As is to be expected in times of social crisis there is a growing trend in ruling circles in the capitalist democracies to adopt authoritarian and repressive methods to cope with the problems besetting them. This trend takes a variety of forms, including:

* Covert support for, or turning a blind eye to, extremist rightwing groups like the National Front.

* The ‘creeping fascism’ tactic of imposing partial constraints on democratic rights, as exemplified by recent events in Queensland. (See the article by Hugh Hamilton in this ALR.) Such measures not only restrict particular rights; they are also designed to create a climate of tension which can be used as an excuse for further repression. And they are a useful thermometer to gauge public reaction and assess just what people will accept.

* Sophisticated propaganda campaigns against unions in the name of democracy. This approach uses ceaseless media hammering of the idea that union leaders ‘run the country’ and force their members to do things like strike. It skilfully plays on some legitimate discontent amongst workers over the bureaucratic nature of unions (the worst offenders though, in this regard, are the most docile industrially). The ‘Right to Work’ legislation being adopted in the Liberal/NCP states is a further refinement, cloaking an anti-democratic law in a seemingly democratic garb.

* Increasing the powers and organisation of the various ‘security’ services under the pretext of anti-terrorism but with the real aim of increasing surveillance and intimidation of all opposition forces.

All these and other similar moves add up to a cautious, step-by-step strategy of containing dissent and isolating the most dangerous opposition forces preparatory to destroying or neutralising them. The left should not underestimate the dangers it and the broader working class and progressive movements face if the growing climate of
authoritarianism and repression intimidates people or, worse still, convinces them ideologically that such measures are necessary to solve problems such as inflation and unemployment.

It would be a mistake to believe that the conscious aim of the ruling class at present is to establish some new form of fascism. Fascism, 'the openly terroristic rule of the big bourgeoisie', means the denial of all democratic liberties; civil, political and industrial. Historically, it arose out of the economic and social crisis following World War I, a crisis much more severe than the present one, at any rate so far. Since that time more advanced and sophisticated tools of social control have been developed in all areas: economy, ideology and culture, politics and physical force. So far in the advanced capitalist democracies (with the possible exception of Italy) the balanced use of these has been sufficient to maintain order of the system. The manipulative use of parliamentary democracy and clever use of the modern mass media are two examples.

Naturally, as the effectiveness of these tools diminishes so does the trend to authoritarianism and repression increase. In this situation the struggle for democratic rights of all kinds assumes great importance for the left in both a defensive and a strategic sense. A strategy for the democratic movement and an analysis of the role of the democratic struggle in the more general struggle for socialism are therefore essential.

A good starting point is the assertion, which can be backed up by a deal of historical evidence as well as current experience, that antidemocratic and authoritarian trends are both necessary and logical for the ruling class in situations such as the present. At a time of crisis it is difficult if not impossible for an establishment to be as tolerant of dissent and opposition as in more stable times. In the first place, this is so because contention over policy and directions for society is objectively more dangerous when the system is in difficulties. There is less room to manoeuvre, it is more vital than usual that the ruling class policy be implemented exactly without influence by the needs of other classes and opposition movements, if they 'get out of hand', they may strike a deeper chord of discontent than in 'good times'. And in the second place it is so because subjectively a ruling class at such times feels more insecure and therefore less tolerant, whether or not its fears of what might happen if it doesn't clamp down are justified. It can't afford to take the risk, as it were.

It should be remembered too that existing democratic rights are not simply 'bourgeois': many of them were not invented or easily conceded by the bourgeoisie. Rather they were the outcome of struggles, often long and bitter, by the 'lower orders' of the newly established capitalist society: workers, peasants, women, etc. Universal suffrage for men of all classes and votes for women are two good examples. Even more is this true of workers’ class rights, such as the right to form unions and job organisations, conduct strikes and so on. Many of these rights were forced on the bourgeoisie, which accepts them only so long as it has to or while the exercise of those rights does not seriously threaten it. The ruling class always hankers after 'the good old days' when the masses had even less rights than they do now. Thus, in good times or bad, the tendency of the ruling class is to restrict and limit democracy.

This by itself has important implications for socialist strategy but there is a further, perhaps more important point. The ruling class never wants an expansion of democracy. It fears, denounces as subversive and fights tooth and nail against democratisation at any level of society, whether it be a more democratic electoral system or more rights for workers on the job. For these reasons, struggles for both the defence and extension of democratic rights are potentially anti-capitalist, especially at times of crisis when ruling class authoritarianism is heightened.

As part of a socialist strategy, democratic struggles are important in several respects: ideological, educational and organisational. Ideological, because one of the central myths of the system is that it is free and democratic, as opposed to socialism which is supposed to be inevitably dictatorial and bureaucratic. Any struggle which helps people to see the limitations of bourgeois democracy therefore plays a part in breaking down the ideological hegemony of the system. This is made all the more important by the fact that the lack of democracy in industrialised socialist countries, especially the Soviet Union,
COMMENT makes the myth of a free and democratic capitalism versus an unfree socialism more believable.

The educative value of democratic struggles is that participants in them may more easily find out the real views of the establishment on democracy. This happened in a striking way in the movement against Kerr’s sacking of Whitlam but it can also happen, for example, at a job level. Quite minor demands for worker involvement in decision-making meet with very hostile responses. Most businesses in Australia at present oppose workers’ participation, let alone workers’ control.

Democratic struggles are also important to preserve basic organisational rights (job, union, party and movement) without which there is no possibility of any real opposition to a powerful and well-organised ruling class. These basic organisational rights are under strong attack at workplace level and through legislation like the ‘Right to Work’ laws and the recent laws introduced by all the Lib/NCP governments to destroy the Australian Union of Students. These defensive struggles are important in themselves to preserve workers’ organisational and political strength which in the last analysis is the only real barrier to authoritarian threats. But they can also, in some circumstances, lead to offensive struggles.

Seen in a still wider perspective democratic struggles can develop a ‘transitional’ aspect; that is they can begin to take the movement out of the narrow confines of the system. This is especially so if the expansion of democracy can be raised alongside defence of existing rights. In this connection, the origins of the term ‘Social Democracy’ should be remembered. This term was accepted by all the socialist parties up to World War I, when the sellout to national chauvinism by the majority gave it such a bad name that the left, in the first instance the Bolsheviks, chose the name communist instead. The term originally distinguished the working class parties from bourgeois democratic parties. It was meant to convey that they stood for a democracy going beyond political democracy (right to vote for a parliament, etc.) by extending it into other areas of social life, especially economic life, where the capitalists had all the rights and ‘votes’ and the workers virtually none. The qualitative extension of democracy could only be achieved through economic and social democramtisation. This concept is the link between the original formulation of the aims of socialism and the present-day concept of self-management socialism. The superior democracy of self-management socialism compared to either capitalism or bureaucratic socialism is a significant part of its appeal and may be for many a way into development of a more rounded socialist consciousness.

Given these general points, how should the left approach current democratic struggles? In the first place, some dangers in the present situation should not be ignored. While the conservative forces have a healthy respect for the fighting potential of the trade unions and other mass movements they have also shown a capacity to carefully test out the limits of this potential. Instead of head on confrontation with all the movement at once, there is a series of moves in one place and then another, with the results of each move assessed before moving further. In some important respects this strategy has succeeded and there has not been nearly the response there should have. A good example is the lack of a concerted union response, in action, to attacks on the unemployed by governments, business and the media. And the response to the blatantly undemocratic street march laws in Queensland has not been what it should be. There seems to be a numbed acceptance by many ordinary people, either because they accept Bjelke-Petersen’s views or because they feel intimidated and that nothing can be done to change things. Either way, the future is black unless a very broad and powerful movement can be mobilised.

That requires, as in other struggles, an end to all forms of left purism and a reaching out to all potential allies, starting on their terms and in their language. For reasons discussed above, it is important to the left that the democratic movement succeed even if only in the limited defensive aspect. Whether the movement goes beyond defence to a struggle for expanded democracy depends on such things as how the establishment responds and how well, or badly, the left works in the movement.

—B.A., 20.6.78.