A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE. The crisis which at present afflicts the Communist Party and indeed the whole socialist movement in Australia, is essentially a crisis of strategy. The elements of this crisis have been building up over a considerable period, at least two decades. The crisis did not arise out of events in Czechoslovakia, although these events helped to clarify many of the issues involved, and forced many people to think through problems and face up to conclusions they hesitated to draw.

The source of this crisis lies much deeper, it is about the prospects and means of a socialist transformation in our country. There are two main elements making up this crisis. Briefly it is the gradual disintegration of the old strategy and the difficulties of elaborating a new strategy for a socialist transformation in Australia. The task of working out a viable socialist strategy in any country is a great and complex undertaking. In fact it is a creative act. There are few cases in history of a successful elaboration of a strategy for socialist transformation. Where it did occur it was the product of a thorough study of the conditions of the country concerned and the working out of a strategy based in these specific conditions.

It is an interesting fact that in every case the successful strategy for a socialist revolution was worked out by departing from established dogma, and in face of the opposition of the
entrenched orthodoxy. Lenin was attacked by the "official" socialist establishment in the West for violating "Marxist principles". The Chinese revolution, after suffering severe losses by following a "strategy" worked out abroad and based on different conditions, achieved success only when it broke radically with dogma and boldly worked out a strategy for the socialist revolution based on the conditions of China. This was bound to be very different from the conditions in Russia in 1917. The Cuban leadership too, refused to accept the "sound advice" of how not to make a revolution, and proceeded to make one.

It is one of history's ironies that in all three cases the successful revolutionaries proceeded to make the very mistake which would have wrecked their own revolution — to generalise from their own successful experience and to attempt to apply it to the different conditions of other countries. This was bound to lead to failure, even disaster, as indeed it did. However helpful the experiences of revolution of other countries may be, the task of elaborating a viable socialist strategy has to be faced afresh in each country. It is a difficult enough undertaking even for those closely bound up with the pulse of life and struggle in their own country. It certainly cannot be done from afar.

Australian Communists have for many years blinded themselves to this problem and to all that it implies. We have based our work on strategic assumptions (for no one acts without some assumptions, however vague) which have been false, which have gradually crumbled in face of reality and which have not been replaced by a new strategy which fits our conditions. This is the essence of the crisis in the Communist Party.

What were these strategic assumptions? We believed that the socialist system as it has developed in the USSR constitutes the model for us which, with minor modifications based on our conditions, would be developed in Australia. We assumed that two factors would bring about the socialist transformation leading to the establishment of a socialist system based on the Soviet pattern. Firstly, a deep going economic crisis comparable to that of 1929-33, which would profoundly revolutionise the workers and place fundamental social change on the agenda. Secondly, the growing attraction of the socialist alternative as it flourished and developed in contrast to the countries gripped by sharp and insoluble economic crises. We believed that the socialist countries' all-round advance would make them increasingly attractive, to act as a magnet for the whole world. It became clear that both assumptions were incorrect. Australian society was not developing in the way we had envisaged, and the Soviet Union and the other
socialist countries were not proceeding in the manner which we had expected.

Thus the old strategic assumptions became increasingly hollow. Many members and supporters of the Communist Party became aware of this, as their assumptions clashed with their experiences. It was a gradual and often painful process of disillusionment. Perhaps the most serious aspect was the slowness of the Communist Party itself to replace non-viable strategic assumptions with a new viable socialist strategy. In the meantime, and in the face of the absence of workable alternatives, many socialists lost heart, confidence and their enthusiasm.

Some have taken a different road. In view of the obvious difficulties for a socialist advance, they have attached their hopes and faith to one of the large socialist countries, trusting that it would lead them through the difficulties. As expectations were disappointed and foundations crumbled, blind faith in the leadership of this or that socialist country became terra firma. This is as much a psychological as a political phenomenon. In this sense there is much in common between those who in 1962-63 pinned their faith on the Chinese leaders and those who today blindly follow the present Soviet leaders. In both cases they are abandoning the painful task of facing up to the inadequacies of our past strategic assumptions and the difficulties of elaborating a new viable socialist strategy. In human terms such reactions may be understandable, politically it is a form of capitulation to the pressures of our society. It is taking the (seemingly) easy way out.

Certainly, changing society is a complex undertaking. It inevitably requires a lot of hard work and retracing of ground. Surely the last 20 years have taught us something about the difficulties and complexities of changing society in Western countries (and not only in the West). But it has also shown that the objective need for socialism is greater today than ever. In fact mankind's very survival, not just its progress, as in the past, may depend on it.

The significance of the Statement on "Aims, Methods and Organisation" is not that it is THE answer to the problems of a socialist strategy for Australia; it lies in the fact that it is the most serious attempt yet made in our country to elaborate a socialist strategy. It faces up to the problems in our conditions and at this time and seeks to suggest some answers and to advance some pertinent solutions. Their fuller elaboration is the collective task of all serious socialists in our country. Its success will be the turning point for the revolutionary movement.

B.T.
IF THE WORLD MANAGES TO SURVIVE beyond 1984 a year to remember will surely be that of 1968 and the events that unfolded in Paris and Prague. The dramas played out in those two cities have already been recorded and analysed in millions of words and already some of the responses to these events, in actions and reactions, give hope that the world will not only survive but be renewed.

A new contribution to this debate comes from a book entitled Socialism's Great Turning Point, by Roger Garaudy. Reactions to it within the French Communist Party and in wider sections of the left may well become part of the drama. Garaudy has been twenty-five years a member of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party and currently (at least at time of writing) is a member of its Politburo. A scholar of international repute he is best known in this country for his philosophical work and activist contribution to the development of Marxist-Christian dialogue.

When such a man writes that his book is an attempt to break the silence of years because his ideas never penetrate beyond the closed doors of leadership meetings he is summing up a dilemma of all those who see a value in and a need for revolutionary organisation but recognise the conservative brake on social and revolutionary developments that such an organisation can be if its decisions are made by a leadership consensus where centralism operates for everyone but democracy is strictly limited.

This debate is not new, it may well be as old as human organisation, it is certainly the unresolved debate of revolutionaries and it involves above all the freedom of information so that decisions may be genuinely arrived at and discipline is more from self than authoritarian imposition. The debate cannot be avoided because of Paris and Prague. Paris pointed up an almost forgotten lesson, that of the spontaneous action of masses of people which cannot be contained within one organisation and which, at times, takes even far-sighted organisation by surprise. But it also pointed to the necessity for organisation. Prague, on the other hand, seemed to spell out clearly, at least for those in Europe, that the only form of organisation which will be permitted, if one wants to avoid military intervention, is incapable of the full realisation of socialism.

Garaudy says that he does not dispute “the program, the policy or the aims of the party” but that his concern is for the right
of revolutionaries to find their own way to socialism free from foreign intervention or the necessity to accept the rule of one party. The meaning behind the events in 1968 “call into question our party’s whole policy and its conception of French socialism”. He claims that an explicit statement on these matters would not compromise the Communist Party but would remove a main obstacle to unity with other left forces.

The problem is that when a communist party or any leadership group has a monopoly over decision making and when it is in a position to direct the whole economy and to take every decision on activity within the economy right through to artistic creation then authoritarianism, dogmatic distortions and the degeneration of socialism is inevitable. In such a situation a ruling communist party becomes both anti-democratic and anti-scientific and thus becomes the brake on the development of society. The misuse of power, the illegal trials, the jailings and murders commonly called Stalinism are not “mistakes” to be admitted and forgotten. Rather “inquisition is the daughter of dogmatism” and the invasion of Czechoslovakia is the product of the former “mistakes” yet goes beyond it “by applying to an entire people and their communist party the methods used at the Moscow Trials”.

Garaudy believes that the divisions, or more correctly the crisis of communism (the labelling of people and organisations as “revisionist” and “counter-revolutionary”, the silence and passivity of many workers in countries where communist parties exercise power and the by-passing of communist parties by young revolutionary forces in some western countries), all stem from the political concepts which oppose the creation of a model of socialism different from the model which history imposed on the USSR.

In France there are numerous anti-capitalist forces, even a majority of the population, but they tend towards “impotence” and yet the majority force within the opposition is the communists. Garaudy calls the communist party “powerless” and yet says that “nothing constructive can be accomplished without it”. He believes that “constructive work can only by accomplished if the communist party is prepared for a thorough transformation”.

The initial reaction to Garaudy’s book was a condemnation by the politburo which called it, perhaps curiously, “impermissible aggression” against the USSR. Now L’Humanite has published a protest by Garaudy in which he speaks of misrepresentation of his views and even the banning of his books from sale in communist shops. An editorial note claims that to have published Garaudy’s views earlier would have meant that the discussion for the French party congress, due in February, would proceed on the basis of the
platform put forward by Garaudy and not on the collective view. The note is interesting since it contradicts part of the original condemnation. This stated that Garaudy had refused to take part in the working out of the draft theses for the congress but the note makes clear that Garaudy did submit proposals and these were received.

Whether or not the French Communist Party will tolerate Garaudy's views may soon be resolved but his contribution to the debate and the debate itself will go on. Put simply, an authoritarian revolutionary organisation may in some circumstances bring forth revolution but that revolution will be stamped with authoritarianism. In a country like France, or for that matter Australia, it will almost certainly not bring forth any revolution at all.

Until this is faced and resolved the debate will continue.

M.R.

SOCIALIST SCHOLARS’ CONFERENCE: In November last three Sydney socialists (Dr, G. Hawker of the History School, University of New South Wales; Phil Sandford, former American SDS activist, now a trade union research officer; Russ Darnley, a student activist) decided to act on the idea of holding a Socialist Scholars’ Conference. At present this is planned to run over 4 days in Sydney, May 1970. At the time of writing not many details are known about the Conference, however initial reports do indicate widespread interest in the proposal, mainly from academics.

Precedent for such a conference is found in the USA with the Socialist Scholars’ Conference, founded in 1964 by a group of historians. Since 1965 this has been held annually, each time attracting hundreds of interested people and dealing with a diversity of topics, from Labor History to the problems involved in the creation of a radical culture. The original concept was addressed to “scholars who share a Socialist perspective”; on the matter of who should participate the planners stated that “whoever thinks he might be at home or interested will be welcome”. Indications are that the Sydney group also intends to hold these general criteria. The only restriction so far made is that all papers presented at the conference “should be well thought-out and
documented, and that they should be at least partly concerned with contributing to Socialist theory”.

I think it can be said now that the conference will mainly be attended by university students and academics. But at the same time it should be pointed out that it is open to all socialists, and by definition “scholars” are not unique to academic institutions. However accepting that the attendance will mainly consist of academics, etc., does not mean that the conference is in anyway “elitist”, or irrelevant to the working class movement. On the contrary it could well be a most important stage for the development of socialism in this country.

I say this in the belief that the universities occupy an important position in our society. Each year in Australia they produce some 10,000 graduates, people who in the main, as David Triesman has put it, “socially engineer the decaying capitalist structure to keep the whole nauseating apparatus from collapsing”. They become the spreaders and the perpetuators of a way of looking at the world which believes that an uncritical attitude towards society is a virtue, and that at all costs the capitalist structure must be supported.

Capitalist society cannot get on without its universities. It needs graduates for industry, and the various organs of government. It needs them for teaching the young that view of the world which leads them to the position of subservience mentioned above. As Althusser says “it is by the very nature of the knowledge it imparts to students that the bourgeoisie exerts its greatest control over them”. Therefore the universities must be seen as a major institution in society, the socialist transformation of which is an essential step in the transition to socialism.

To some extent this was realised in the sixties; the universities became the scene of student clashes with civil and university authorities. They became centres of resistance against the Vietnam war and conscription. The result of this however was to cultivate in the minds of the young activists hostile attitudes towards intellectual and theoretical work. The values of street demonstrations and the clash with the authorities were extolled. And whilst students by taking to the streets became a pressure point in society they only confronted the obvious evils of capitalism, e.g. the Vietnam war, and did so with their hearts and bodies.

This emphasis on action was infectious and permeated the universities. The cost was a real analysis of our society and the neglect of creating a body of theory and scholarship by which we can “establish institutions that can build and sustain a mass
socialist consciousness". In short, the way in which the university could be transformed into an organ for the transition to socialism was neglected.

Whilst the students neglected this task so too did those amongst their teachers who regarded themselves as socialists. Certainly there were notable exceptions; but on the whole the socialist academics were only socialists in a political sense — taking part in demonstrations, writing for left journals, speaking at meetings, engaging in Communist and Labor Party activities. On the academic scene however they were non-socialists, teaching unwillingly, if not unknowingly, the bourgeois view of the world because they had not developed a revolutionary cultural challenge to it — or could not see the links between their particular discipline and the bourgeois hegemony. Again there was the problem of what happens to those who seek openly to work as socialists in an institution where promotions can have a lot to do with whether you rock the boat or not.

Now a conference of socialist scholars such as is envisaged can be a means of changing much of this. By calling for contributions to socialist theory it may encourage socialist academics to see their disciplines in this context and thus set in process the situation Perry Anderson advocates where: “A political science capable of guiding the working class movement to final victory will only be born within a general intellectual matrix which challenges bourgeois ideology in every sector of thought and represents a decisive, hegemonic alternative to the status quo”.

Related to this is the effect of such a challenge upon the undergraduates where, if it is made, they will have a real chance of ending their position of subservience both at university and later as members of the work force: instead of supporting a collapsing capitalist structure they may actually engineer its collapse.

R.J.C.