TRADE UNIONS & REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY

Joe Palmada

It was Marx who first pointed out that, under capitalism, social relations are not seen as relations between people and all that involves in terms of human values. They are seen rather as relations between things, between machines and the commodities produced. Never has this been more clearly expressed than in this period of 'neo-capitalism' and the 'consumer society'.

If we were not aware before, then the experience of some socialist states has shown that the revolutionary act involves not only the destruction of the economic and political power of capitalism, but also the construction of a whole new social order of things in which the newly liberated forces of production find both adequate forms for their further development and, perhaps more importantly, the coming to fruition of a new ethic of human relations — an ethic which sees the new society in terms of people as individuals as well as social beings. This ethic includes new concepts of democracy, freedom, creative initiative, a sense of being, respect for the individual, and so on — all those human ideals which have inspired revolutionaries over the years but which do not automatically come into existence at the instant when political power passes into the hands of the formerly oppressed classes. In the beginning, the new socialist state will, of necessity, take over many practices, traditions and habits of capitalism.

What the working class and other oppressed classes aspire to in the new society and, more importantly, the extent to which they struggle for it in capitalist society, will play a major role in moulding the society of the future. I say this, for I believe that, in developing the class struggle under capitalism, the strategy and tactics of revolutionaries, together with their concepts of organisation, institutions and structures must contain within them the embryo of the socialist society that revolutionaries strive for. Double standards should have no place in the socialist society of the future.

The conditions for revolution — for radical transformation to a socialist society — is neither willed directly by the political party, the trade unions, nor even by the working class. The socialist revolution is the result of a whole complex of historical circumstances, upon and within which the masses, particularly the working class (understood in the broadest sense) must exercise its active and conscious influence.

The pre-requisite for this intervention is the revolutionising of the working class as a whole. This means, in essence, a stage being reached when the working class no longer merely refuses, spasmodically, and in a general way, to collaborate with the ruling institutions of the capitalist class and state, no longer takes a stand that represents solely an opposition confined within the framework of capitalist democracy. It means that the working class, as it actually exists in factories, whole industries and localities, launches a movement that challenges fundamentally the capitalist state, its institutions, its values.

The organised working class, in their trade unions, must be assisted in this role which, by the very nature of the spontaneous movement expressed in their day to day struggle against capital, they are prevented from seeing clearly. The development of trade union organisation is characterised by two main features:

- the trade union movement embraces an ever-expanding and ideologically diverse number of workers
- of necessity, the union concentrates and generalises its activities so that the power and discipline of the movement tends to concentrate in centralised leadership from which control is exercised. The general tendency of this type of leadership is to become more and more remote from the masses, from the workshop or office, thus losing close touch with the moods and currents that characterise the spontaneous struggles of the working class.

As well as assisting the unions to gain legal recognition by the capitalist state (partly because the capitalist class saw the need to facilitate and regularise their right to represent, in an "orderly" fashion, the workers' demands, and partly to make the workers' demands subject to legal endorsement), this tendency, at the same time, spontaneously enmeshes the workers' organisation in the framework of capitalist society and capitalist class laws.

Legal recognition of the trade unions was, of course, a tremendous victory for the working class and has assisted considerably in the improvement of the material conditions of the working class. But such a situation represents no more than a necessary compromise with capital, a compromise determined by the nature of the struggle when it is confined merely at the level of fighting for a

Joe Palmada is a member of the National Executive of the Communist Party of Australia.
greater share, or merely maintaining the share, of what the workers produce.

The trade unions can only become an instrument of revolutionary change if their leadership recognises not only the importance of the economic struggle but also its limitations, and constantly makes preparations for the moral and political awareness of the workers for an offensive of a different kind, a radical transformation of the capitalist system itself.

If the tendency of the trade unions towards centralism and a central apparatus has its strengths and advantages, it also has its weaknesses. This is a growing remoteness from the workers at grass-roots level, and a tendency towards bureaucratisation of the institutional structure of the union movement embodied in its rules and constitutions.

The workers throw up their own organisation at shop floor level spontaneously. Sometimes they are encouraged by the more conscious of union leaderships; sometimes, indeed in general, they are discouraged, or at least contained, by such restrictions as the A.C.T.U. Charter for Shop Committees.

By its very nature, the shop committee wages the class struggle constantly, for this is where class conflict is more clearly defined. The bureaucratic structure and form of the trade union, however, in general tends towards settling and resolving class conflict. There are, of course, exceptions among those trade union leaders who exert a lot of energy in promoting and encouraging the workers' struggles and refuse to be contained. But here, I am not referring so much to individual trade union leaderships but rather to the inherent bureaucratic nature of the trade union structure, its rules and constitutions. This has two sides—both unity and conflict with the spontaneous movement of the rank and file.

It is precisely this relationship which requires greater study and clarity. The relationship between the two institutions—the trade union, and its official organisational structure on the one hand, and the "unofficial" shop committee on the other, should be such that every spontaneous movement by the workers at grass-roots level should not result in an assumption of control by the union. The shop committee, and workers, will accept and assimilate the discipline of the union leadership to the extent that its autonomy and freedom to act is respected and encouraged. In this respect, the shop committee organisation must be seen to be, and encouraged to become, a counter-balance to the inherent bureaucratic nature of the official trade union structure.

The concept that sees the shop committee as a mere instrument in the trade union struggle—a concept expressed in authoritarian discipline and the right of direct control over it, means that the committee becomes emasculated as a force for revolutionary activity and expansion. The real power of the job or area committees consists in the fact that they are close to, and conform more closely to the consciousness of the workers who are constantly developing new initiatives in their struggle against capital. Today, more than ever, and for a variety of reasons which space does not permit us to develop here, smaller and smaller numbers of workers actually participate in the life of the union—general meetings, elections, etc. But at job level, and with greater possibilities in whole industrial areas, the workers' actual participation is, and can be much higher.

Revolutionaries are vitally interested (or should be) in two main areas of work among the working class:

- The workers' struggles for both the immediate and long-term interests of the class.
- How political consciousness and social awareness can be developed in the course of these struggles.

These two areas of work and responsibility embrace a whole complex of demands and issues—economic, political and social.

If we examine the present workers' movement in Australia, we find that it is characterised by the development of a spontaneous movement embracing ever-widening categories of workers. A new feature of this movement is that it continues to develop alongside a steady growth of unemployment—a factor which in past circumstances has had a tendency to dampen the militant movement.

What is the nature of this movement and what is its motivation? In brief, the immediate reasons lie in the steady erosion of real wages through the inflationary cost spiral, monopoly manipulation of prices, and the effects of increasing direct and indirect taxation. Whilst these factors constitute the main pressures propelling the spontaneous movement, other issues of deeper significance are beginning to emerge which demand further analysis. That is, the growing number of strikes associated with political and social issues and questions of managerial policy. The following table shows a steady increase in strike struggles around managerial policies and "others", which include political and social issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF DISPUTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAUSE OF DISPUTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave, pensions compensation etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical working conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade unionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,273 1,340 1,713 2,014 2,738 497 449</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The significance of the above statistics is that they reveal a growing challenge by the workers to managerial policy-making which reflects the beginning of consciousness towards challenging the power base, and for greater workers' participation in decision-making. It reveals, as well, a growing participation by the organised workers in the political and social issues of the day.
As well as the objective factors associated with the spontaneous movement and mentioned previously, two important subjective factors have operated which give momentum to it . . .

- the favourable conditions created by the movement for over-award payments which began in the middle 1960's. For instance, in 1967-68, over-award payments accounted for about 15 per cent of the increase in average weekly earnings. In 1969, this had increased to about 30 per cent, and last year, it was estimated that over-award payments accounted for as much as 40 per cent of the increase in weekly earnings.

- The impetus given to the movement as a result of the moratorium on the use of the most obnoxious features of the penal powers of the Arbitration Act following the national strike of May 1968.

These facts reveal two important phenomena. Firstly, the militant section of the working class (an ever-widening section in narrow trade union terms, including sections of workers with right wing leaderships, some never having been in a strike before in their history, such as NSW plumbers, textile workers, etc.) has revealed a determination to maintain its share of the gross national product.

Notwithstanding the inherently defensive nature of the struggle and the fact that the gap between the skilled and unskilled, the more strategically placed and the not-so-strategically placed workers, and Australian-born and migrant workers, continues to grow, the movement is important inasmuch as it holds the potential for a wider, more conscious offensive action provided both its limitations and its potential are understood.

Secondly, the movement reveals a strong trend away from the established institutions of arbitration and towards direct negotiation as a means of satisfying the economic demands. This does not mean that the workers have abandoned arbitration nor that, as yet, it is a fully integrated concept with its ramifications understood by the class as a whole. Rather it is a movement which sees a much easier and quicker method of satisfying demands through a direct confrontation with each employer or with groups of employers.

Whilst viewing this trend as positive because of this and the potential it holds for a better understanding of a new concept of industrial relations (indeed, the whole process of industrial democracy, not the least important of which is "workers' control"), its weakness lies in the subjective pressures involved. Herein lies the weakness of job or industry organisation if, as so often happens, the workers seek to resolve their problems separately, exclusive of the interests either of other sections of the working class, or other oppressed classes.

They are assisted in this delusion by virtue of the "special" or "privileged" position some sections of the working class occupy in the scheme of production, such as certain sections of heavy industry, some areas of construction, maritime workers, etc. This raises the question of how the workers' grassroots organisation in this or that factory or industry can recognise or become conscious of the identity of interests among themselves and between themselves and other oppressed strata. Such understanding can come only partly from within the spontaneous movement; it has to be developed from outside, by the working class political movement.

The preoccupation of the trade union movement with somewhat narrow economic issues, their lack of mass involvement in the struggles around the broader political and social issues, and weak trade union responses to the social injustices of this society, are bringing into question among the youth, the viability of the trade unions.

Such an attitude has some basis in the role and approach of most unions today. We see it reflected in the erroneous, subjective responses that reject the concept of the decisive role of the working class and the trade unions as a viable force for revolution, and the development of new theories for the destruction of capitalism expressed, for example, in such slogans as the "right not to work". Such a slogan is acted out by some of the youth who, rejecting capitalist life-styles, opt out of the rat-race and develop their own counter-culture — rejecting both work and the values of a consumer society associated with it.

The basis of this concept — the right not to work — which, in itself, contains considerable validity, proceeds from a rejection of the hypocrisy of this society with its consumer ethic and its moral values that declare it obscene to use a four-letter word in public at the same time as it glorifies and tolerates the obscenity of war, particularly the obscenity of the Indo-China war of U.S. aggression.

This attitude is perhaps easily enough understood, particularly for its counter to the capitalist ethic, but to elevate the symptoms of an ever-expanding alienation in society to a primary revolutionary force is to place undue emphasis on effects and not causes. Alienation is not new in capitalist society. It began with commodity production and the consequent division of labour in the productive process. Today, in the era of the scientific and technological revolution, this process of the division of labour has accelerated, making still more acute the producers' alienation from the processes and results of their creative labour. The worker becomes a mere cog in the production process, far removed from concern with the end result of what is produced for society, or even whether society needs what is produced.

Life becomes more meaningless, with little more purpose than the need to "keep up with the Joneses". This is what is being rejected. In the words of C. Wright Mills ... "Each day men sell little pieces of themselves in order to try to buy them back each night and week-end with the coin of fun."

To illustrate the point more clearly: in the days of developing capitalism, science and the work of scientists was confined mainly to the universities,
and the results of their work was more or less peripheral to the production process. Whilst the scientist served industry, it was mainly indirectly, the fruits of scientific discovery flowing to, and becoming adapted to, production, as a matter of course rather than by deliberate design.

In the age of the scientific and technological revolution, the ever-widening branches of science are directly related to the production process in what is termed “research and development”. In advanced areas of production as much, sometimes even more, capital is invested in the area of “R and D”, which, like the machines and raw materials becomes an extension of the “means of production”.

The mental labour-power of the scientist, chemist or technician becomes a commodity, just as much as the manual labour of the labourer, thus reducing them to wage-labourers and widening the strata of the working class. This is but one effect, albeit an important one, but for the purpose of illustrating the point, we stress the second aspect. A chemist working for a multinational corporation, say I.C.I., can never be sure whether what he discovers, and is appropriated by the capitalist, will end up as a new fabric to clothe society or a chemical to defoliate a Vietnam jungle.


The first he calls “powerlessness” which he defines as the inability to control work, such as the inability to influence management decisions, lack of control over immediate work processes and lack of control over conditions of employment.

The second he calls “meaninglessness” which he defines as the inability of the worker to develop a sense of purpose by seeing the relationship between his job and the over-all production process.

The third, “isolation”, is the lack of membership of industrial communities and is reflected in impersonal administration and the absence of informal groups.

Fourthly, “self-estrangement”, is the failure to become involved in work as a means of self-expression. It is reflected in the isolation and separation of work from the totality of social life, and in work being simply instrumental (a source of income) rather than a source of intrinsic satisfaction.

Whether one agrees with these definitions or not, it is clear that alienation has its origin in the division of labour in the production process.

It seems to me that the solution cannot be found in merely opting out of capitalist society, but rather understanding better its causes and organising an assault on the root causes. The “right not to work” is a negative slogan, even though it reflects positively an opposition to capitalist society. Rather, the slogan should be “a right to purposeful work — a right to meaningful leisure”. However, it will not be slogans which alter the situation, but action; and not in some future society, but now!

If alienation means “powerlessness” as defined by Blauner, as being the “inability to control work, influence management decisions, lack of control over immediate work processes and lack of control over conditions of employment”, how relevant then is the demand for workers’ control? Is it merely a gimmick, an example of “left-adventurism”, or class collaboration? or does it have a real validity in the “revolutionising” of the working class? And how relevant to the revolutionary work of the trade unions are such struggles as the prevention of the destruction of historic buildings, the preservation of parks, prevention of pollution, direct trade union-worker intervention in the ecology-resources crisis, quality, production standards, and so on?

I firmly believe that the trade unions, as workers’ main organisations, are relevant — that they can and will become an important component in the vehicle for radical social change. But for this to happen, trade union leaderships and structures, like the concepts which guide them, must conform to, and accommodate, not only the new issues, but, above all, the democratic participation of the rank and file and their organisations at grass-roots level.

A new movement must be developed which extends the workers’ organisation at factory, shop and area level — a movement which encourages and develops the initiatives of the workers and assists them to find expression for their activities in organisation which they truly feel is theirs.