THE ACHIEVEMENTS and failures of Australian communists in the trade union movement in the post-war years have some significant lessons for revolutionaries concerned about a viable strategy for social change. The trade union movement is one area above all where communist policies and methods have been tested in practice over many years and on a mass scale. It is also the area where current policies will be tested and judged.

Despite significant achievements Australian communists have not been able to prevent the growing integration of our working class into the capitalist society during the last two decades. One reason for this is that until very recently communists have not consciously tried to prevent this integration because they have not been clearly aware of it.

It is ironic that the very successes of the Communist Party in the trade union movement have contained the seeds of the failure to develop the revolutionary consciousness of the Australian working class. The successes of the militant struggles after the war (1946-48) in which the communists played a leading role improved the wages and conditions of the Australian workers and played a part in establishing the existing standard of living. Despite subsequent sectarian errors and faulty estimates, and notwithstanding the decline of the Communist Party and its mass appeal, support for the communists in the trade union movement remained at a high level. Even the chill of the cold war period did not fundamentally alter that.

The reasons for the successes of the communists were the same

Bernie Taft is Victorian State President of the Communist Party and a member of the Editorial Board of ALR.
as pre-war — their devotion to the workers’ interests, their militancy, determination and hard work, their skill in the conduct of economic struggles, their high level of integrity and their honesty. Generally speaking the calibre of the communists was high. Another reason of some significance was that the work of communists in the trade unions was freer from dogmatic imposition of policies not suitable to Australian conditions than were other spheres of the work of the Communist Party. As Alastair Davidson notes, its policies “were to some extent based on a realistic estimate of the conditions and traditions of the Australian labor and socialist movement”. (The Communist Party of Australia, p. 93)

Yet in the very area where the Communist Party has been most successful, where it has been able to withstand many attacks and displayed the greatest resilience, it has failed in its basic objective — to develop the socialist consciousness of the working class. In a sense the ingredient of success in this sphere — the devotion to and gradually the narrow pre-occupation with the defence of the economic interests of the workers — allowed in the prevailing conditions of the fifties and sixties the growing pressure of ruling ideology to increase its domination over the Australian workers. The economic development and social life of the country provided favourable ground for the spread of bourgeois values and the ethos of the consumer society to all classes.

It was a tragedy that this growth was not seriously combated by the only force in the country that could have combated it. To a large measure the battlefield for the workers’ mind was vacated and left to the ruling class and its ideologists. The question must be asked, why did this happen, why did it take so long to elaborate a revolutionary strategy, why did the growth of conservatism go relatively unchallenged leading to the present situation? A combination of a faulty strategy for social change, of false estimates based on poor analyses of the Australian reality, tardy responses to growing difficulties, slowness in making tactical correction, followed by subsequent over-reaction to setbacks, brought this about.

Let us examine this in a little detail. The strategic concept which dominated communist activities in the post-war years was the dual belief that the impending economic crisis would bring about the mass radicalisation of the Australian working class and that the great challenge to and decisive contest with reformism had arrived in 1949-49. The 15th Congress of the C.P.A. held in 1948 declared: “The capitalist world, already deeply affected by the general crisis, which was worsened by the war, is about to plunge into the biggest of all its economic crises”.

The communist tactics in the general coal strike of 1949 can
be attributed to this concept. After the defeat of the coal strike, erroneously hailed as a victory over reformist ideology, there was a refusal to face up to the facts that it revealed. The Communist Party leadership at that time did not discern the ebb of the post-war movement. On the contrary it persisted with offensive tactics, which in the developing conditions inevitably led to isolation. The correction was unduly delayed for several years and as a result of this, when it finally did come, was bound to have elements of an over-correction. From offensive, exposed positions, well in advance of the workers’ understanding and capacity to fight, the party swung to defensive, adaptive and overcautious positions and attitudes.

A certain retreat was necessary and justified, but because it had been delayed for too long and was carried out without a serious revaluation, it led to new errors. The retreat was made in a pragmatic fashion as a response to the situation that the party found itself in and which had led to loss of support and isolation, rather than as the result of a new analysis.* It was done in an empirical fashion which has always been more characteristic of the party’s work in the trade unions than in other spheres, and went too far in some respects and became too general in others. It led to placing unity as such in the centre of much of the tactics of the party; “unity for unity’s sake” gradually became, if not the theory, certainly the practice of some communists in the trade unions. Some of the necessary tactics of those days later hardened into principles, and for some the means became the aim.

As a consequence of this kind of correction of sectarian errors, conservative attitudes grew, powerfully fed by the economic developments which flowed from the continued expansion of the Australian economy, and the mineral discoveries. In fact no new strategy replaced the old one — there was simply a process of adaptation to new conditions. The very successes of this adaptation — the party regained some of the ground lost since 1949 — blinded it to the new dangers and to the real problems. The party drifted on, based on traditional methods of work. Communists continued to work well as trade union officials, they continued to gain (and regain) the support of many workers, but they also became narrower in the scope of their work at the very time when developments in our society made imperative a widening of scope and horizon. At the time when communists did little to widen the workers’ horizon the ruling class was successfully setting out to narrow it.

Having burned their fingers earlier, communists tended to keep away from the fires of the revolution altogether, instead of finding

* During the following years there continued to be periodic declarations by leading party spokesmen and bodies about the impending major cyclical crisis. A special pamphlet was even published on the forthcoming crisis.
the way to stoke the fires of the revolution without getting one's fingers unnecessarily burnt. For well over a decade the political battles in the trade union movement were confined to those who were militant and who involved the workers in action on economic matters, and the 'moderates' who damped down the struggle. The militants saw themselves as fulfilling their revolutionary responsibilities by their economic militancy. This was the period when bourgeois hegemony made its real inroads in the ranks of the Australian workers. Even where communists fought bravely and vigorously it was confined to one front, the economic front, whereas the real battle was on many fronts — it was for the hearts and minds of the workers.

All this occurred whilst there was an ebb in the revolutionary movement in our country as in other advanced capitalist countries. When this ebb gradually ended in the latter part of the sixties it gave way to the beginnings of a new upsurge of the revolutionary movement in the advanced capitalist countries, catalysed by the war in Vietnam. The scientific and technological revolution brought with it new contradictions, new processes emerged, new revolutionary forces came to the forefront, creating both new tasks and new potentialities for the trade unions.

Yet even at this stage, it took a few more years before a serious attempt at elaborating a revolutionary strategy for the trade union and workers' movement was made and the process of applying it could begin. This delay was due to several reasons.

1 For a long time the old line persisted at the very centre of the communist party's leadership of this work, based on narrow economic militancy.

2 There was a general resistance to new ideas by people who had got set in the old ways. Especially there was the pressure of conservative attitudes and sentiments, the tendency to take the easy way out. Resistance to change, even where it was unconscious was extremely strong. The corrosive influence of bourgeois attitudes and values had penetrated deeply.

3 It was only when the new policies were seen in their revolutionary perspectives, as part of the overall strategy of the Communist Party, that they could be understood and absorbed and the task of applying them could commence.

But the difficulties of putting such a revolutionary strategy into practice in conditions of economic expansion remain formidable. The apathy and the subsequent relative passivity of the great body of Australian workers about the war in Vietnam at a time when other sections of the population are increasingly active against this war is perhaps the most striking expression of the problem.
To challenge the integration of the working class into the capitalist system, to successfully counteract the influence of capitalist ideology, of apathy and the spread of false values requires in the first place a recognition by industrial activists that economic struggles by themselves, no matter how vigorously conducted, do not challenge capitalist hegemony. However, the opposite view is still widely held. A whole generation of industrial activists has grown up with the firm and deeply imbedded belief that militant economic struggles challenge the capitalist system. Yet in today's conditions this is an illusion, and a dangerous one at that. There are strong supporters of the present system and active anti-socialists who are militant in the conduct of economic struggles. When faced with this new breed of rightwing leaders in the trade union movement, socialist activists are often puzzled. They question the genuine character of this militancy, expecting in accordance with the classical pattern of the past, that these people will be militant in words only and that they will sell out to the employers at the suitable moment. Of course many rightwing leaders do exactly that, but it is quite possible these days to be an extreme rightwinger, a supporter of the war in Vietnam and a fanatical anti-communist and still fight firmly for economic advances of the workers. The experience of the American trade union movement ought to dispel any illusions on this score.

The plain fact is that with the development of modern technology it is possible for the ruling class to concede many of the economic demands of the workers in the advanced countries, to absorb these demands without weakening the capitalist system, but actually strengthen it. In these conditions the old criterion that you can tell the difference between revolutionaries and reformists in the trade union movement on the basis of their militant pursuit of the struggles for the economic demands of the workers, no longer holds good. A growing group of younger trade union activists believe that the only way for modern society to operate successfully is for organised groups to press hard for their share of the benefits of technological advances. This is the reason why economic militancy is quite acceptable, even fashionable, in circles that would not have dreamt of taking direct action a generation ago.

The old broad division in the trade union movement between reformists and revolutionaries, with groupings in between these two, no longer holds good in today's conditions. There are now three, not two main trends in the trade union movement. There are firstly the old-style reformists, who are generally arch-conservatives, geared to the past, often inefficient, who dampen down struggle, who mostly prefer a quiet life, with the minimum of troubles and problems. There is a second broad group of various
brands of modern reformists. These people are generally younger and more in tune with present day realities. They seek an efficient streamlined trade union movement, with updated structures that cope with the needs of the seventies, as they see them. They do not oppose militant action to win industrial demands. Many of them believe that the trade unions should act as a pressure group in our society alongside other such pressure groups. They want a trade union movement that fits into modern capitalist society, which many of them seek to reform, some having substantial reforms in mind. This grouping stretches from new-style right-wingers to various leftwingers, including people who have socialist aspirations. But despite the emphasis on militancy and widening the scope of trade union work they all accept the structure of the present social system, and seek to confine the trade union movement within it.

The essential differences between these modern reformists and revolutionaries in the industrial movement lies firstly in their objectives, and secondly in their choice of issues and methods that will get the working class nearer to these objectives. Revolutionaries seek to counteract the integration of the working class into the capitalist system. They are not content to struggle for demands which the ruling class can absorb, and which can even contribute to wider acceptance of the present system by the workers. They do not want to see workers transformed into dull, conformist, gadget-ridden and motor driving servants of the ruling class, getting some of the second quality benefits flowing from our consumer society. Yet this is the pattern of capitalist development. This is the price that modern capitalism imposes on those of its victims that are rather “better off”, than its victims in the third world.

To successfully reverse this process requires a counter-hegemonic struggle that challenges ruling class ideas, attitudes and values in every sphere of life. Concretely in the trade union it means conducting struggles on such issues and in such a manner that will bring the workers up against the system itself, that will teach them in practice as a result of their experiences the need to change the system itself, not simply to reform it. These issues include workers control demands, extension of industrial democracy, participation in decision making on all issues affecting the workers’ life and future. It means challenging the bosses’ “sacred rights” to determine employment, safety and conditions.

Even the traditional demands which by themselves do not transcend the capitalist system can be posed and fought for in either a reformist or a revolutionary way. The economic struggles are always the base of all trade union activities. Yet they too can be handled in a way that questions the bosses’ “inherent” right to
determine the division of the social product according to his
criteria. "Widening the scope of trade union work" can be a
reformist or a revolutionary slogan, depending on how it is
approached. It is quite possible to widen the scope of trade
union activities and confine it well within the present system.
Even on the Vietnam war, two distinctly different attitudes are
possible. One can seek to discuss with the workers the need to
end this war on humanitarian grounds or on its futility or its
immorality, and not go on to a fundamental criticism of the
capitalist system which creates and conducts such a war. Clearly
a revolutionary has the objective to help the workers to such a
fundamental understanding of our social system.

The manner of conducting these struggles must always be
directed towards rank and file involvement, towards releasing
the initiative and creativity of the workers. The more that it is
done on the job directly by the workers concerned the more
valuable it is for the future of the movement for socialism.
Struggles must be conducted in such a manner that the workers
gain confidence in their own capacities, that they develop a
collective outlook, as against that of individualism which capitalism
breds. Unfortunately the trade union movement has allowed the
capitalist trend of finding individual and inadequate solutions to
social problems to gain much ground among Australian workers
in the last two decades. Instead of seeking a social solution to
inadequate public transport facilities, the working class movement
in effect has gone along with the concept that individual motor
car ownership is the way to cope with the problem. The same
applies to inadequate health services, the worker can "solve" it
individually by paying nearly two dollars a week to cover himself.
In face of inadequate old age pensions he seeks to get round his
problem by saving for a house and a car and making other
arrangements. The trade unions often help him to get the extra
few dollars to "solve" (partially) such problems for himself. Yet
all are social problems. The efforts of the trade unions ought
to be in the direction of social solutions rather than with capitalist
individual "solutions" to the problems. All of this is part of the
overall task before us — to further develop and elaborate an
effective counter-hegemonic strategy in the trade union movement,
which bases itself on the new manifestation of the contradictions
of capitalist society, on the new tensions and new revolutionary
forces which they generate and on the newly felt needs and
demands which they raise. This strategy must aim to create both
the need and the vision of a socialist society within the restricting
confines of the present society, and to establish the conditions for
breaking through these confines.