Statement for the Seventies

IN THE FIFTIES capitalism was still able to give the illusion of stability, to strut as though it and its imperialist world system could live forever. In the sixties the illusion was shattered into pieces—on the one hand by the Vietnamese people, who proved they could defend their revolution against the worst onslaughts of imperialism, and on the other hand by momentous upsurges in the very heart of one capitalist homeland after another.

Less than ever do socialists need any eye of faith to see that this outmoded system can be overthrown; the problem is rather to elaborate a way to do it in the shortest time and at the smallest cost to humanity.

It is now apparent that capitalism must regard its educational institutions, and in particular the universities, as permanent centres of disaffection and upheaval. When the revolutionary student movement breaks through its manufactured isolation from the tremendous forces of the working class, as it partially did in France in 1968, the shape of final catastrophe for capitalism can be clearly seen. Socialists thus have a special responsibility to work out an adequate program for their political activity in universities.

This document, in the form of preliminary notes, was written by Dr. Allan Roberts and others in January 1970. It later drew attention at Sydney University when it was distributed by some of those involved in the 24-hour occupation of the Administration offices at that university.
The perspective we propose here rejects the concept that the struggle can concern only a vanguard minority of students. Modern capitalism is riven by a contradiction it cannot wish away, one that lies at the very core of its educational policies. On the one hand, it is a system whose profit-seeking goals and militarist brutality offer people a stunted, alienated life and the threat of ever more horrible forms of death; thus its overall achievements and pattern cannot be justified by any criteria of rationality. On the other hand, this irrational system develops its technology in such a way as to need ever larger masses of highly skilled workers, who must be trained to the use of rational thought. It is this contradiction which capitalism tries to "solve" by cramping education into constricting channels of specialised "courses", aimed at producing a chemical engineer, a market economist, even a "sociologist", who will confine the use of his reason within such a narrow framework that he fulfills technological needs without scrutinising and condemning their context.

This contradiction did not pose a serious problem for capitalism as long as the cadres concerned were few in number, since they could be drawn mainly from a narrow upper circle and have their loyalty further ensured by disproportionate material rewards and social proximity to the ruling class. But today a numerically significant section of youth must be drawn into tertiary education — instead of the 14,236 Australian students of 1939, there will be 120,000 in 1972 — one in every seven from their age groups.

The socialist exposure of capitalism finds a wide echo among this new social stratum, many of whom adopt the revolutionary Marxist critique and wage a conscious struggle against capitalism. But it has been shown that wider layers still will struggle against the manifestations of capitalist repression that they experience in their lives as students, where they are regulated at every step by traditional hierarchies lacking any rational justification. Because of the universities' function to serve capitalist society, to contest this oppressive rule involves contesting its purpose and thus the society itself.

Rejecting at once both the concept of a closed enclave producing the specialists capitalism needs, and the authoritarian control needed to discipline them, there emerges the project of the open, self-managed, critical university — the theme of the program that follows.

1. By 1972, one Australian in seven from the appropriate age group will be undergoing tertiary education. A degree or diploma now does not imply automatic entry into the ruling elite, but in
general characterises a certain kind of skilled worker with specialised knowledge. This applies even more strongly to graduates of the technical institutes or "colleges", whose role in tertiary education is being consciously fostered.

2. The intense specialisation of degree or diploma courses today is harmful in major respects. The types of skill required for modern technological society are more inter-disciplinary, requiring attitudes of mind, particularly in teaching, research and development, which can benefit from the achievements and methodology of many varied fields. Even more importantly, there can be no justification at our present level of technology for cramping the minds of increasing numbers of youth into restricted channels, to the neglect of their proper development as socially aware human beings.

At one time an argument might have been made out for such a mutilation of the human personality: society's cultural development requires a high level of goods and services, and to maintain this level men must be shaped to fit the processes of production — however regrettable this necessity might be. But this (always dubious) argument lost any shred of validity long before we reached the present era, in which the benefits of science already achieved can provide the age of plenty.

Only the distortions and wasted potential inherent in the social system of capitalism, geared to private profit and the repression needed to maintain it, prevent the attainment of a fully human society. It is this social system, and not the requirements of technology, which demands that skilled workers trained to tertiary level should be over-specialised and under-educated.

3. The need for humanised education has important implications for the structure of tertiary institutions, which are today shaped predominantly by what is seen as their essential function: the production of certified specialists. It is from this ceremony of certification that there stems the present pre-occupation with examinations, as the crucial pivots around which the whole system revolves, along with the necessity for entrants to be subsequently sorted out into "passed sheep" and "failed goats". Undoubtedly, a university can see certification as one of its functions (medical practitioners, for example) but what is quite monstrous is that the form and content of education — at a level which must in the foreseeable future involve the bulk of the population — should be deformed by this one-sided and crippling perspective.

This fetish of specialisation in turn creates the further "specialisation" of people into such absolutely separate categories as
students" (here) and "workers" (there). The absoluteness of this division must go. On one hand, courses must be re-shaped in light of the educational needs of people generally, not just the needs of the economy for animated raw material. Increased flexibility and scope of courses would then allow a vast expansion of the university population. On the other hand, the educational experience of students should not be confined to the lecture room and laboratory, but needs to be supplemented by the irreplaceable education of actual social experience in productive work.

It is only in this way that the universities can transform themselves from the privileged enclaves that they appear to be at present, into valuable and valued institutions serving all the people. In particular, it is only genuine moves in this direction that can erode the real present grounds for division between the working class and the academic community, with all its harmful political and social effects, particularly on joint efforts for social change.

4. If courses are to be re-shaped to fit humanity’s needs, we must first recognise the extent to which they are applied to the requirements of capitalist society.

This adaption is most evident in the humanities, where such studies as politics, sociology and “economics” minimise or flatly omit the critical approach essential to revealing the truth about the society we inhabit. This evasion of critical theory is managed by such devices as pre-occupation with the “micro” approach, ignoring the framework (social and conceptual) in which the detailed phenomena are embedded; a crushing emphasis on positivist schools of thought which implicitly accept the given system and thus protect it from criticism; an artificial division into allegedly non-overlapping disciplines, so that some of the most important failures of capitalist society apparently disappear, being irrelevant to any particular single discipline (much of political economy, for example, can be studied in neither “politics” nor “economics”).

In the natural sciences and technologies narrow skills are inculcated with no attention paid to their future and application. This of course fits in well with capitalism’s desire for specialists who will serve the profit system with mutually rewarding efficiency, and never question the purpose or rationale of their work. To appreciate the dangers to humanity inherent here, we need only recognise that the specialists concerned have the skills needed to devise computer systems for an all-embracing “security” apparatus, to design a city-destroying bomb, to cultivate a deadly virus, to pollute the environment.
Such considerations as these emphasise the primary need for a struggle around the content of courses, for the incorporation of critical theory and socially-responsible studies. In the consideration of capitalist reality, and of their relation to it, the future skilled workers in tertiary institutes can come to see both the need to reject this outmoded social system, and also their common interest with the industrial working class in overthrowing it.

5. The special problems of tertiary institutions, not least among them being the necessary re-orientation towards a fully human education as opposed to mass production of "specialists", cannot be solved by the governing bodies of Australian universities today. The people most entitled to tackle these questions, as well as to make the decisions on the everyday affairs of their own institutions are the staff (academic and non-academic) and students themselves. The representatives of "business-men" or the business man's governments have values and interests which set them diametrically against any progress towards such humanist goals, and automatically exclude them from contributing to this re-orientation.

6. The need for university autonomy, with essentially staff/student governing bodies, increases daily as the conflict sharpens between the needs of human education, and the narrow grasp of the present conservative controllers. There is a crying need for self-management of the university by those who work within it.

7. Autonomy of the university is a hollow phrase, unless it implies financial autonomy. Nor can a single university standing alone hope to maintain its independence. Tertiary institutions as a whole must be granted adequate sums, and their united demand for this must replace the present servile competition which atomises them into small, impotent units. The Budget must provide for an adequate living wage for all intellectual workers employed in their apprenticeships at universities — i.e. for all students.

8. It must be recognised that, in any campaign for self-management the question is one of power. It is not just that the present hierarchical "rulers" within the universities can be expected in the main to resist moves for a real shift in power to the staff/student community. More fundamentally, a real encroachment on the power of the State and Federal governments is implied.

This consideration does not in any way weaken the rational arguments for the objectives outlined, but it does reveal as illusory any idea that simply the rationality of the case, once expounded, will ensure its general acceptance. Questions of the transfer of power on so important a scale are simply not decided "on the debate" in capitalist society. They rather hinge on the degree of
conviction of the people seeking the change, and the extent to which they show themselves prepared for it.

An essential element in this preparation is contributed by such actions as opposition to particularly flagrant abuses of power by the present holders, or the claiming in practice of valid rights not at present accorded. It is only when seen in this context that "confrontation" policies can achieve a real sense of direction.

9. How should this struggle for power be conducted? It is the students who can be expected to take the lead. Given, for example, their dependence for promotion and advancement on the existing power structure, the academic staff in general are tied more closely to that structure; they are less inclined towards oppositional initiatives, and more inclined towards dubious compromises. Nevertheless, experience has shown that militant student action with a clear perspective can win some staff support, particularly from junior members.

In order to involve the mass of students and to guarantee their control over the conduct of the struggle, mass meetings should be constantly convened in the course of the struggle.

These mass meetings can be developed as the expression of the students' will in place of the Students' Representative Councils. Set up as toy parliaments, the SRC's consist of a small elite who, once elected, are out of the control of their electors. The student representatives on university senates and councils are in the same position. In order to put power permanently in the hands of those who are the members of student unions, we must work to abolish or transform the SRC's and create new, independent student unions in which all power and decision-making is placed in the hands of general assemblies.

It can be argued that while the mass meeting and the general assembly are democratically superior to the SRC's, they would inhibit many students and staff from speaking and limit their participation to voting. It is therefore necessary to develop democracy based on departments and smaller units, which will allow and encourage the direct, personal involvement of each student (and staff member) in the control of his affairs. Such small units would be the base of a co-ordinating, overall university council of student/staff representatives. The mass meeting and general assembly is a bridge to this.

Out of a situation in which mass meetings or a network of elected departmental committee "check" the administration's exercise of its power, deny it new powers, challenge and defy its decisions, and
make demands on it, dual power will develop. Such a situation is unstable and cannot last for long. Sooner or later an issue will arise which will pose the question of which is the superior force. A contest of wills, a struggle for power will ensue to decide which is the superior. In such a situation, students and staff must be prepared to occupy and run the university themselves. That is the logic of the struggle.

The involvement of the State on the side of the administration is inevitable and poses the necessity for students to seek alliance with and aid from the working class.

10. Resistance to the demand for self-management of the staff/student community can take different forms. A particularly dangerous response, which can be expected when the movement achieves success in popularisation or consequent activity, is the offer of some form of “co-participation”. This can vary from admitting a few representatives to governing bodies, to surrender on issues which do not vitally affect the existing power structures. The key words here are “the improvement of communications”, “consultation”, “participation”. Any such developments must be seen for what they are: attempts to side-track and “buy off” the movement; and the need for full self-management must be emphasised, contrasting its implications in detail to the inadequacies of the sops conceded.

If, however, students or staff temporarily accept “co-participation schemes”, after a policy of boycott has been advocated by militants, it is then appropriate to convince the majority that representatives on the “co-participation” bodies be elected by general assemblies of voters, that their mandates be constantly renewable and revocable, that they report back to general assemblies, that there be no secrecy of information and meetings of “co-participation” bodies be open “to the public”, except in exceptional circumstances. As well, these representatives must carry demands from the general assembly into “co-participation” bodies. In this way representatives will not be cut off from those they are supposed to represent, will not be co-opted into the administration, and the “containment” purpose of these schemes can be exposed.

11. The campaign for university self-management cannot be properly conceived just as an isolated change in the functioning of capitalist society. This would envisage, in effect, the creation of a new kind of privileged-enclave position for academics, while the rest of the population remained helpless to control the most vital features of their daily work and lives.

Rather, it must be seen as part of a general movement to extend
the principle of self-management throughout society, the most important feature of which would be the development of "workers' control" in all work places. It is obvious that such democratic control can only be a farce if the owners of industry retain their present legal privilege to dominate and dictate to their employees. Thus, if it is not to be a hollow sham, a general movement for self-management must be also a socialist movement seeking to end the private ownership of capital.

The opening up of universities, and their re-casting into a truly universal role, is of vital importance if society is to develop towards socialism along a path free from the domination of bureaucrats. For the real self-management of enterprises and the whole of society in conditions of advanced technology, it is essential that all workers have a permanent access to higher education, without suffering a cut-off at an arbitrary age, or upon achieving a narrow skill of the kind so readily outmoded by technological advance. Acquiring the education needed to play a competent role in self-managed industry must be seen as a normal part of everyone's working life and paid accordingly.