In a paper given at the ALR sponsored Marx anniversary in Melbourne, JENNY MACKLIN discusses the work of the Labor Resources Centre and its contribution to the development of a strategy for social change.

It is very difficult to work out the roles of organisations such as the Labor Resource Centre (LRC), perched somewhere between the political and industrial wings of the labour movement. While being committed to Labor governments believing they can in fact change real things for real people and open up possibilities for change, we have decided to do something other than become an outside arm of government.

What can be done in the labour movement to move things along a bit — practical things? The vanguard, economism, the inevitable decline of capitalism, have all been knocked on the head. Luckily, we haven’t been concentrating our efforts on these things. What do you do these days though, if you think things should change?

What we are talking about and working on at the LRC is addressing and trying to resolve some of the problems we face today in a way that extends the spheres of society that are subject to the democratic involvement of people. That is what we are actually trying to do — and it is not easy. It is clear to us that if the movement concentrates on the wage struggle and not on how the cake is baked, we do not have a force for change. Our work is basically about developing people’s capacities and orientations within the traditional working class to enable them to take part in the democratisation of their workplace — where they spend a lot of their time. I think that is important.

I feel it is a self-imposed criticism that we concentrate on the traditional working class. It is not because we are unaware of other parts of the labour movement (as that is what we are attached to, that restriction is given), rather, they are well organised and progressive. This really points up a major problem for progressive change. It is important that we try to come to terms ourselves with the subjective problems: that white collar workers have good working conditions, are well educated, have good promotion prospects, good salaries and are anti-union, hence don’t need to know about how their industries work as ‘I’m all right thank you very much’. Of course, none of those things are true and a close look at the objective conditions quickly shows that. Basically, I think, we can get around this problem and if we are seriously going to try to understand the complexities of modern capitalist society, we will have to.

We have obviously been wedded too long to the idea that the industrial proletariat constitutes the subject for social change. However, when it comes down to actually going out and developing processes for social change, we are faced with the problem of the world working class — skilled male labour, being the best organised. Therefore some of the work in terms of developing capacities and understandings is done for you if you don’t have to start at basics and begin organising. This approach unintentionally disenfranchises not just white collar workers but also women and the unskilled. This is a very difficult problem if you work with the organised labour movement.

Over the time I have been thinking about strategies for the '80s, challenging capitalism and building socialism, I have got confused about priorities. Not surprisingly everything seemed enormous, inter-connected and nothing I read really helped me think about what to do in the here and now in
a better way. The primary problem I faced, however, was the interconnection between capitalist accumulation and the prospect of the end of the world because of the arms race. Our work has really been premised on the prospect of continued economic growth — how else are we going to provide jobs. This was one of those blind alleys that seem to be constructed to prevent you doing anything as everything is too difficult.

It seems, however, that the question of growth really cannot be challenged until there is a commitment and understanding by working people of how income distribution can be changed. There is no doubt that this currently is not on the agenda in any real way.

What we are trying to do at the LRC is to closely work with groups of stewards in various industries. Our major aim is to develop our own view of the industry, to increase the capacities of the people who work in those industries, to try to get some view of the whole so as to be able to challenge management’s view about what is produced, how it is produced, and how much of it. The contradiction is that we will all become good managers, that their way is the only way to run privately-owned enterprise. On the other hand, the experience of greater democracy on the shop floor is being contaminated. But they are real questions. The essence of this is that it is a strategy for a war of position where we can gradually make incisive interventions into the sovereignty of capital.

I am not saying the strategy we are pursuing constitutes a generalised strategy for social change — although the key issue of expanding people’s capacities is obviously crucial. However, expanding those capacities in the area of industry is obviously an important part of that strategy.

We have to remember what it is in fact that we are trying to build. Social change is more than a leap of faith and is also more than a form of intervention in the production process. If socialism is about the ability of people to have greater control over their lives, then in the broadest sense we have obviously left a number of areas of life untouched, consumption being the most obvious.

There are also other problems — what do you do when people don’t think their work is important, or alternatively, control of the work is in the hands of technology. I don’t think

Jenny Macklin at a shop stewards school arranged by the Labor Resource Centre in Melbourne.

means changes to their livelihoods and values.

We have come so far in developing an understanding among the stewards of why it is a good idea to have a look at their industries and to play a role in changing them. A small amount of financial information and education has gone a long way. Although this has not immediately challenged how much is produced and who by, managerial prerogatives and private property relationships are in fact being confronted in a direct way. However, it is not in a way that is outside these people’s capacities or foreign to their experience.

For example if we were to now launch out into the need for planning agreement, consultative structures and all the other bureaucratic structures being designed to challenge the prerogatives of private investors, we would lose these people. It seems to me very important that we don’t move ahead quickly in this way now that the Labor government opens up the opportunities, as fundamentally the labour movement does not have a clear understanding of how to change this very complex industry structure for the better. So it’s not a question of the vanguard — of clever boys or even girls — as we will lose the people we are working with. Their capacities will not be developed and any chance of an alternative view of how industry should be organised with commitment from those who work in it will be impossible. We would then be left supporting the employers’ view or retaining the status quo in an attempt to protect jobs. It is very important that this not happen and as a consequence we both need more of an input into these areas, and input of a very constructive kind. Otherwise the short-term demands for changed structures will overtake us.

This means understanding how industries (in the broadest sense) work, the impact of government policy, learning about cost structures, profits and so on. All things we have shed away form so as not to get contaminated. But they are real questions. The essence of this is that it is a strategy for a war of position where we can gradually make incisive interventions into the sovereignty of capital.

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Workers in the sheet metal production industry in the western region of Melbourne. The photos were taken for a Labor Resource Centre project.
this is enough to negate what I have said but they are further questions to be answered.

Because of the labour movement's incredible lack of resources these efforts will continue to be very difficult to sustain — also because most of the labour movement is still tied up with the wage struggle.

I think it is the case that the extension of democracy within the enterprise is a special case of the more general objective of allowing individuals and groups to share the decisions which affect their lives. However, democratic change in this area will also change the face of our economic institutions, and then possibly changes in production and consumption will occur. We don't want to end up with an authoritarian planning structure as a way to cope with the changes and restructuring that is occurring.

What does the dismantling of capitalism and the building of socialism involve? It is all too clear that spontaneous uprising is not around the corner. Planned insurrection is also only a dream in some people's heads. We are talking about transformation of people's capacities, and through that and at a similar pace, the economic institutions of capital. Where a lot of people spend most of their time. There are other areas of life that are very important that I haven't touched on and this process is not to exclude them. Other people are organising in them.

Jenny Macklin is co-ordinator of the Labor Resources Centre in Victoria.

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