REVOLUTIONARIES, who aim to change society, are faced with a disturbing and puzzling contradiction in evaluating the industrial movement in Australia in 1970. On the one hand there is a clearly discernible rise in militancy and of struggle among significant and growing sections of blue and white collar workers. The eruption in the penal powers struggle and the breadth it developed are symptomatic of the processes at work. The changes in the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the replacement of Albert Monk by Bob Hawke, are an outward official reflection of the changes in the working-class movement over the last decade, the emergence of a younger, more militant, more modern leadership.

On the other hand, and alongside this growing militancy, socialist consciousness has dimmed. Socialism, the establishment of a socialist society, is not the issue among the workers that it was two or three decades ago. By and large the Australian workers accept our capitalist social system and its foundations. They are certainly not rebelling against it. They are prepared to support some reforms, but reforms to improve the system, not to destroy it. This is the reality. The workers are ready for struggle for extra money, and against the penal powers, but not for the replacement of our system by a socialist system.

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For revolutionaries whose whole work is aimed at changing society, at arousing socialist consciousness among the people, this is a painful conclusion to come to. It poses the question: where are we going in the industrial movement, what are our perspectives? Are there realistic possibilities for advancing the revolutionary movement among the workers at present and the immediate future? Is it possible to be an effective revolutionary in the industrial movement in present conditions? These questions have to be faced seriously and fearlessly.

They can only be answered on the basis of a realistic assessment of the position of the working class in our society, the changes which the Australian working class has undergone and is undergoing at present and likely future trends. Three features stand out in their effect on the Australian working class:

Firstly there has been a significant rise in the standard of living for the majority of workers, a growth of consumption of consumer goods, availability of jobs and the possibility of getting a better job — for many a "place" in this society. The greater satisfaction of material needs (both real and artificially induced "needs") is coupled with the second notable feature of our society — mass manipulation of consciousness. This has led to the spread and acceptance of the values of our society, to apathy, to lack of concern and involvement, to a dimming of socialist consciousness. These two features, greater satisfaction of material needs and manipulation of consciousness in the interests of the ruling class, go together.

The scientific and technological revolution has made this possible. It has created the material possibilities of giving more goods to the workers whilst at the same time enormously increasing the profits of the capitalist class. It has also created the technological means of manipulating the mind far more effectively than in the past. The technology of modern communication allows the ideas and values of the ruling class to dominate the whole of society as never before. The mass media, TV, educational institutions, all help to spread these ideas and values. The ethos of the consumer society pervades all spheres of life.

Because capitalism can and does supply more goods, because in countries like ours it eases the most immediate direct pressure for physical survival for most people, the manipulation has been fairly effective. It is a modern version of the bread and circuses that the Roman slave owners provided. This situation places economic struggles into a different setting. Militancy on economic questions is essential for a better place in our capitalist society; it is for a
greater share of the benefits that this society offers — it does not necessarily challenge or threaten capitalism at all. This is considerably different from the pre-war situation where economic struggles were only a small step removed from challenging the capitalist system as such, and in some circumstances, such as the 1929-33 depression, actually did threaten the system. Today, economic demands can generally be absorbed and integrated. In fact today, unlike the past, economic militancy often goes hand in hand with support for the existing system, as the one which makes such a struggle for a greater share possible. Militancy has become quite respectable. All sorts of professional people engage in militant actions on economic demands now.

What are the perspectives in Australia? With the economic expansion, with the mineral discoveries the ability of the ruling class to absorb economic demands is likely to grow. The position in the United States should serve as a warning. There militancy often goes hand in hand with extremely reactionary political attitudes. This makes it necessary for revolutionaries to take a different attitude to economic militancy in present conditions than they did in the past.

Fortunately the scientific and technological revolution has not only produced more goods and more effective manipulation, things which the capitalist class likes and uses to its own advantage. It is also creating other things which they don't like and which set into motion anti-capitalist forces. This is the third big change: Modern technology needs skilled, highly trained people, it needs armies of skilled craftsmen, of technologists and of scientifically trained people. This has ushered in the education explosion — more schools, more and larger universities and other educational institutions, many more skilled workers with higher levels of education. The ruling class needs them to develop and make use of modern technology, to increase its profits.

So we get the strange situation where on the one hand the ruling class has the most developed means of dulling people's minds, of filling them with a false consciousness, yet at the same time educates vast numbers of people, opening their minds, widening their horizon and developing their critical faculties. It is proving very difficult to educate people without increasing their capacity for independent judgment, though of course that is what the ruling class strives to do (see "Statement for the Seventies" in this issue). Moreover these people are no longer almost exclusively the sons and daughters of the rich, as in the past. The children of working people are better educated and better trained today.
In addition, the development of modern “mass” society, its big and impersonal bureaucratic structures, its remote decision making and lack of mass participation processes, all create a reaction, particularly among people who have been freed from the worries of direct physical survival and who are better educated — a demand for a voice, a say. It creates a revulsion against the irrationality of the system. This is a mass phenomenon today. It will grow, it will spread, especially among the young, including the young workers. It arises from the nature of capitalist society, from the direction of the scientific and technological revolution. It creates a demand or a striving for more democracy, for greater freedom, for human dignity, however incoherently this is expressed at times. And it touches the most vital spots of the capitalist system, because capitalism cannot satisfy this demand without giving up control and domination, its class rule. This is unlike many economic demands which it can satisfy if it has to.

Because the scientific and technological revolution is carried out under the direction of and in the interests of the economically powerful classes, a growing gap arises between the advanced countries and the so-called under-developed countries. The benefits in the shape of more consumer goods in the advanced Western countries are in growing contrast with the poverty and stagnation of the third world. This increases the social problems; for the people in the Western countries it also creates moral dilemmas, since it shows up the irrationality and brutality of the capitalist system. The war in Vietnam is the most glaring expression of this irrationality and brutality. All this highlights the gap between what the scientific and technological revolution does and what it could do, if directed socially, by society and not in the interests of the ruling class. The scientific and technological revolution and the changes that it is bringing into our world create more and more questioning, frustration, opposition and resistance.

It has fed the resistance in the third world and in the last few years it has brought growing questioning of capitalism and opposition to it in the Western countries. It manifested itself in the sixties, at first in the student movement in the USA, in West Germany, in France and Italy. But in 1968 it involved the working class in France in their millions, and in one fell swoop shattered the theories that claimed the “end” of the working class as a potentially revolutionary force and the “end of ideology”.

What does this analysis mean for the work of revolutionaries in the industrial movement? Of the three trends which are in evidence in the Australian working class, the last, the growing militancy, questioning and resistance is the most significant. It
has a revolutionary potential. It will grow and spread. But it depends on the work, the tactics of revolutionary activists, in which direction it will develop — whether it will simply lead to greater militancy on economic questions or whether it will be given a revolutionary direction and serve to activise the revolutionary potential of the Australian working class.

Certainly the work of revolutionaries in the industrial movement at present is not consciously and purposefully directed towards that aim. Among the obstacles preventing such a re-orientation of revolutionaries is the carrying over of attitudes and tactics from a different, past period. Policies and tactics which are correct at one period can be quite incorrect and harmful in a different period. What is correct for the ebb is not correct for the flow of the revolutionary movement.

We have had an ebb in the revolutionary movement in our country for a long time, perhaps 15 to 20 years. Revolutionaries have got into adaptive habits and defensive attitudes. This tends to happen when certain tactics are applied for a long period; they become fixed. It is affecting the work of revolutionaries in many areas. Many carry on as if we were still in the difficult fifties and in the early sixties. But so much has changed and is changing, calling for reassessment, for different attitudes, for new perspectives. What is new today is the upsurge of the movement. It is quite true that this by no means embraces all or the majority of the workers, as one can point to a great deal of apathy and inactivity which it would be foolish and dangerous to ignore. But what trends should a revolutionary party looking to the future base itself on? It should value and nurture this rising, growing trend.

Tactics which are sectarian in one situation and which isolate the vanguard can have the opposite effect in a different situation when the movement is rising. The adjustment is not automatic. When people get steeped in a certain way it is easy to go on, but difficult to change. Tactics harden into principles. An example is the attitude to “unity” by some militants. Unity is not an aim, it is a means to an aim. We oppose unity for unity’s sake. But unity has tended to become an end in itself for many militant activists.

The upsurge of militancy is at present reflected to a large extent on economic questions, partly because there is no adequate provision for other expressions which are present and which need to be given scope. Revolutionaries should work in such a way as to give this militancy a direction that will lead the workers to a
revolutionary position. That is why it is necessary to extend the scope of industrial activities and raise such questions and demands as will bring the workers up against the system, that can't be absorbed or fully absorbed, that involve them, develop their initiative and awaken their revolutionary potential. This is possible today, and will increasingly become possible. Hence the accent needs to be on workers' control demands, on job involvement, on job organisation, on industrial unionism, on involving the workers directly rather than doing things from on top, on breaking out of the confines of economic demands.

In Australia, due in no small measure to the work and influence of revolutionaries in the trade union movement, we have favorable conditions for developing the revolutionary trends in the industrial movement with a good deal of co-operation and assistance from some trade unions. It depends on the willingness and capacity of the revolutionaries, on how they are able to make use of the existing possibilities, whether the growing militancy, which will develop anyway, is channelled into areas that can be absorbed or whether it leads to a revolutionary upsurge of the Australian working class.