Towards New Union Militancy

In what ways do you regard recent industrial activity by your union as a new development?

The strike was longer, involvement greater and direct confrontation sharper than in most recent disputes. The assaults on partially completed buildings where employers attempted to use building tradesmen or other scab labor to smash the strike was a particularly new ingredient. We stated that if, in this scattered and fragmented industry, an employer used scab labor he must bear the full consequences. Arising from this private property was smashed where arrogant employers ignored the democratic decisions of mass meetings. It was this destruction of private property which struck fear to the very hearts of the employing class. If a relatively small union could successfully mount such an attack, what could be achieved by the more powerful unions with more resources if they acted in a similar way!

Jack Mundey is NSW secretary of the Builders Laborers Federation, and a member of the National Committee of the Communist Party. He gave this interview to ALR in July.
You speak of "destruction" rather than "occupation" which many on the left consider to be the main thing.

That is specific to the industry — there seems little point in the occupation of empty shells and still less of continuing building activity during a strike. In production and services (the nurses for example) the situation will differ, while in administration (the university for example) it will differ again.

What was the degree of involvement in the strike?

For our industry it was quite high. It was possible to hold the attendances at meetings at a high level — 1200 in the fifth week in Sydney, and the best ever attendances in Newcastle and Wollongong; 250 or more were engaged in consistent activity, which moreover was of a high quality in the vigilante groups, the number of which increased as the strike went on. These numbers should be seen in the light of the turnover in our union — 50% of the membership changes every year, yet we were able to hold them in the strike.

Another feature of involvement was the street demonstrations in which our members held the streets against the attempts of the police to move them onto the footpaths. This was another blow for the view that the streets are for the use of people and not just for commercial activity and military parades and that kind of "law and order".

What do you think was the inspiration for this heightened militancy? Did it come from overseas, or locally, or both?

I believe a combination of international developments and purely national and local issues influenced leaders and rank and file. Many workers have been impressed by the aggressive forms of strike and militant activities in overseas countries. The events in France and Italy, and in Japan, and in some of the initiatives of the Black Power movement in the United States have impressed. The activities of the students in many countries including Australia have also made an impact and been appreciated by advanced workers.

The post-O'Shea period and the release, to a certain degree, from the stultifying restrictions of the penal powers has been particularly
important. The harshness of the treatment of the lower paid worker in this first phase of the scientific and technological revolution, where he has fared much worse than any others, is a further reason for heightened militancy and a feeling that change can be achieved if we act.

You rate the penal powers struggle of May ’69 very highly?

I regard it as decisive in cracking the sense of frustration which was becoming universal among workers. The way it worked was that when a group of workers was involved in a struggle (and I could give many examples), after a few days or a week an array of union officials ranging from extreme right to extreme left would turn up and urge them, in different ways, to do the same thing — return to work to avoid the penal powers being slapped on the whole union or body of unions involved. The “left” officials usually justified this as being “in the interests of the class as a whole” as against those of the few score or few hundred workers actually involved. This may have been true in some periods and instances, but it became a habit and an excuse. There was too much readiness to settle rather than set out to win disputes.

The other side of all this was that union activity became increasingly embroiled in arbitration, and no real perspective was held or put forward for knocking over the whole arbitration and penal powers treadmill. Another aspect was that struggles have been fragmented. For example, there has been no combined strike of workers in the building industry since 1957.

You spoke of the scientific and technological revolution. How does this affect building workers?

Naturally much less than in some industries. It is hard to envisage building being basically computerised or automated in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless technical change is extensive — use of glass, aluminium, preformed concrete, prefabricated sections, new methods of placing concrete on site (cranes, pumps, etc.) are being increasingly used on homes as well as in commercial and industrial building. Little wood is now used in the latter, and less is also being used in homes, so the number of versatile tradesmen employed in building, especially carpenters, is decreasing rapidly, most of those remaining being form workers (for concrete).
Does this have any bearing on the issue of industrial unionism?

Certainly; it emphasises the need for it—for a real industrial unionism free from craft hangovers, and with the laborers being accepted as a real force in the industry, not just as assistants. There are now 11 unions in the building industry, with many classifications in each. (The BLF has five classifications, and we are out to reduce the number.) The aim is especially to ensure that the lower paid workers improve their position relatively. Our agreement for settlement in the recent dispute is that the lowest paid will get no less than 90% of the increase of the highest paid. I would say that in the future industrial union the difference in rates between the lowest and the highest should be no more than 20%.

What books, writings, discussions, etc., have particularly stimulated your thinking on all these matters?

That is very hard indeed to answer. As a struggle develops it is not a particular book or books that promotes thinking. In today's shrinking world there are many cross-currents at work in the industrial and political movement, so it is a combination of writings from various viewpoints that influences thinking along with the experiences of the struggle itself. Speaking personally, the struggles in France in 1968 and the varied reports on them, and the CPA pre-Congress and Congress discussions and decisions certainly stimulated me and encouraged the style of offensive strike developed in our struggle.

What problems have you encountered in striving to develop such militant activity (a) among militant-inclined workers themselves, (b) from other forces in the industrial movement, (c) from "the public" generally?

I should point out the general difficulty created by the very scattered nature of the building industry. In regard to (a) I have already referred to the problems created among militant workers by the arbitration-mindedness that developed. Most militant workers have been critical for years of the general passivity displayed in strikes, and the failure of communists and others on the left to really force the issues. As I have said the frustration arose particularly because of the bowing down to penal powers, or even the threat of penal powers. These workers found it difficult to differ-
entiate who was who, who was left, right, or centre when all urged return to work when it came to the prospect of a longer strike.

(b) The left in the industrial movement in the main supported our tactics, though there were forebodings that "occupation" and "destruction of private property" were "going a bit too far". Some conservative members of the CPA considered the action was "left adventurist". The rightwing made no secret of their distaste for the strike, and their attitude to alleged violence and the threatened use of the Crimes Act was almost identical with Askin's, the employers', the newspaper editors' and the police.

(c) Because of the publicity, there was a sharp and mixed reaction. Controversy raged and our experience was that opinions was pretty evenly divided. My own impression is that younger people tended to support our positive approach, while older people were more status quo-ish and against confrontation. There was a general sympathy however for the lower paid worker, the battler, and his difficulty in raising a family.

Is there anything in the criticisms that have been raised — of adventurism; of waging a too-prolonged strike; of deliberate damage to property; of coercing others who didn't agree with the strike; of introducing foreign concepts like "workers' control"?

The accusation of adventurism was used by the Sydney Morning Herald in its editorial when it urged the membership to reject the leadership: "The State Secretary of the union, Mr. Mundey, a leading member of the Communist Party, seems to be out to make a name for himself and his party in an extreme and adventurist manner. His union followers should consider where he is leading them before it is too late." (May 29.) There are also older trade union leaders, including on the left, who expressed the same sentiment.

As I have said, I think tactics in strikes, particularly since 1949, have been so tailored as to give a high priority to the penal powers threat, and thus the need to "get them back to work" to avoid fines. The general idea among officials was to try to win strikes quickly, and failing that, to beat a retreat and make the best of it. With the removal of some of the teeth from the penal powers in May '69, longer strikes including general strikes are likely to become the order of the day. Real economic and political gains are achieved when industry is brought to a halt. Lightning strikes and guerrilla tactics at job level have their place, but when the crunch comes it is the ability of the union to "stop everything"
that can force a strike victory at a higher level. Our crunch came in the second week, when tradesmen were beginning to be stood down and there was a move for conferences and a “responsible” approach of settlement through negotiations. At this stage there was little preparedness by the Master Builders to concede anything substantial. But when the laborers disappointed their expectations for return based on previous experience and the above pressures within the union movement, they got a big shock. They got an even bigger one from the vigilante groups, and so they had to change their tune. I believe they would have succumbed earlier (many did, concluding individual agreements with us based on paying what we wanted) had it not been for pressure from governments and other groups of employers more powerful than the Master Builders.

Deliberate damage to property was the most controversial aspect of the strike. It was also the one that worried the employers most of all. We did not set out on a wanton destruction rampage, but attacked only buildings where employers were attempting to use scab labor to break the strike. This had a devastating effect on employers, government and police alike. In this dispute it took the class enemy by surprise. Future action of this type will be most successful if hundreds and thousands of strikers are involved, so making it difficult for full police and government defence of the employers’ property. The scattered nature of the building industry was an advantage here, as the vigilante groups were very mobile and could strike quickly.

The accusation of coercing others who didn’t agree with the strike is largely untrue. It surprised many experienced union leaders that in a casual industry such as ours we could maintain the involvement of so many in a five week strike. In fact the tendency was for attendances at mass meetings to increase. The vigilante groups had their main development in the fourth and fifth weeks of the dispute. The decisions of numerous mass meetings in Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and Goulburn were either unanimous or overwhelmingly in favor of continued action. These demonstrations of determination obliged us to stop the small number of tradesmen and non-unionists from performing our work. There was little criticism from other unions of our right to stop scabbing, though some more faint-hearted union officials were critical of our forceful methods of backing up democratic decisions of our striking members.

Of workers’ control, again there was some criticism from the more rigid on the left, particularly some members of the CPA, to the effect that the whole exercise was “left adventurist” as well
as there being "nothing new" in the conduct of the strike. It was even suggested that it was an "Aarons' plot" to demonstrate part implementation of the recent Congress decisions and "embarrass" the "opposition" in the CPA! The emphasis on offensive strikes as against the usual "go home and stay home" strike allows an element of workers' control to exist. For example occupation and continued production could give workers a practical demonstration of their potential capacity to run industry.

What was gained by the strike, economically and otherwise?

The margins element of the wage was increased and a new standard established. The widening gap between tradesmen and laborers was greatly reduced. This was a victory over the employers' policy, applied especially in the metal trades margins struggle of 1967-68, where the tradesmen got $7.40—quite a substantial increase—while the rest of the workers, the great majority, got very little. Our strike has helped the whole class to smash these plans to buy off a minority section while making more than compensating profits from the low wages of the majority.

It is sometimes said that there are really no economic gains for the workers in such strikes. For example in this case it might be said that even with 100% victory it will take the workers a year to get back the wages they lost in the five weeks.

This argument is fallacious. Everything in the capitalist system goes against the workers if left to itself. If we don't struggle inflation will reduce our wages each year anyway, and we would never get it back, while the employers would grow richer and more powerful. The losses of the employers were far greater than ours—$60 million is their conservative estimate—and they have therefore learned that they must look on the laborers, with their newly developed strike experience, as a force to be reckoned with. This will help us to win further gains in future. I have already referred to the general economic gains for the class as a whole which is likely to flow from our struggle.

Other gains include increased financial unionism, and the possibility of the building unions now exercising a greater say in the industry. More broadly still, the workers—especially those most involved—developed their self-action and the consciousness that militancy needs to be displayed in the political and moral fields as well as industrially and economically. This will especially assist our objective of getting a big involvement in the September Vietnam Moratorium.
Do you see any weaknesses in the strike?

At the conclusion of the strike we called the wives together. We should have done this in the beginning. Other organisational problems were the neglect of finance raising in the concentration on vigilante activity. Another weakness is that there hasn't been a real analysis by all building unions in NSW of future industrial relations within the building industry. We propose to request other building unions to discuss our strike and future industrial relations as they see them as we enter the 70's.

What do you see as needed for further development of militant activity and its closer connection with aspirations for revolutionary change in society?

A complete reorientation of the left in the movement towards direct confrontation on a wider scale and with wider horizons, and away from purely wages and conditions struggles. The failure in peace activity, in all anti-war struggles, is the immediate main problem the unions must tackle. Direct intervention in the control of industries, in social problems, price controls is a must if unions are to win younger people and reverse the drift away from unionism.