A STRATEGY
STARTING IN
THE WORKPLACE
Max Ogden

In this article I wish to discuss the micro aspects of applying the sort of transitional socialist economic strategy which is being discussed fairly widely on the left at the moment - for instance in the CPA's A New Course for Australia. It is necessary to hone in on the workplace to identify the best foundation on which to base such a strategy.

First of all, it would be useful to have a look at the problems associated with traditional wage campaigning as this impinges heavily on whatever we do in developing alternatives. It has been said many times, but is a truism that obviously needs repeating, that wage demands of themselves are not capable of developing a socialist consciousness nor, more importantly, a strategy for social change.

Despite the fact that socialists active in unions have been aware of this for many years, there is not much evidence that this is seriously thought about. There are several reasons for this:

* The first and probably most important is the sheer pressure of day to day work, particularly of officials, which makes it extremely difficult to get the time to come up for air and think about the problem.

* The second is the way wage campaigns are so often developed in isolation from other issues, which makes it more difficult to develop political consciousness. The way the industrial relations system operates means that this often happens even when a conscious effort is made to link issues together.

* The third is the confusion between trade union consciousness and socialist consciousness. Because a group of workers are militant, either one or both of two
possibilities are considered: that by continuing the way they are, socialist consciousness will develop automatically, or that militancy is the same thing as socialist consciousness. Nowadays we see more than ever how erroneous this view is, when small groups of elitist workers can take quite militant action, and yet maintain a very conservative political stance. This is especially true of the United States, but is also seen here.

Wage demands from time to time assume great political importance and obviously this is a possibility at the moment. As workers seek to break out of the indexation strait-jacket, they find themselves more and more having to confront the Fraser and other big business governments. This could lead to developments like the miners’ defeat of the Heath government. In fact, the Victorian S.E.C. workers’ strike had some of these connotations as it seemed to have considerable public support, especially in the aspect of its confrontation with government.

The argument advanced here is that we need to understand the weaknesses of traditional wages campaigning and especially its isolation from other issues and strategies. Having done that, we need to redevelop it as part of an integrated strategy from workplace through to government and international politics. This is to provide a basis for more effective wage campaigns, so central to the day-to-day work of unions, so that there is a greater possibility of political consciousness growing out of these struggles.

What are the weaknesses of wage campaigns

1. Taken on its own, a wage demand never questions the right to exploit, only the price. The successful 1974 Metal Industry campaign, which saw national stoppages for the first time, despite some attempts at injecting politics, did very little, if anything, to question the right of exploitation.

As Andre Gorz put it so well “While it is necessary to demand satisfaction of immediate needs, this struggle no longer brings the entire social order into radical question.”

2. In a certain sense, the constant and isolated claim for wage rises reinforces the capitalist ethic, that everything and everybody has a price. If this ethic is imbibed and workers can be reasonably successful, then far from questioning the system they think it is not too bad. Of course this has changed a little lately, but with the sop of indexation there has been little questioning.

3. The weakness of over reliance on wage campaigns as a basis for mass mobilisation is clearly shown at the moment. The main issue has run into trouble and therefore action has dropped, because little attempt has been made to develop other issues.

4. Wage demands very often hide other, more deep-seated issues. More and more, it is recognised that such as boredom, lack of dignity and freedom, powerlessness, etc are the real causes behind disputes. Unfortunately, as yet they are mostly manifested in wage demands because the method of coming to grips with the real issues are still tentative and only in their infancy.

Civilisation at the Crossroads: social and human implications of the scientific and technological revolution, $4.50 (300 pp.), 1969.

Some copies of this very important pioneering work are still available. Published by ALR in 1969, the book is the work of a Czechoslovak interdisciplinary research team headed by Radovan Richta. It appeared late in 1967 in Czechoslovakia and undoubtedly resulted from the deep concern with the crisis in economy, politics and ideology which came to a head there at that time.

Its findings in turn provided the theoretical basis for the Action Program developed by the Czechoslovak Communist Party to meet that crisis.

These national aspects do not, however, detract from the universality of the problems dealt with. The book is a first-class piece of research and analysis about issues confronting all advanced industrial societies, as apt today as it was when published. Over 300 pages of text are supplemented by extensive tables and references. At today’s prices, it is selling cheaply.
5. Wage demands are nowadays often a divisive issue. Apart from the fact that there are now myriads of awards and agreements, the main arguments advanced by unions, especially in over-award campaigns, involve comparison of worker with worker. For example, comparison with the going rate in the district and relativities between skilled and semi- and unskilled workers are crucial factors in seeking a wage rise. This means that there is a vested interest in keeping everybody at different rates, so as each can have an argument.

It is interesting to note that recent research showed that only 7 per cent of unions bothered to utilise company balance sheets, indicating that capacity to pay does not rate highly in reasons advanced for wage increases.

6. A further aspect of the divisiveness of wage issues is that they seek individual solutions to what are mainly social problems. This is considerably reinforced by the nuclear family and its attempts at solving its social and economic problems on its own. This brings about the need to raise more forcibly the issue of the social wage, i.e. social services, pensions, health services etc. and the whole role of the nuclear family as it impinges on the workplace.

All these points are not to suggest that unions drop wage demands. That is not only impossible, but would lead to a demoralised working class, making it more difficult than ever to build consciousness. But it is to suggest that we have to look more deeply at the issues likely to provide a challenge, and that wage demands become an integral part of that whole strategy and not isolated as is currently the case.

The problem is that we tend to see exploitation only in economic terms whereas it is many-sided. The basic reason for exploitation is to provide profit for the exploiter, but it is expressed in such things as inhuman working conditions, unhealthy environment, authoritarian structures leading to indignity, demoralisation and lack of confidence. It is this expression of exploitation that has to be challenged if we are to begin the process of consciousness-raising, and we must not allow it to be obscured by having it expressed only in money terms.

To understand fully the production process and then to begin to exercise some control over it, is the first step in consciousness-raising. This is because it is the area that workers know best, and therefore can see the need for challenge, and how it can be done. Almost any worker in any work-place could tell you how his/her job could be made more efficient or easier, but of course it rarely pays to open your mouth as it could be the end of the job.

At this stage it is worth outlining the experience of the metalworkers at Fiat in Italy, over the last few years, to show what a challenge over work organisation can mean. The unions in Fiat began to raise the issue of work organisation in the mid 'sixties as a basis for rebuilding the union after a period in which little was achieved. Job conditions and work organisation were the issues, because first of all they were the issues about which the workers felt most deeply, and secondly, the issues through which capitalist exploitation is felt most.

"It started with a mere questioning of the factory's methods of organising work, then it developed into demands for checking rights and after that into demands to influence the methods of work itself (piecework, workloads, numbers of workers on the job). Gradually, from here, there were demands to alter working conditions (job ratings and therefore the way a job is done) until the question of investments was reached, what type they should be and where they should be made."

The struggle began to make inroads into work speeds, setting of the piece rates, work hours, a wider range of work for each worker, workloads and so on. This, for the first time, provided a wide basic knowledge of how management organises the work process. It began to demystify the Taylorist method of work fragmentation, and so-called scientific management. As each gain was made it provided a basis for new consciousness to make the next claims that would further encroach on management prerogatives.

What is important is that the union leadership fought extremely hard to prevent these crucial issues from being sidetracked
by purely wage demands, but sought to have such demands made within the context of the overall challenge.

Initially in the middle and late sixties, there were many problems and the workers tended to make only the most obvious demand - higher wages.

To quote again from the report given at an international conference in France in 1974...."The risk was that Fiat might try to limit the trouble by granting wage increases that would have obscured the underlying problems. In fact there was a definite chance that just a wage demand, even for considerable increases, would leave enough room for Fiat to manoeuvre and solve the problem without any real change in industrial relations dominated by the management, and their 'company loyalty', productivity-first, philosophy, and not all workers were aware of this."

In 1969 an important victory was achieved which gave the workers rights of control over timing and workloads. However, this victory had a more significant feature to it. "In order to check observance of these new rates on the assembly line, Fiat recognised a number of 'experts' the union would appoint, selecting them from various teams. From this came the 'team delegates'. In fact, the union decided to have the 'experts', or 'delegates' elected freely, in a secret ballot, irrespective of union affiliation or membership. In this way, they became not just representative of the union, but the direct expression of all the workers and the bearers of their teams' opinions before management."

This very important development in fact created a shop committee (as we know it) that cut across traditional lines of skills, trades, union membership, and helped to eliminate long-standing causes of division. This development was a significant step in the subsequent coming together of the metal unions in Italy. This was only possible because of the challenge launched on the production process.

The big step forward in 1973 was the demand to have a say in Fiat investments.
This was coupled with important campaigns around work environment (dust, humidity, noise, heat, etc.) and health, which had many workers' groups monitoring and noting all the relevant facts on these issues and making some gains. The password in this period became "a new way of working". The agreement reached at this time was that ten billion lire would be set aside for improvements in the working environment, experiments with "assembly islands" (new organisation to break down the assembly line), and an agreement to invest in the south of Italy.

This latter point was to diversify production into such socially useful commodities as rolling stock, buses, earth-moving equipment and to provide employment in the south where it was most badly needed. Due to the onset of the economic crises Fiat was able to frustrate the agreement re the investment.

However, this fight was renewed with greater vigor this year (1977). As with the earlier period it was necessary to struggle against the simple solution of only going for higher wages, thus benefitting those in work and leaving the wider problems to governments and political parties. After considerable struggle this year the results recently achieved are as follows: "Fiat has to provide 5,000 new jobs over the next 3½ years distributed in various areas of the south, acceleration of the process of production diversification in the field of the means of public transport, reduction by half-an-hour of the working hours of shift workers, agreement on the introduction of new technology in important processes, improvements in the work environment and new rights of control."

This constitutes an important and principled victory, especially given the current economic circumstances. To put the strategy into perspective, a last quote from the 1974 report... "It is difficult to explain these struggles on work organisation without speaking at the same time of the general demand for a change in economic policy; may we just emphasise the close relationship between these claims, also because this explains how the workers have come generally to request a policy of development of the south as the main point in a program of deep social reforms - housing, health, public transport, etc. - that by itself would not have been possible without a clear consciousness of the role played by the factory and how work is organised there; and the fact that the movement was able to continually return to work organisation problems as a basis for action on the shop floor, showed that the workers realised this was the hub of capitalist contradictions."

A comment accompanying the report on the recent victories makes it clear that the challenge on work organisation at the point of production was closely allied to, and part of, the general strategy being pursued at the level of national politics in Italy.

It is interesting to note that important gains made by the Swedish workers earlier this year also centred around work environment, health and job security. After a long struggle the unions succeeded in having legislation come into effect on January 1, 1977, which gives the shop floor much greater power over hire and fire, stand-downs, shop steward rights, safety and the environment, and access to company books and information.

The lesson from all this is not that we should follow slavishly the Fiat or Swedish examples, but to study the strategy and tactics used. The keypoint is that they seem to have successfully linked exploitation at the point of production to a long-term strategy, including legislative programs; something that we have not been very successful with in Australia. We suffer usually from one or two problems - we try and develop consciousness from too high a level, requiring a considerable degree of abstraction, or when the issue is close to the bone, it is not seen as relevant in the development of consciousness.

The type of basic issue of work organisation or work environment will be different depending on the industry, skills, sex (some issues will be more important to women than men), and so on. For example, the Lucas Aerospace workers, because they are a highly skilled workforce, appear to have been able to start at a higher level of abstraction than the Fiat workers, i.e. they did not have to go through a couple of the earlier stages. Nevertheless, they would need
to have the general strategy of challenging management at ever higher levels, starting from the most widely based demand applicable at the point of production, and linking that to wider political issues outside the work places.

It must start with such demands as preventing the further fragmentation of work (an aspect that is increasing with new technology), with demands to improve the work environment to make it healthier and more pleasant, to break down hours and importantly to challenge the rights of supervision. After all, if a group of workers can't confidently challenge supervision, and at least the lower levels of the hierarchy, they are hardly likely to be able to challenge the government or the system. Each one of these issues will require a well worked out log of claims of its own.

An important integral part of this has got to be a wage policy that is based on whole new criteria. As the work organisation and hierarchy is demystified, workers will get a new appreciation of each other's value to the process, and base wage scales on that. Use of wider skills, co-operation, development of a team spirit, etc., led the Fiat workers to begin to break down the traditional and artificial relativities and status differences and make wage demands that have begun the long process towards a socialist appreciation of people's worth to the community. Such a development is inevitable once we begin to control the work process. A similar process has occurred in the self-managed factory "Dynavac" in Melbourne. Wage relativities have been compressed because the workers set the rates and they have developed a complicated set of criteria concerned with a range of issues which has helped to break down much of the divisive aspects of wage rates.

It is becoming urgent in the current economic circumstances that we evolve a strategy that goes beyond the traditional economism and pragmatism of the Australian labour movement. It has to be a strategy that takes up the immediate issues at the job face which challenge the power structure, and be prepared for it to develop through various unavoidable stages over a number of years. The stages should lead to major demands and struggles for whole alternative socially useful programs for the companies or industries, devised by the workers, and in alliance with and impacting the wider political developments in the country.

The crucial elements must be:

1. That they begin where exploitation is best understood and manifested, which is usually at the point of production.
2. That the demands are winnable.
3. That they challenge an aspect of the boss's control.
4. That each succeeding demand opens up the next winnable demand.
5. That it is within the context of an overall socialist political strategy.

The way to get started is not simply to repeat ad nauseam to workers that they are exploited, but to provide the necessary skills which will enable them to do something about those aspects of exploitation which they already identify with and wish to act upon.