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 he 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.