Seafarers on Australian ships whether coastal or overseas, today enjoy wages and conditions almost undreamt of a few decades ago. Wages are high; arduous work has either disappeared or is fast disappearing; accommodation aboard ship is good with single berth cabins; seafarers are much better protected from the weather than previously, being supplied free with oilskins and sometimes industrial clothing. Ships now have wheelhouses and look-out cabs, and with bridge and accommodation built together exposure is avoided going from one part of the ship to another. The number of working hours has decreased (in some cases considerably), and jobs are allocated by roster instead of choice from a line-up. Leave systems are as good as anywhere in the world, if not the best.

These conditions have been won only after consistent battling by the men in the industry and their leaders.

Since seafarers enjoy such good conditions, do they still suffer from alienation in the sense of wanting to smash machines or industrial plant, to riot or to create challenging situations, or make revolution because of dissatisfaction with their lot?

These feelings come and go, at times becoming almost overwhelming, at other times being hardly noticeable. In this regard, seafarers seem to be much the same as other sections of the working class. During the early ‘sixties these feelings reached a peak, then declined; they reached another peak in the struggle for peace in Vietnam. Since then, there has been another decline.
At present with their aggregate salaries and “swinger” leave systems providing some satisfaction, I think the most prevalent kind of alienation is of the personality kind, with some men blindly following a leader for fear of losing conditions; others simply submitting without a thought to what someone else says; a few others feeling uneasiness at being thrust out into society at large without the covering of being fed, clothed and sheltered on a ship and protected by a union; of not wanting to be a scapegoat; of concern for the future and whether they will have a place there or be unable to adapt to changing circumstances; of worry about retraining problems, and challenging the status quo.

Basically, I think the only way of handling this difficult problem lies in the early 1960s experience, when the enormous resources of enthusiasm and initiative in the rank and file were tapped to resolve the problems then confronting us.

It seems to me that because of some mistakes made in this mass movement and involvement of rank and file members (the only such experience I have had in 26 years at sea), union leaders don’t want rank and file activity unless it has been given prior approval or unless they can control it. And when the rank and file and their delegates come into conflict with officials, the officials invariably win the day, and the standing of the delegates is left in question with the men in the ships.

That certainly was not the case of the early ‘sixties campaigns. The leaders could not possibly have won those campaigns with “on top” negotiations without relying on the resources of the rank and file in the ships. Nor will they be able to solve the main problems requiring attention right now unless they do so. These problems are:

* The immediate re-negotiation of the two-year consent “closed” agreement, that has until May 1975 to run, because of the already disastrous effects of inflation which is continuing. This closed agreement gave us an “increase” of $12 over two years, but it would be more correct to say that it will give us a decrease of approximately $2000 in the purchasing power of our wages over the period.

Another aspect to re-negotiating the agreement is to involve seafarers in the 35-hour week and the extra week annual leave struggles. Some seafarers are under the impression that this agreement will give them a 35-hour week (in an appropriate form) and the extra week annual leave, but it actually does nothing of the sort. All it does is to give it to them IF the Arbitration Court grants these conditions to industry in general. The result has been to effectively remove the marine unions’ membership from participation in the struggle to win these demands. To that extent that struggle is weakened.

* Amalgamation of the marine unions, first where it is easiest. Quite apart from the political and industrial implications of amalgamation, marine unionists pay high union dues and much of the official administration of these unions is duplicated. Yet it is still a battle for the unions to exist. An amalgamation handed down from “on top” (even if it comes about) could be disastrous if mass work on the ships is not done to eliminate old antagonisms that have existed for many years, so it is absolutely essential for the rank and file to work with each other on the ships in this matter. If this task is not taken up immediately the way is clear for “sweetheart” deals to be made with shipowners by one or several unions to the exclusion of some others.

Other problems requiring attention in the near future include:

* Women as crew members. This means in all departments, from skippers to the most junior ratings. There are many precedents for this. The Stewards’ Union has for many years had stewardesses on passenger ships; the Scandinavian ships have employed stewardesses for many years; at least one British ship to my knowledge staffed the entire galley with women on overseas trading; socialist countries have employed women skippers and mates as well as in other departments.

The Seamen’s Union recently adopted a policy of accepting women as crew members on ships. It should be taken up in other unions and pursued at the first opportunity.

* More democratic control of disputes on ships. The present situation in the
Seamen's Union is that ship's crews can be suspended if they stick a ship up without the officials knowledge, or against official advice.

* The new conditions experienced on big bulk ships on long overseas tramping trips may present some big psychological and emotional problems. Some men go on voyages of four months or so, and may find on returning to Port Hedland, for example, that they are off again for another overseas stint.

The Brisbane branch secretary of the Seamen's Union, Jim Steele, has reported his experiences on such a ship in the January and February Seamen's Journals. He also comments that some men underwent character changes in these circumstances. Another factor could be that with ships of this size, shipowners may well prefer Australian crews to low-paid overseas crews because they feel they might adjust better.

* It has already been suggested by Roger Wilson, assistant secretary of the Seamen's Union in Victoria, that a pilot study should be initiated on what seafarers do in off-working times, as a guide to determining whether some of these activities can properly be called leisure, or just a wasting of time that leads to boredom, frustration and no improvement in the quality of life. This affects other workers as well, of course, but is a very important aspect of seafaring life.

SOURCES OF ALIENATION

The problem of alienation of seafarers is something that has its origins ashore, that the men bring to sea with them and which is aggravated by the type of life they lead and the way they fit in and adjust to the customs and practices of seafaring. Seafarers suffer pressures in different forms because they are engaged in an industry that forces them away from their families and homes and into an authoritarian, all-male environment, where very little interest is shown in them and where they, in turn, do not show much enthusiasm in the ever-changing nature of the work they do, the types of cargoes their ships carry, or to what purposes these cargoes are put -- whether they are for the community's benefit or just the shipowners' private profit.

These feelings remain from the first day a young lad ships out, right through his working life till he either retires or goes ashore for whatever reasons. They differ as he moves from one age group to the next and from one rating to another and maybe back again through demotion or other reasons. It is all a part of the general problem of people in society feeling at loggerheads with others and dissatisfied with themselves in their work and in their relationships. It is the very complex problem of alienation in society from which none of us is free.

The following is an outline of how men go to sea, what attitudes they bring with them and how these and other factors interact.

DECK BOY

Take the example of a man who has been at sea for 10 years and who went to sea as a deck boy at sixteen years of age, which is a fairly common experience. Not so many years ago it was common for a boy to go to sea at fourteen, but now the tendency is for him to be a bit older.

He probably comes from a family where there has been some seafaring connection at some time or another. He has probably been at a co-educational school; played sport; may or may not have had sexual experiences; may have a religious background; has mixed socially with others of his own age; had very little money to spend; had his clothes washed and ironed by his mother who probably also made his bed and cleaned up after him, and in general waited on him.

He now moves into an entirely different world.

His only interest in sport could well be the second-hand spectator's participation of the racing form guide or the football pages of the newspapers. He will have a single berth cabin which he looks after himself, he washes his own clothes, etc.

Generally, there will be no others of his age aboard and he will know nothing at all of what is going on around him. He is often the butt of the jokers about the place, being sent to get the green oil for the starboard lamp and the red oil for the port lamp, and all sorts of silly errands. He is often seasick. With all the booze on ships, he will learn to
become a seasoned drinker. He will probably get more money than his father, his contacts with girls and women are very little because of the fast turn-around of ships in port. He will not know how to assess the continual conversations on heterosexuality and homosexuality. (He is in a difficult position in establishing lasting friendships and relationships ashore with either his own sex or with girls and women.) He will learn of working class struggles that gain and protect the wages and conditions of workers, and when he goes on leave he will have more money than he knows how to handle. These early years also easily lead to a certain feeling of superiority.

Seamen, perhaps more than most, have chips on their shoulders and seem to be trying to prove something, or that they are better than others. This kind of personality is continually being rekindled by life at sea today, and sometimes results in violence. Particularly among deck ratings who go to sea earlier than others, there is the tendency to "prove" an argument or "resolve" a difference of opinion by simply saying "I've been at sea longer than you, and you don't know what you're talking about". Or, "I've been there and you haven't, so I know.”

CADET DECK OFFICER

A cadet officer will usually be a bit older than the deck boy, with a better educational standard, probably similar family background with maybe a father or some relation who has been an officer before him and who is trying to put him on the right path. He will live on the upper deck among the officers, learning navigation, etc., and the ways and behaviour of an officer. His trade union education will be vastly different from that of the deck boy, but the pressures on the cadet in passing exams will be pretty intense and the dropout rate is fairly high.

As he gets older and passes his exams, pressures will intensify further as he studies for higher certificates, promotion and higher pay. His interests from the first day at sea to an adult deck officer will coincide in many ways with the deck ratings, yet may be vastly different in some others, e.g. adopting class attitudes to his and society's problems. He also gets conditioned to feel some superiority.

ENGINEER, RADIO OPERATOR, SHIPWRIGHT, COOK, STEWARD, FIREMAN

Generally speaking, all these classes of seafarers go to sea as adults. Their conditioning has been completed ashore before they came to sea and therefore they don't go through the same confusing period as the deck ratings in establishing their own standards in so many different fields. They bring with them their attitudes, customs, habits and practices, learned when they were working ashore. They may be married, single, or separated.

Of course, there is a certain degree of transferring from one job to another. Their interests will vary as to politics and political involvement, ideas on and activities within the respective trade unions and the working class generally, personal likes and dislikes, choice of radio or television programs, music, books, religious beliefs, how much they drink, their behaviour and mannerisms, morality and ability to communicate with others, etc.

* * *

It is easily seen that life on ships combining all these different elements, and with the complete absence of females, can fluctuate from the "happy" ship all of us have been on at different times in our lives, to the veritable floating hell, with casualties abounding on all sides, in the physical as well as the psychological sense. It is a moot point how many men have suicided when they felt that the pressures of society and shipboard life had become too great.

The marine unions, recognising that friction and conflict may lead to violence, have initiated moves to overcome the problems including:

* Single berth cabins instead of open foc'sles and multiple berth cabins. Recreation rooms with games and libraries, radio and television, etc. where we could relax and talk in our off-working times and have a beer in comfort, as well as many other items improving the quality of shipboard life.

One side effect of this nowadays is that as ships got bigger and bigger, crews smaller and smaller, and as each department became more confined to their different areas of the ship, and with men being watchkeepers and
asleep during the daytime, there is no-one around to talk to and the accommodation has been aptly labelled the “laminex prison”.

But we still continue to regard ourselves as A.B.’s, cooks, stewards, firemen, officers, etc, each with our own identities and characters, problems or contentment with our lot as the case may be, with not much being done to overcome one of the biggest sources of friction and division that is still with us -- that of having seven different unions, thereby maintaining the general feeling of animosity and distrust. Although this ebbs and flows from time to time especially with the better conditions obtaining, the shipowners and capitalism are not sufficiently seen as the basic cause of our troubles. The existence of widely differing socialist ideologies today and the fact that the recent big amalgamations of trade unions ashore has found no reflection in marine unions, adds to the problem.

* In the early ‘sixties, as said earlier, there was a well co-ordinated liaison between Seamen’s Union officials and rank and file. This enabled the interests, aspirations and capabilities of the whole union to be channelled in the same general direction and gave members a tremendous feeling of satisfaction in having achieved some great results. That period has long since passed and these problems of such liaison are again to the fore.

* The setting up of a training school for deck boys and young engine-room ratings, so that young lads would have a more realistic idea of what they were heading into was an important move. But experience has shown it would be better to have the training school on a ship anchored somewhere and on short runs under better supervision. All marine unions should vigorously support this move of the Seamen’s Union.

* Recently, bars serving draught beer have been set up. It was felt that “wardrobe” drinking tended to be “unsociable” and that it was better to drink beer together at the bar, rather than in the seclusion of our cabins. However, I think our drinking habits may have turned full circle, because on occasions I prefer the seclusion of my cabin to enjoy a beer or some wine to the noise of the television, the radio blaring out the racing results, and men arguing with one another. If a man is not interested in horses, or television, or drunken arguments, but likes a drink himself, then obviously the recreation room with its bar and the other amenities is not the place for him.

* * *

Generally speaking, seafaring has mostly been a young man’s work and health had to be good enough to be away from doctors for long spells. But under today’s technology a man well into his forties or fifties who has been at sea all his life is not likely to change if he can help it because of the drop in income he would suffer, the very different life-style he would move into and because he would probably be at the bottom of the labor market. All these are problems of the seafarer whatever his age, his religious beliefs, his political leanings, his marital status, his sexual preferences.

The problems of society which produce alienation are reflected aboard ships, where additional particular problems also producing alienation operate as well.

We should be making more effort to recognise the different forms of alienation of seafarers, to link them with the general problems of capitalist society today, and to develop consciousness of the need for a fundamental change to self-management socialism as the means to tackle them.