ANY ATTEMPT TO DEVELOP deep going socialist change in Australia will be impossible without a working class and trade union movement well educated in revolutionary, marxist concepts of society. In fact, I believe, the crisis besetting the union movement from top to bottom is basically ideological. Given that as the basis of the problem, the marxists and conscious left in the unions have to devise a long range strategy for revolutionising the movement. This means setting about the job of educating union members to give them the potential of being able to see the contradictions in society. However, before we race off to take Marx, Lenin and Gramsci to the workshop, we need to have an understanding of just what we are trying to achieve.

It would be a truism to say that an educated and aware union membership would be capable of many things: the development of
workers' control programs, militant action on political questions, a conscious widespread democracy in opposition to bureaucratic trends, and above all, the kind of political understanding which could lead to the defeat of capitalism itself. Left wing worker education, which stemmed from the Communist Party and organisations like the Victorian Labor College has so far proved largely ineffective. The Communist Party has had an important position in the unions but has failed in or virtually ignored the task of extending its influence ideologically. It has essentially been issue- or action-oriented. On the other hand the Labor College has perhaps been the opposite. It has been largely divorced from action and rank and file workers, with its emphasis and influence mainly on a few union officials.

The very important lesson for us from these experiences is that ideological work should go deep amongst the rank and file and be closely linked up with the action which is taking place. In particular, at least till recently, there was not so much the effort to get unionists to think deeply about problems as to accept ready made slogans and solutions which entailed little analysis and little participation in their working out. What is required is a whole new generation of leaders unhobbled by economism, with a fundamental understanding of society, combined with a dynamism and ability to organise and bring revolutionary theory to the working people. This would be in sharp contrast to the great majority of present union leaders, and education work directed towards rank and file leaders should have this perspective.

Perry Anderson in his essay in *The Incompatibles* explains very clearly the inherent shortcomings of unionism, as did Lenin and Marx before him. He is here examining the present British Trade Union set up and how it has not yet extended very far beyond the traditional economism. He says that unions will not supplant political parties as instruments of social change, although in their situation vis a vis a Labor Government the traditional economic demands will have more of an immediate political dimension. He goes on to pose the question, "Will the unions sponsor a new political party as it once sponsored the Labor Party?"

The important point for us is to thoroughly understand the inherent shortcomings of unionism in order to work to overcome them. We have a somewhat different set of conditions from Britain and therefore can probably come to conclusions slightly different from Anderson's. For example, unionism is far more widespread and influential in Australia and, among other things, at long last we have a leadership developing which shows signs of being able to transcend the old barriers of economism. In fact, probably our biggest difference with Perry Anderson would be that unions will
become more political because of the political and social questions they take up as a result of economic issues. It is likely that given effective influence and leadership unions will more closely identify with radical political parties or will demand more radical programs from existing political parties. But unions, even radicalised unions, cannot substitute for a political party since their interests are sectional and they involve in their ranks people of vastly different levels of understanding, commitment and activity. Nevertheless if unions move to embrace wider and more fundamental political issues in society they will influence the future development of the political organisations of the left and play a greater role in activity for radical social change.

The job for us then is through the agency of unions, to see that any such political movement is socialist in content and not a further integration in the system. Greater attention is now being paid to the task of educating members as part of the activity of trade unions. However, there are two rather clearly defined philosophies emerging in relation to education work. One is designed to mould a more efficient movement with a better public image, etc., which can wrest more of the spoils within the so-called pluralist society. The other is the revolutionary concept designed to explain society in all its contradictions and immorality, and point to the alternatives.

The renewed interest in the Victorian Labor College and the development of the Trade Union Education and Research Centre in Sydney are important in this respect. Unfortunately, the T.U.E. & R.C. and its magazine Modern Unionist tends towards the first concept and at this stage contains little that is revolutionary, and could even have the opposite effect. If we produce, as a result of education, reformist oriented leaders, all we will have are unions which will more effectively fit into the corporate capitalist set up. To be effective the revolutionary concept of education must be at the centre of our thinking all the time.

Such widespread education at a factory or workplace level is a rather formidable task. Nevertheless, an analysis of union structures and activities brings it more into perspective. For instance, the major unions and associations, even considering only their biggest work places, have direct contact with many thousands of workers, most of whom at the present time are left to their own devices on things other than wages and conditions. It is not too difficult to organise speakers, classes and cultural activities regularly of a lunch time, and if well done would definitely evoke a response. Such activities should be coupled with central lectures and schools ranging from a day up to three or six months, where we get people off the job.

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What we should aim to develop is an approach by shop stewards and activists such that the potential for real self-action on the widest range of questions becomes possible. This means curricula and programs consciously aimed at exposing the monopoly, class nature of our society so that such views win through on the strength of argument.

Such an education program must aim its work at the grass roots and should take into account the following four points, particularly the first:

1. Subjects aimed to develop deeper insights into society — philosophy, economics, history, etc.
2. Topical political and social subjects, which in fact are a concrete expression of No. 1, for example, censorship, Vietnam, conscription, Aborigines etc.
3. Cultural programs and topics to help widen the interests and extend horizons.
4. Subjects such as public speaking, administration, etc., to lay a better organisational basis for a revolutionary consciousness.

If this kind of activity is to be effective, money will need to be spent. Some unions espousing progressive ideals are sitting on many thousands of dollars and are frightened to use them. Even a small levy on members can raise a lot of money as in the AEU in Victoria for example, where a general purpose 50 cent levy has meant that the education activity will have a substantial sum at its disposal. In particular, as this work develops it will be necessary to provide full time organisers or education officers. Their role must be that of carrying the ideological struggle right into the factories, and to be effective they would need to be free from the every day grind and machinery role of a normal organiser. They would sit down with shop committees to help plan programs, supply speakers, find out the needs and to actually lecture themselves.

There is an important role in this work for academics. I am sure that many who are experts on particular subjects would be pleased to spend a little time in factories or workplaces during lunch times. The use of tape recorded lectures for unionists to listen to over lunch would also be of great value. Recent experiences in the Victorian AEU branch indicate the potential. When the incident at the Williamstown Court over conscription objector Laurie Carmichael Jnr. broke and involved most of the union leadership, many factories were in opposition to such deep involvement in political action. As a result, the officials had to go out into the shops and argue for the policy and action which took place. This was the first really conscious and concentrated effort to argue the Vietnam and con-
scription question in a mass way in the factories, apart from some printed propaganda, sporadic meetings and conferences of mainly convinced people.

The result to date has been excellent, and some factories which initially expressed opposition changed their position to one of support when confronted with reasoned and convincing argument. The point here is that the results have been good despite the fact that insufficient ground work was done over a considerable period. However, if there had been a long period of consistent attention in the factories including lectures, classes and other activities, no doubt many more would have been prepared to stop work and protest.

On the cultural side, the experience with La Mama Theatre during the first week of December was outstanding. They performed during lunch times at the gates of several large factories. In all cases the attendance was excellent, and although there was some doubt and cynicism initially, the performers got the audience very interested, and when they finished discussed the whole thing with them. Their politics were hard hitting and succeeded in getting a message across which would otherwise take far longer. In fact, it can probably be summed up by the comment of a worker at the Newport Railways Workshop, “Christ!! That’s just what life is like.” It has been a good experiment and will be repeated in a much bigger way in the coming year. This street theatre is an excellent example of the potential for ideological and cultural activity.

A further example was the day of lectures held last August when 37 shop stewards booked off the job by their fellow workers, attended. They listened to lectures on Labor history, union organisation and so on. All expressed keen desire for further such activities. The value was shown particularly in the fact that the last hour or so was spent in discussing the ways and means for the AEU to be a stronger force for socialism. The program for the coming year will contain several of these days, each devoted to one specific topic. The important point is that to reach the necessary level on these political questions it is insufficient to rely solely on the experiences of working class actions. Conscious efforts have to be made to take this to higher levels and education plays a part in this.

This brings us to the all important point of whether we view the industrial working class as potentially revolutionary or rely only on the intellectual culture of the more highly skilled technicians, scientists, students, etc., for change. Whilst it is true to say that large sections of the working class are politically apathetic and seem
to have found their place in and made their peace with the system, this is none the less in the main an unconscious position. This is contrasted to large sections of the middle class who **consciously** argue that their place is in the private enterprise system.

Experience is tending to show that given revolutionary leadership in struggle and confronted with well thought out and reasoned arguments, most workers will come down on the progressive side of many political and social questions. More and more action is now being taken around wider issues which often call into question our very system and cannot be bought off with a mere couple of dollars a week increase. This year we have seen the penal clauses defied, concern and action on town planning, pollution. Even the Federal election result has a significant feature in that it is probably the first big swing to the ALP which wasn’t the result of a major economic crisis or problem, or a national crisis such as during the second world war. It tended to show that the Australian people are capable of taking a conscious, reasoned view of society’s problems. This of course is very far from a revolutionary position, but in this instance it is the process and not the end result which is important. The fact that a deeper thinking electorate seemed to emerge means that there is a basis for the kind of education talked about here.

The potential for workers’ control programs and action will certainly be enhanced by an effective education program. In comparison with students who have raised the concept of student power, largely due to the very kind of education they have received, few workers have had the advantage of education which can assist the questioning of society. It is surely obvious that a thorough-going revolutionary approach based on enlightened leadership at job level will be necessary for any development in the field of workers’ control. Our overall aim could well be summed up in the slogan, “From Self Action to Self Management” through action and education.

Many cynics say that we won’t get change until the worker has a “pinched gut”. In fact, the working people, because their economic position in an absolute sense is improving, are now being confronted by much deeper problems which are far more revolutionary in content because they are at odds with the system while most economic demands can be bought off. However, the extent to which that revolutionary potential develops is contingent on widespread union education linked up with action and revolutionary perspectives, and it can probably be said that those who do not pay a great deal of attention to making such a program an integral part of future tasks will bear a heavy responsibility of rendering very dim the prospect of the development of a revolutionary working class.