal intercourse between men established, which produces in all nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the "propertyless" mass (universal competition), makes each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others, and finally has put world-historical, empirically universal individuals in the place of local ones.

The technology of the computer, communications satellites and cable television has made the "universal intercourse between men" a reality through the imperialist linking of national economies across the world. At present this technology is under the control of minority groups in society, whether in capitalist or post-capitalist countries, making the majority "propertyless" in information and control. The urgent task before us is to act through unions, political parties, the women's movement and all other organisations which seek to increase the political awareness, confidence and capacities of the under-privileged groups in capitalist and other class societies. We have to assert our rights to understand and control science and technology in the interest of serving human need and the production of use values, rather than maintaining the division of labour that perpetuates class societies. The processes of democratisation of information and power, and self-management in the workplace and home, offer the only viable future for the world.

*Mitsubishi's latest: a desk top robot, price: $2,400*
Argentina's fifty years of crisis

— Jim Levy

As if in a recurrent nightmare, the Argentine people seem trapped in an unending cycle of disaster. The latest episodes followed upon each other with frightening alacrity: humiliation in the Malvinas, the forced resignation of General Galtieri, the sordid internecine struggle for power in the wake of defeat, and failure at Madrid of the once world-champion soccer team. Argentina is a community under almost unbearable pressure in every facet of its existence: a state without legitimacy, politicians unable and unwilling to establish a workable consensus, an economy in shambles, a military, brutal and brutalised apparently beyond any constraints, a civilian population largely terrorised, submissive, confused and demoralised.

To the dispassionate observer, the invasion of the Malvinas, whatever the legitimacy of Argentina's claim, might seem quixotic, bizarre. In this day, it represents crude irredentism, a terribly mistaken adventure to achieve sovereignty over some remote islands sparsely populated with anglophiles in the South Atlantic. Those who undertook the enterprise staked not only their own careers but also the nation's prestige on an ill-conceived, poorly planned military operation which closed off any possibilities of diplomatic solution before an intransigent, better-armed enemy. The utter failure of the military government to achieve any of its objectives demonstrates yet again the bankruptcy of its leaders and thus condemns Argentina to further political instability, economic failure and social conflict.

It is these failures which partly explain why the military decided to abandon negotiations over the Malvinas and to invade. Increasing pressure from civilian politicians, organised labor, industrialists and the constituency formed around "the disappeared" had already forced most elements within the armed forces to concede the need for a limited political opening. Much of the political pressure resulted from monetarist policies which, in the name of liberating "market forces" (the only liberation known to have occurred in Argentina since 1976), have inflicted enormous damage upon local industry and its employees. While the exporters of agricultural produce flourished and, with them, the traditional oligarchy of estancieros (cattle barons), the majority of Argentines have witnessed a very serious drop in their standard of living. Thus, the military which pledged in 1976 to end "subversion" and to build an economy capable of sustained growth, needed to find popular support in the face of its economic failures, or at least to deflect its responsibility for them. Now the military confronts a much deeper crisis.

Why has this country, endowed with all manner of resources, failed to develop along lines followed by Australia or Canada?
did social conflict grow to the point where, by 1974-75, the country was on the brink of civil war? Why have democratic and representative institutions so disintegrated that the military has intervened at least seven times since 1930 and the last elected president to complete a full term in office was Juan Peron (1946-52)? Why have the bonds of this society so eroded that since 1976 its self-appointed guardians "disappeared" somewhere between 6,000 and 15,000 of their fellow citizens, murdered thousands more and terrorised many of the remainder into silence, exile, submission or acquiescence? Is there any connection between the crisis over the South Atlantic islands and Argentina's past and present domestic situation?

The Argentine problem became manifest in 1930 when the army overthrew an incompetent and corrupt but democratically elected constitutional government. The justification for army intervention sounded ominous: the economic and political situation demanded strong, idealistic government. The military leaders not only found democracy wanting but also believed that only they possessed the abnegation to put the nation's interest above personal gain. Elements of fascist thought, admired within certain military circles, surfaced in the rhetoric and, to a lesser degree, in the actions of the government: the themes of discipline, authority, loyalty to the patria, repudiation of liberal values, and rejection of those who adhered to them, all came to the fore. Although this government lasted only little more than a year, it is a precursor. In 1932 a fraudulent election produced a government whose economic policies and political conduct remained faithful to the pre-1930 norms; outwardly, Argentina returned to the status quo ante.

Appearances deceive. After 1930, the military became the major political force in Argentina, unable to extract itself from politics even when it has wanted to (and this desire has surfaced on several occasions). The reasons are complex: many officers do believe sincerely that the military is the repository of selfless patriotism to defend the nation's sovereignty and the Argentine "way of life" on behalf of which life itself may be sacrificed. Numerous Argentines accepted this view, at least until 1955; it would be a mistake to deny the popularity of the military.

At the same time, los que mandan (those who rule), some of whose ranks are filled by military officers, have employed the army without qualm to accomplish national tasks — from eliminating the indigenous people occupying the rich pampas in the 1880s to terminating "subversion", whatever the cost, in the late 1970s. Industrialisation also has drawn the armed forces deeply into politics. They encouraged the growth of heavy industries partly in the name of national security during the 1940s; then they managed them and profited from them. Thus, the military is as deeply implicated in the nation's political and economic failures as the civilians they replace. After each attempt at rule the armed forces' chiefs emerge divided within and obviously as incompetent and venal as their civilian predecessors. They are also far more brutal.
The Argentine economic riddle

The economic riddle is why Argentina has grown at such a slow rate since the 1920s. It might come as a surprise to Australians to know that in 1914 Argentina enjoyed a per capita income higher than that received here. Based upon the cultivation and export of agricultural produce — wool, wheat, beef — Argentina had achieved a standard of living equal to that of Australia on the eve of World War I. But by the 1920s, from the evidence, it is clear that Argentina began to lag behind Canada and Australia: both agricultural production and exports — the basis of the whole economy — dropped off.

At first, the economic collapse of 1930 rocked Argentina no less than all the other comparable countries. In economic policy, the governments of the 1930s attempted to restore trade relations by assuring themselves of the traditional export market (Great Britain) via agreements that blatantly favored the export-oriented oligarchy and British interests in Argentina. This policy, despite its political and social implications, resulted in the partial recovery of the export sector and, surprisingly, the development of Argentine industry. Outwardly, Argentina’s economy survived the depression well.

But the political and social bonds were loosening. At no time prior to or during the 1930s had the small group which dominated Argentina seriously addressed the problems of social injustice or political fraud, corruption and repression. Indeed, the Argentine oligarchy endured precisely because it refused to do so. The development of the labor movement was met with repression and coercion, sometimes savagely. What little social legislation emerged from the Congress was simply not enforced. The Congress, itself composed of men often fraudulently elected, faithfully represented the oligarchy which it served. The state became little more than a vast patronage agency in which interests, as petty as that of the janitor in need of work and as powerful as Royal Dutch Shell in search of concessions, were reconciled at the expense of the public. A gap broadened and deepened between a huge mass of the unrepresented and the urban middle and upper class consumers unbridged by trade unions, but adequate educational facilities, by a spirit of compromise, or even by noblesse oblige. In such circumstances, nationalism emerged as Argentina’s political and social mortar.

Increasingly during the 1920s, the Argentines (with other Latin Americans) reacted against the economic and cultural hegemony exercised primarily by Europe, and to a lesser extend by the United States. British control of the railroads and meat-packing (the latter shared with US interests), and the great British influence over finance and transport (among other economic activities) constantly reminded Argentines that, despite the level of development, they lived in an economic colony. Manufacturing industry was precarious. When imports were cut off as occurred between 1914-1918, the Argentine economy revealed an extremely unhealthy dependence on imported manufactured goods and on such raw materials as coal.

Nationalists advanced the need for greater Argentine control over the economy. But nationalism did not react to capital alone; it also reacted to the huge number of migrants who brought their skills, labor, religions and languages to Argentina. Nationalism essentially is anti-foreign. Nevertheless, in 19th century Europe it functioned to bring into the political system the disfranchised lower and middle classes thus constituting a progressive force. However, in the 20th century, nationalism has worked to frustrate that process and to divert energy towards constructing ever larger symbolic differences between states and other large groups.

Currents of Argentine nationalism

Thus, by 1930, one of the frightening currents within Argentine nationalism, ascribed to by many of the officers and their civilian supporters, was an openly fascistic adoration of an authoritarian, largely self-sufficient state. Economically, it meant the
The economic requirements determined by the depression did not permit economic nationalism in the 1930s. A return to fraud and corruption behind the facade of democratic government forestalled the immediate imposition of authoritarianism. Steadfast resistance to claims for social justice and continued repression of the labor movement substituted for the kind of voluntary discipline hoped for by the right; culturally, the nationalists made great headway.

Even before they emerged triumphant in 1943, the nationalists managed to establish Argentina's neutrality during the war. In fact, neutrality made good economic sense (the Germans did not torpedo Argentine ships carrying food for the British), but it was also a victory for the pro-Axis forces and is evidence of the increasing influence of rightist, authoritarian nationalism within Argentina.

Byzantine politics

The byzantine politics of the years 1943-45 take their significance primarily (but not exclusively) from the emergence of Juan Peron. Before discussing the relationship of Peron to the present situation, however, it should be remembered that Argentine nationalism had taken a nasty turn based upon an economy losing its dynamism and within a polity which had forfeited much of its legitimacy.

The first Peron era lasted from 1945 to 1955. During these ten years Peron blended the various nationalist themes, and added important new elements. Above all, he provided Argentine nationalism with a profoundly popular base — far too popular to the minds of most of the Argentine oligarchy. This was achieved partly through a major reorientation of the economy away from the dominant role played by foreign trade and foreign capital to the development of heavy industry based upon the mobilisation of national capital from private and public sources. Peron made agriculture, the economic foundation of the oligarchy, pay for industry. Sound economic arguments can be
advanced in Peron’s defence. Argentina was far too dependent on exports of primary products; the export sector was not competing successfully with Australia and Canada (among other nations exporting food); Argentina possessed adequate human resources to sustain industrialisation; and the size of the internal market allowed for the purchase of local manufactures.

Impressive

In fact, the performance was impressive at least until 1948-49. Then the rot became increasingly manifest: poor agricultural production or poor trade results or a combination of both (depending on the year) caused frequent imbalances of trade and payments with the inevitable squeeze on foreign exchange. Having declared Argentina’s economic independence in 1947, Peron did not welcome foreign capital, and although he was forced to reconsider this policy in 1953, Argentina now revealed the chronic economic difficulties from which it continues to suffer: stagflation or boom or bust, but not steady growth. When Peron fell in 1955, Argentina was an industrialised nation but at a substantial price paid primarily by the agricultural sector. Agricultural production, on which exports depended, stagnated or declined. This represented a major change in the nation’s economy and traumatic political repercussions resulted.

Against the attacks of powerful agricultural interests, many of which were linked to foreign capital, Peron moved with consummate skill and speed. To create a political force loyal only to himself he virtually created, organised and then co-opted a massive labor movement by granting all manner of economic and political favors. In 1943, before he became President, Peron began to mobilise the Argentine masses for the first time in the nation’s history. As President, he taught them that the state had responsibilities to assure social justice, and was rewarded many times until his death in 1974 with almost unquestioned political support. Until 1955, with that support he could take on and defeat most challenges thrown up by the oligarchy. But it would be a serious error to believe that Peron merely handed out turkeys (or beef steaks) in exchange for votes. To the contrary: even when the goodies ran out (certainly by 1952 or before) he maintained the loyalty of the masses. (Throughout his career Peron skilfully manipulated nationalism to create a half-baked ideology which was easily understood and extremely popular.)

Economic nationalism

First, Peron exploited economic nationalism. He bought the British-owned railroads, declared the nation’s independence of foreign capital, nationalised activities such as telecommunications, deemed to be essential to national security, and employed state capital to develop heavy industries some of which, like that of steel, became enterprises owned and run primarily by the military. Not only did the symbols of economic nationalism appeal to the masses and to nationalists of the left and the right, but the rapid growth of state economic activity in both production and services led to an enormous increase in people economically dependent on the state. These enterprises, their employees and their suppliers constitute an economic and political fact of the greatest importance in Argentina today. Thus, Peron gained additional support from white collar bureaucrats and technocrats as well as from the industrialists. The case for the old economy could be heard only within increasingly limited circles, even when conditions began to deteriorate.

Political opposition to Peron came from elements antagonised by his close association with pro-Axis groups before 1944, by his participation in the 1930 and 1943 coups and opponents concerned about his possible dictatorial ambitions. Peron responded to these criticisms with consummate skill. He linked the oligarchy with the old state, recalling its decadence, corruption and antidemocratic practices. Few could disagree with much of his critique. In 1945, he confronted reformed elements of the corrupt but
constitutional regime in what many observers believe was the most honest election in Argentina's history. He won, and proceeded to open up political participation still further by gaining the vote for women in 1947 and by encouraging organisations at the base. He attacked the communists and favored the military thus keeping the support of the authoritarian nationalists. Nationalism not only gained a popular base but also endowed the state with a legitimacy among the masses it had never before enjoyed.

Peron's economic policies and political strategies found their complement in his social program. In a variety of ways — including, for example, the acceptance and encouragement of the labor movement (provided that it remained loyal to him), the implementation of a vast array of welfare measures and blatant demagogy — he forged a kind of social pact acceptable to the urban commercial and industrial bourgeoisie. An anathema to the elite of the ancien regime, which also opposed Peron's economic strategy and popular nationalism, this policy resulted in vastly heightened economic expectations among the mass and its organisation into a cohesive political movement dependent upon and loyal to one man.

The strands within Argentine nationalism, which exalted Catholicism, insisted upon religious instruction in the public schools, and claimed both cultural and racial superiority within Latin America, were integrated with great subtlety into this populism. Peron never proclaimed the most xenophobic elements of Argentine nationalism — he refrained from open anti-Semitism, for example — but he went far enough to co-opt substantial numbers especially during the good times. With reference to the present crisis, Peron mobilised much support within Argentina by attempting to export Peronism to the areas deemed by the Argentines to be the less fortunate countries of Latin America, especially to Bolivia and to Chile.

The whole Peronist edifice contained at least two basic weaknesses: it depended on one man, and it rested on a weakening economic foundation as the agro-export sector continued its relative decline, as industry demanded more and more capital and as the state had to meet its increasing economic, political and social obligations. By 1955, a motley coalition possessed the strength to challenge Peron. It included elements of the old agro-exporting elite, liberal democrats opposed to Peron's increasingly dictatorial methods, entrepreneurial elements suffering from the economic crisis, xenophobes angry at Peron's backsliding on a variety of issues, and a large sector of the bourgeoisie frightened by the appearance and influence of organised labor. In substantial numbers, both the Church and the military enlisted in the cause. On September 19, 1955, Peron, rather than face the prospect of a civil war which could have easily become a class war, took refuge on a Paraguayan gunboat anchored in the Rio de la Plata, not to set foot again in Argentina until 1973.

Traumatic

Peron's decade had been traumatic in at least three ways: the mobilisation of the mass;
industrialisation; and the growth of the state. These facts were irreversible. Whether or not the various political forces that now occupied the Casa Rosada wished to turn back the clock was irrelevant. They were dealing with a new thesis. The utter and tragic failure of Argentina to achieve an economic, political and social modus vivendi testifies to the depth of the problems left by Peron, deepened still further by each day of confusion, inflation, corruption, repression and violence.

Initially, the victorious attempted to obliterate Peronist politics, to proscribe Peronism — as if such a thing were possible! In the attempt to reassemble Humpty Dumpty, the new leadership ruthlessly censored, imprisoned and ignored the masses and even held elections with the intention of restoring civilian, democratic government disallowing the participation of the Peronists. Given all that passed before, how could the state achieve legitimacy under such circumstances? What possible meaning could democracy have? But institutional politics constituted only part of the problem.

Economic problems

The structural problems within the economy continued. Led by the agro-exporters, many Argentines argued that the country ought to return to what made it once wealthy: the export of agricultural products. Industrialists, directors of state enterprises, labor and economic nationalists refused to accept this solution. The failure to agree on a coherent economic policy has resulted in the stop-start pattern, characterised by moments of raging inflation and speculation. In the meantime, foreign capital made impressive gains, especially in the industrial sector.

Although the economy grew during the 1960s, it did so unevenly over time and among sectors. The absence of consensus over political and economic directions, combined with the formal proscription of the nation’s largest and most cohesive political force, encouraged the proliferation of splinter groups and parties from extreme right to extreme left. Peron, from splendid exile in Madrid, watched as the military intervened in 1962 and in 1966 to prevent the Peronists from returning to power. He also watched the military fail to develop or to impose a successful economic policy. And he watched the people of Cordoba go to the barricades against the military dictatorship in May 1969. This revolt demonstrated dramatically the degree to which the nation had become fragmented and bitterly divided. Slowly, it dawned on some of the more sophisticated military leaders that there could be no consensus without Peron, that the longer they remained in power the more widely they would be held responsible for the situation and, not least important, that the exercise of power was itself dividing the military and creating potentially debilitating internal conflicts.

Finally, General Alejandro Lanusse, who himself had been jailed by Peron, undertook to guide Argentina through the ultimate humiliation — the return to power of Peron himself. In a tortuous political process this occurred and, on October 12, 1973, the ageing general accepted the presidential sash. There was not to be a blank cheque, however: Lanusse and his colleagues had insisted that the growing left, especially the revolutionary marxists and reformists within Peronism, be firmly controlled. Indeed, it was almost certainly Peron’s hope to reconstitute the old coalition of industrialists, those dependent on the state sector, the co-opted union leadership and nationalists wherever they might be found — to relive the heady days from 1945 to 1949. Despite the euphoria, facts would not conform. Humpty Dumpty cannot be put together again. Immediately the cracks appeared.

Organised left

First, by 1974 an organised left existed. Although small numerically, it attracted the frustrated and idealistic among professionals and students who saw Argentina’s promise pass them by. Second, within organised labor, an important sector had broken with Peron and Peronism. Mostly marxist oriented, this
sector criticised the corruption, opportunism and collaboration of their brothers. It drew much numerical strength from interior industrial cities such as Cordoba and Rosario. Third, Peronist labor, expecting a rerun, established demands unacceptable to the now powerful industrialists whose support of Peron was necessarily conditional on his ability to maintain labor discipline, and on an acceptable economic policy. Fourth, and perhaps most critical, Peron lacked the support of the military.

Even if the old general had not died of heart failure on July 1, 1974, the house of cards would have caved in. His inability to realise the dreams of his followers was obvious from the first day of his administration; in fact, his left and rightwing followers were already at war, a conflict exacerbated by the increasing activity of the marxist guerrilla.

It is this resort to violence which embodies the Argentine tragedy. Given the not insignificant achievements of that society, it is difficult to explain. Argentina was not, in 1975, nor is it now, El Salvador. Those who went to war in the streets of Buenos Aires and in the hills of Tucuman enjoyed an infinitely higher standard of living than those who now struggle in El Salvador. The miserable in Argentina are proportionately far fewer. The space for political debate and for social reform was then much greater than in El Salvador.

No one can understand Argentina without some comprehension of the strains under which the community has lived at least since 1930 and the bitterness, frustration and anger they have bred. The bizarre strands within Argentine nationalism reflect rather than reconcile the social divisions; they are evidence of the hatred and fear which, through nationalism, have gained legitimate expression. This occurred in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s.

Undeclared civil war

By the time in 1976 that the military overthrew Isabel Peron who, as vice-president, had succeeded her husband, Argentina was sliding towards civil war in the midst of raging inflation. The tenuous bonds of society were coming apart in a celebration of violence. Declaring a “dirty war” on its own citizens, the military unleashed virtually its total force on a largely unarmed and unprepared society. The slaughter was indiscriminate and prolonged. Unlike the case of Chile where the terror was relatively brief and guided from a central point, in Argentina the central government presided over, but often could not control, a violent campaign of four years’ duration. Any crime, any atrocity, could be freely committed because the military had declared war, and in war innocents are hurt.

No one knows the exact toll, but the estimates of Amnesty International are known, and they refer to those who have disappeared. Add to them a large number who were murdered. Travellers recently returned, journalists and Argentines themselves all agree that no family remains untouched. Yet, in addition to the murdered, the tortured, the maimed and the disappeared there exists a society which still hates, and a society which still fears; a society which is
flush with victory and a society which is bitter and silent in its defeat and anguish.

The justification for such savagery sounds familiar: to eliminate subversion, to sanitise Argentine politics, to restore Argentina's democratic and Christian(!) heritage, to straighten out the economic mess. Indeed, that economic mess was worse than ever as Argentines lost all confidence in the mayhem of 1965-76. The military then turned the economy over to a representative of the agro-export sector, Jose Alfredo Martinez de Hoz, whose function it was to restore the nation's grandeur by an explicit and consistent policy of favoring agriculture and the export of its products at the expense of the over-protected, inefficient and expensive industrial sector. That meant lowering tariffs, encouraging the investment of foreigners, reducing the bloated, unproductive state sector. If such measures meant, in turn, unemployment as industrial firms closed down, and the anger of the industrialists, then so be it. The military was determined to establish a consistent policy.

Martinez de Hoz did achieve some of his goals: thanks to high demand for the kinds of products Argentina could provide, agricultural production increased, prices remained high and Argentina's trade and payments balances reflected strength. But the domestic economy suffered as industry, predictably, underwent a serious crisis (which continues to deepen) due to the rapid surge of cheaper imported manufactures. Unemployment appeared and inflation, chronic in Argentina, continued at high rates. This is the recipe for social discontent. Increasingly, the economy depended on the export of agricultural products to the European Common Market countries, and to its ideological adversary, the USSR.

As might be expected, these policies exposed and deepened serious contradictions. The support of the agro-export sector and of foreign capital antagonised nationalists and labor. The problem was (and is) made infinitely more complex by the fact that most of the military consider themselves economic nationalists fiercely jealous of Argentina's industrial base as a matter of national security. Furthermore, both on this ground and on the need of patronage, the state-owned industrial enterprises were not to be served up to the interests of the agro-export elite for the sake of efficiency and comparative advantage. Stimulated by a bloated military budget, government deficits continued to grow. The political interests within and outside Peronism which reflected the views of the economically victimised became restive. Economic policy emerged as the platform from which tentative complaints were launched against the exclusion of the political parties.

A society in crisis

The military junta responded to the worsening industrial crisis by once again modifying policy and, among other measures, drastically devalued a cruelly over-valued peso thus causing further inflation. The reader can detect by now a recurrence of the pattern: no matter how idealistic and resolute the military, no degree of force can restore Humpty to his former self. As General Galtieri pondered the options before he (or his colleagues) ordered the invasion of the Malvinas, he had to cope with these facts: 1) the military government lacked popular support; 2) the politicians exploited this to demand a political opening; 3) the economy, or particularly the industrial sector, is in a shambles; 4) the parents, relatives and friends of the disappeared continue to demand information from the government; 5) the military is itself deeply divided over the proper policies to solve these (and many other) difficulties.

Of all these facts, the economic crisis is undoubtedly the most serious. Although the agricultural sector continues to perform adequately, industry is sinking deeper into a terrible depression. In 1981, the GDP declined 6.1% from the previous year according to official figures, and was only 2.1% higher than that of 1974. In the last quarter of 1981, the GDP was 10.1% lower than for the same quarter of 1980. A private
A research group reported that, during 1981, employment was nearly 30% lower than during 1974, admittedly a boom year. But real wages for skilled workers declined by 16% and for the unskilled by 18% during 1981. Industrial production decreased by over 15% during 1981. During the first two months of 1982, vehicle sales fell by 58% over the same two months of 1981. Inflation continues at a rate of well over 100 percent. Under such conditions, even the control of subversion, now largely accomplished, seems rather expensive. The industrialists and labor leaders have had enough.

Aware of their growing unpopularity, even among sectors willing to go along with repression, the military has debated the possibilities of opening up government to acceptable political groups. These debates are acrimonious because not all officers of the armed forces would agree that their mission is accomplished, that their dirty war is over. Many fear reprisals for atrocities committed if civilians return to government and many fear the loss of privileges or budget cuts.

Given the recent history of Argentina and the present situation, the explanation of the Falklands or Malvinas policy is perhaps more understandable. The nation has been, for the last fifty years, under enormous pressure as demonstrated by increasing social disintegration, political failure and the legitimisation of a xenophobic nationalism. Its future, barring an unpredictable revolution of its basic structures, would appear to be tragic.

**Visions of a thaw in the Cold War**

—Peter Ormonde

*English historian E.P. Thompson is a major force in the British and European peace movements. His latest book Zero Option, due for Australian release later this year, is a collection of essays, articles and pamphlets from the last two years. The topics range from Thompson's analysis of international relations, through polemics against conservative academics and politicians, to a scathing piece on the recent war in the South Atlantic—the War of Thatcher's Face.*

*The book is published by the Merlin Press. Below, Peter Ormonde gives an outline of Thompson's ideas on disarmament and politics.*
Undoubtedly, the MX missile will be the greatest single artifact of any civilisation. It will be the ultimate temple of exterminism. The rockets in their shelters, like giant menhirs pointing to the sky, will perform for the free West not a military but a spiritual function. They will keep the evil spirits at bay, and summon worshippers to the phallic rites of money. Within the aura of those gigantic circles, the high priests of ideology will perform ritual sacrifices of taxes. In distant outposts of the faith, at Westminster, Brussels, and the Hague, Druidical servitors will bow low to the West and incant missilic runes.

Many Millenia afterwards, visiting archeologists from another planet will dig among the still radioactive embers and debate the function of the great temple. The debate will be in vain. For the temple will be erected to celebrate the ultimate dysfunction of humanity: self-destruct.

- “The MX project has now (February 1982) been cut down in size and shifted in site, no doubt in response to my criticisms.” (Note in the original article.)

E.P. Thompson has an apocalyptic vision. It is a vision shared by a growing number of Europeans and others who, like Thompson, are fighting those pressures driving the European juggernaut towards nuclear annihilation.

Thompson has a soft spot for visionaries, especially those with an apocalyptic vision. One of the most perceptive and sensitive passages in his epic work *The Making of the English Working Class* was devoted to a portrait of Joanna Southcott, “a simple and at times self-doubting woman”, a prophetic leader of a fundamentalist Christian cult from the opening of the last century. Southcott warned her contemporaries: “The midnight hour is coming to you all, and will burst upon you. I warn you of dangers that now stand before you for the time is at hand for the fulfilment of all things.”

*The Making of the English Working Class* is an extraordinary piece of historical writing permeated by Thompson’s thorough-going commitment to a concept of social change as a historical process in which humankind is the determining agent.

Thompson is violently opposed to any
political philosophy that accepts the notion of pre-determination. For Thompson, humankind makes its own history; the outcome of any historical struggle is dependent on the interventions of political forces and social groupings.

The prophet Southcott was moved by a hell-fire Christianity: a cataclysmic moment of judgment delivered by a vengeful god. The agent of Thompson’s Armageddon is a lot closer to home — it resides in the ideological labyrinths of the military-industrial-political complexes of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Thompson’s judgment will be delivered by the peoples of Europe and eventually the world — or it will rain down from a thousand anonymous delivery systems.

"Exterminism"

Thompson has another vision — a European (leading to a global) upsurge of popular protest against the grinding mills of "exterminism" — that social/cultural/economic complex that keeps the world frozen on the edge of nuclear destruction.

E.P. Thompson is a respected (if controversial) historian but he is probably more widely known these days as a prominent activist in the European Nuclear Disarmament movement. His avalanche of articles, pamphlets, speeches and talks are also striking sympathetic chords in North America, the Pacific and, significantly, within Eastern Europe. His ideas have provoked a sharp reaction from the political hierarchies of both East and West.

Thompson identifies the threat to human survival not simply as aggressive imperialism or the death throes of a corrupt and vicious economic system. Rather, he sees a self-reproducing reciprocal suspicion and antagonism that has been embedded into the economic, political and social structures of both blocs.

Thus, just as Thompson hails the growing rumblings of discontent about US domination from within NATO, he also lauds recent moves in Romania, East Germany and Poland towards a greater economic and ideological, political and military independence. Thompson sees the development of an independent and autonomous movement for democracy within both East and West as intrinsically linked with the issues of disarmament and the regeneration of an international order based on diplomacy and discourse.

In this series of essays, notably Beyond the Cold War and Notes on Exterminism, the last stage of civilisation, Thompson argues that the ruling elite of the USSR, by accepting the arguments of a "defensive" nuclear weapons system and deterrence, locked the Eastern bloc into much the same ideological and economic strictures as apply to the Western " arsenals of freedom".

Carried on by the chronic inertia inherent in its bureaucratic structure, the USSR, Thompson argues, strove for parity with the US during the post-Khrushchov years under the tutelage of the current leadership which has close links with the USSR’s already well-developed, though in many instances, technologically inferior, military-industrial-political complex.

"No profit" claim

The vulgarised marxism that claims that the USSR has no profit motive and therefore no need for weapons adopts a mechanical and simplistic view of the problem, reducing the complex political/ideological forces underlying militarism to an artificial, contrived shibboleth. One simply has to examine recent history (USSR-China, Afghanistan, Kampuchea, China-Viet Nam, Poland) to put to rest that other reassuring formulation that socialism, by definition, is an anti-militarist force for peace.

In the political vacuum of Soviet orthodoxy these "events" are rearranged and reinterpreted as expressions of that fundamental antagonism: Imperialism versus socialism, reaction — progress, them and us. Thompson thinks it unlikely that many will
find the apportioning of blame a very rewarding task when the larger part of Europe lies in ashes.

It is the world-view that allows such a distortion, perpetuated by entrenched interests on both sides, that is at the centre of the problem. Thompson argues that the only solution lies with increasing democratic control over the decisions of both blocs and the assertion of new priorities.

That the justification for Soviet armaments is wearing thin is shown by the fact that the workers of Western Europe are taking little consolation from the assertion that the SS-20s targeted on their families are "purely defensive".

The truth, according to Thompson, is that there can be no "defensive" nuclear weapon that works by annihilating the civilian populations of the opposing country — or those who unfortunately happen to live within striking distance of either superpower's missile silos.

"Both superpowers are armed for instant and annihilating attack," Thompson writes. "Barbed wire, pillboxes, trenches, anti-tank guns — the accessories of a Maginot Line — might be characterised as defensive weapons, but ICBMs may not."

Now, according to Thompson, both blocs are subject to similar economic pressures and distortions arising from the increasing militarisation of their economies. Longer lead times in research and development, pressures for larger production runs to reduce unit costs, and the need to keep the weapons industries producing, innovating, planning to maintain skills and capacity.... all these pressures apply for both the corporate and the socialist-based economies. Of course, they are manifested differently and the political responses of the state are different but together they serve to maintain and enhance the "deterrence" industries of both blocs, and each other.

An economy in which the manufacture of nuclear weapons is the "leading sector"— around which are clustered the most innovative industries—in much the way the motor car industry has stimulated Western industrial growth this century—z—is the epitome of exterminist production.

The logic of deterrence has led to a situation where there are sufficient warheads to obliterate Europe 30 times. Is it of much importance whether NATO can do it 15½ times while the Warsaw Pact can only manage 14½, Thompson asks.

Thompson argues that the ideology of the Cold War has penetrated the economic and social structures and the culture of both societies.

Unfortunately, while the growing symbiosis between military, political, industrial and ideological wings of "US Imperialism" is all too apparent, secrecy and lack of public accountability screen such a process in the USSR. However, the career of the present Soviet leadership and Leonid Brezhnev is a clear barometer of the relationship between the Soviet military and political apparatuses. The same applies in other Warsaw Pact countries, such as Poland, to varying degrees.

Reagan's efforts to whip up the Cold War mentality of the 1950s have met with, at best, mixed success. Internally, the xenophobia whipped up by Reagan, Thatcher and Fraser has exploited people's willingness to be diverted from immediate economic and domestic crises.

The failure of the US initiative to boycott the Olympics, the failure to even maintain an effective ban on sales of "strategic technology" to the USSR by US corporations, and the current inability to halt the European-USSR gas deal, point to the obvious and indisputable fact that times have changes since the 1950s.
I’m enough of a “determinist” to believe that there are solid economic foundations beneath this shift. Increasing trade between East and West, including heavy borrowings by the Eastern Bloc have fostered alternative interests to the almost total economic and political dependency of the 1950s allowing, in fact, demanding some moves towards political independence from within NATO and an increasing unwillingness to submerge lucrative trade deals to the propaganda interests of the USA. Perhaps no case is more illustrative of this conflict that the perplexing muddle Doug Anthony gets into every time the idea of blocking wheat and wool sales to the Soviets is suggested.1

Reagan cannot turn back the clock and eliminate the progress of the last 30 years. That’s not to say Reagan’s Cold War is any less dangerous than its predecessor. If anything, it looks more desperate, more "adventurous", a full-blown confrontation and more "thinkable".

However, Thompson not only perceives the dangers of this instability but also the positive developments and potentials for change that underlie Reagan’s desperation.

I have concentrated very much on the “heretical” substance of Thompson’s apocalyptic vision of a relentless exterminism, but in this collection of essays and articles Thompson devotes a substantial space to describing the development of the massive groundswell of protest in opposition to exterminism currently building up in Europe (both East and West).

For very obvious reasons, Thompson cannot prescribe the ideological composition of this movement in detail, but he can give some general indications of the positive goals for which the movement strives. These include firstly: disarmament and resumption of conciliation and detente (but on a much-expanded basis, involving interests other than those of the two superpowers), increasing economic, political and social (cultural) independence and, critically, the struggle for increased democracy and human rights.

Certainly, the Australian left has been involved in the developing movement around the principles of non-alignment. However, some of the broader social and political issues raised by Thompson and the vast European movement he reflects have yet to be decisively hammered out here.

Thompson writes with a brilliant and, at times, poetic style using devastating satire and an evilly-black humour to get his message across. This particular collection of his recent writings is easily readable. In fact, it’ll probably just whet your appetite for more of this remarkably creative marxist. His attacks on the Haigs, Reagans, Thatchers and more anonymous gnomes who inhabit the fungus-laden recesses of the deterrence bunker are timeless pieces of polemical writing. Don’t miss them.

NOTES:
1. One of the most comprehensive ans stimulating books on this following this line of argument is Mary Kaldor’s The Disintegrating West (Pelican, 1979).

100 years after Marx

In March next year, ALR proposed to organise a number of events marking the 100th anniversary of the death of Karl Marx. So far, we are planning a speaking tour and symposia, and a new format for the journal.

We believe this can be a valuable exercise for the Australian left, looking at the influence of Karl Marx and assessing problems and possibilities for the socialist movement.

If you’re interested in helping plan such a program, contact either the Melbourne or Sydney ALR collective.

— ALR Collective,
PO Box A247, Sydney South 2000.
Reviews ....

Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation by Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell (picador) rrp $5.95. Reviewed by Linda Rubinstein.

It is now well over a decade since the breaking of the second wave of women’s liberation. A serious look at the movement’s history, its achievements and its failures is long overdue, especially given the very different social and economic climate of the 1980s compared to the time of the movement’s rebirth in the late 1960s.

Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell’s history of the British women’s liberation movement is not written from the point of view of objective observers, but as a contribution from two very involved and committed participants who, like so many of us were in on those first consciousness-raising groups, those first explorations of the power of female solidarity and the discovery of the political nature of personal life.

The revolutionary implications of the notion that our frustrating and oppressive relationships, our isolation and anger were not the result of our individual inadequacies but a reflection of the society in which we lived cannot be underestimated. It is unfortunate that the movement has lost some of that excitement, that driving forward as the circle of women changing their lives widened and grew, as our understanding of ourselves and each other increased and the movement looked outwards to changing the consciousness of women “out there” — in the suburbs and the workplaces.

While the first achievement of women’s liberation was the lifting of that load of guilt and self-denigration from so many women, the movement’s strength is reflected in substantial changes to social mores and changes to institutions such as law, education, welfare services, etc.

Coote and Campbell examine a number of these areas in some detail. As feminists who are also socialists and located firmly within the leftwing tradition, their analysis is particularly focused on the needs of working-class women ans on what has been achieved by them in Britain.

The chapters on work and on unions are very relevant to th debates occurring within the Australian labor movement. British Tories (led by a woman) are promoting the family as the appropriate location for a whole range of support services, thus justifying the transfer of public funds away from welfare to private enterprise. The area of personal service being a major area for female employment, these policies have not only put additional burdens on women at home to care for the sick, the aged and the young, but have thrown many thousands of women out of work.

British women earn around two-thirds of average male wages; more or less the same as their Australian counterparts, a situation which has not demonstrably improved as a result of the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act. Again, the story is a familiar one — consciousness of the iniquity of discrimination stemming from the activities of the women’s movement resulting in legislation which does little more than recognise that a problem exists. The structural segregation between male and female jobs has been pretty much impervious to anti-discrimination legislation which, due to exemptions, lack of teeth and inadequate resources, has failed to be an effective watchdog.

The experience of legislation has been that it is of some assistance to articulate, educated, middle class women who are able to assert their rights for equal treatment in senior jobs. In general, even where their situation clearly lies within the legislative arena, working-class women and particularly migrant women, are not going to use it.

Women and the trade unions

Given this, the role of trade unions, as the only organisations operating at the workplace level, is crucial to any strategy of orienting women’s liberation towards the needs of working-class women. With the growing female workforce participation and increases unionisation of service industry and clerical occupations, women form a higher proportion of trade union members than
ever before. Trade unions have responded to this: in Britain, the TUC has adopted a Charter for Women at Work and, in October 1979, led a demonstration of 80,000 people protesting a proposed Act to restrict access to abortion.

A number of individual unions, particularly those in the public sector, have taken positive steps to encourage women to play an equal role, and initiated struggles for real equality of opportunity in the workplace. Yet even the surface, so far, has barely been scratched. In particular, Coote and Campbell discuss a problem which is rarely analysed deeply by feminists. The traditional militant union strategy on wages, that is, that each group of workers should fight for whatever they can get, means that the low-paid workers, of whom the greater proportion are women, will remain that way as they do not have the strategic position to be able to enforce their demands.

The so-called social contract of the Callaghan government which imposed a £6 ceiling on wage rises was presented as offering security for the low-paid. It was nothing of the sort, in that many groups of low-paid workers, especially part-timers, predominantly female, did not get the £6.

It is apparent that women have perhaps most to gain from a wages strategy which aims to bring the low-paid closer to average earnings (even at the risk of compressing sacred relativities) and a campaign for a social wage around issues of particular concern to them such as child care, health, housing, etc.

Certainly, unions have not really listened to women saying what concerns them — child care is obvious here — nor, for instance, have unions campaigned for shorter working hours on the basis of the possibilities this holds out for greater sharing of domestic responsibility between men and women.

Throughout the book it is made clear that women's position in the workforce is linked inextricably to the division of labour in the home — that central importance must be given to "lifestyle politics" — the struggle to transform relationships between men and women, particularly in the family. Part of this transformation involves sexuality and the book recalls the enormous sense of discovery we felt reading Anna Koedt's article "The myth of the vaginal orgasm".

Sexuality

The women's liberation movement was able to use current research into female sexuality to prove that female sexual pleasure was not dependent on penetration of the vagina by the penis, nor that, even if clitoral orgasms were possible, they were in some unspecified way inferior to the vaginal kind. This was enormously important in a number of ways; not only did it rescue many women from the pit of male-determined frigidity, but it opened up possibilities for female sexuality not linked to the procreative act nor even to male pleasure — in particular, masturbation and lesbianism, as well as non-penetrative heterosexual sex.

To open up possibilities is one thing. To conclude, however, that women who live with or have sexual relationships with men have, in some way, a stake in the patriarchal system, as some lesbian separatists have argued, serves only to alienate women from the movement.

Coote and Campbell are very concerned at the way in which lesbianism has been used to divide the movement. They argue that to define women as either heterosexual or lesbian ignores the fact that many women are bisexual, or move between being predominantly one to the other and maybe back again. They stress that what is important is support and solidarity between women and the development of female eroticism, however and with whom expressed.

Yet, by the refusal to accept the different ways in which women lead their lives, valuable time and resources have been diverted from the struggle to transform relationships into bitter and divisive polemics which have had the effect of driving many active feminists away from the movement, and certainly cut off opportunities for growth.

_Sweet Freedom_ is a concise and refreshingly tightly written account of that first decade or so by two socialist feminists and should be of great interest to the Australian movement. Above all, it is a committed account, although never shrill or extremist. The authors do not fall into the trap of seeing as the enemy all those who do not understand what they are on about. A good example is Anna Coote's debate with Arthur Scargill regarding the Miners' Union journal's custom of publishing pictures of his members' young female relatives in swimsuits. Although one of the authors was deeply involved in the struggle to try to change this practice, the Miners' Union officials are presented as honestly bewildered, rather than women-hating defenders of patriarchy.

Altogether a good read, a useful contribution to debate and a means for women new to the movement to find out about some of its origins.
The federal government assists particular industries in a wide variety of ways. The means of assistance include the imposition of tariffs and import quotas, subsidies, incentive payments, the government’s own purchase of supplies and so on. Moreover, as already noted, the federal and state governments directly and indirectly license groups of companies to undertake particular activities (of which the provision of car rental services at airports is only one obvious but relatively small example). To all of these forms of assistance, conditions can be attached. That is, the various contracts between the state and particular states can be rewritten so that they are much more to the advantage of the state. Any rejoinder here that the state in Australia is a capitalist state is of little relevance. What is relevant is that the labor movement can be expected to understand the nature of contractual obligations, that each instance of industry assistance does indeed involve a contract and that, as parties to current contracts, governments in Australia are derelict in their responsibility to the people.

There is an important political purpose in the use of such bourgeois notions. It takes the focus of any social contract away from an incomes policy which can too easily mutate into a policy of wage reductions alone. While unions and employers might negotiate agreements for wage restraint in exchange for shorter hours, better standards of industrial safety and so on, the state could be expected to attach conditions to pricing and investment decisions in renegotiating its own contracts with employers (although the impenetrability of corporate structures will continue to pose a problem). It can be made to seem reasonable to hold such an expectation: that is the important thing.

Whether the state will even act as can be expected is another matter. In fact, such actions by the state amount in effect to national planning if they are made consistent with each other. It may not work any better here than in European capitalist economies. Indeed, it is unlikely to work; but progress through some sort of national planning is arguably a necessary part of the transition to socialism.

A stronger state

Clearly, the social contracts which have just been mentioned and, for that matter, the wider agreements that may be negotiated between unions and employers are inconsistent with the sort of federalist structure which the Fraser government has encouraged. By a variety of means, the Whitlam government was moving towards more centralised government. Reference has already been made to the high proportion of specific-purpose grants in relation to general revenue grants to the states; the constitutionality of the Seas and Submerged Lands Bill, under which the development of off-shore resources became the province of the federal government, was eventually upheld by the High Court; moves were being made in a number of areas of government to establish and fund regional activities in order to bypass the states. These and/or similar moves must be pursued by any future Labor government. Equally importantly, the autonomy of the large statutory corporations has to be reduced. It is becoming well recognised that the managements of the states’ electricity commissions have too much independence, are too well insulated from the communities they are supposed to serve and in which their plant is located, and are dismissive of the expertise of workers employed by the commissions. It is important to press for greater accountability to local communities and for workers’ control; but it is also important to ensure that statutory corporations which provide physical infrastructure are integrated with the planning apparatus of the state.

The third matter that may be very disturbingly set aside by making centrally negotiated agreements between unions and employers the central thrust of the labor movement’s present strategy is the problem of unemployment. At the beginning of July it was announced that the proportion of the
workforce unemployed and actively looking for work had reached 6.7 percent. Even the *Australian Financial Review* noted, however, that the proportion of people who had been discouraged from looking for work and had so withdrawn from the recognised workforce is also continuing to increase. Some of the latter may actually be working casually in the cash economy; but this is essentially irrelevant. Regardless of there currently being a recession (depression?), it is becoming clear that the proportion of the population which will be required as productive workers is declining.

Up until recent times, two additional systems had worked reasonably enough to disguise this trend. Opportunities for unproductive labour in "service activities" such as, most notably, the simply-regulatory activities of the state, litigation in various courts, auditing and the organisation of tourism expanded considerably. Activities such as these spread the available income among more people. Second, there were extensions in the state’s schemes of income maintenance and in payments involved. Neither of these systems as securely provides claims to an income as does employment in productive activities. That is not to say that employment in what are productive activities for a capitalist economy is to be preferred in principle: it is simply a more secure claim to an income. Schemes of income maintenance such as for the support of single parents, are under attack, and payments are being reduced in real terms. Opportunities for unproductive work are constrained either by their being obviously unproductive or by the level of real wages paid for productive labour.

Maintaining the workless

What can be done? In the first place, the introduction of job-displacing technology must be controlled. Second, there must be real opportunities for the retraining of workers who must be displaced. Third, there must be an expansion of the provision of housing, education, local amenities, and so on, and hence the provision of more jobs in supplying elements of the social wage. All of these moves are matters for social contracts; some must involve the state while some may be more appropriately the subject of agreements between unions and employers. But even if such moves were to occur, it is quite unlikely that unemployment would be obviated or that there would ever again be "an unemployment problem" as relatively slight as existed in Australia twenty years ago.

What must be devised is a system of income maintenance which is secure and as unconditional as possible. A more or less unconditional system might develop within a fringe society; but it would hardly be secure. As things stand at the moment, a state system with any measure of security will be strongly conditional on acceptance of close surveillance by functionaries of the state, of willingness to transfer to employment of whatever nature, wherever it is to be found, and of subservience ideologically, and so on. The task of devising a secure and relatively unconditional system of income maintenance must be undertaken by the labor movement, and specifically by those of us who are employed. Each "social agreement" or contract must be designed in the light of this need and with full recognition that the obverse of every gain for the strong in capitalist societies is the scrapping of some of those people in positions of economic and political weakness.

It is all very well to urge that the left should support the struggles of the unemployed, of pensioners, of migrants, of women or of Aborigines. This would be so much "pie in the sky" if there were no attempts to link these struggles closely with the negotiations in which the stronger, progressive elements of the labor movement are parties.
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