TRADE UNIONS AND REVOLUTION

The revolutionary Left in Australia has its own inheritance. Partly due to the influence of the new Left, many old shibboleths have been discarded. A survivor that has been uncritically embraced by many new forces as well as being carried on by the older, is the belief in the potential of the trade unions, as social institutions, to become a real force for revolution.

The peculiar Stalinist proposition that the workers regard their unions as “citadels” in the struggle against capital persists. And this is so in the attitudes of those who are fond of characterising others as stalinists.
At the 23rd Congress of the CPA the view was accepted that the unions “should be seen as instruments for social change, for the training of workers for a revolutionary transformation of society. Revolutionaries should grasp the potentialities and work to influence the unions to become vehicles for radical social change, for socialism with a human face, to accord with the best traditions, history and culture of our people.” (Emphasis added.)

This view needs more serious consideration, not only for the way in which it is interpreted into practice, but for itself and its implications.

It would seem to be held that there is some absolute connection between working to raise revolutionary consciousness and work in the trade unions as being essential to this end.

Any questioning of this tenet is taken to mean that one is discarding the working class as a revolutionary force. The more is this so if it is suggested that the trade union movement, at this moment, has become a barrier to bringing workers to the position of realising their true potential. It is further distorted to mean that it is “giving the unions away” entirely, or that the view is that they are no longer relevant to the workers’ day-to-day struggles, and so on.

The unions are part of our reality and their relevance for the purpose for which they exist is not in question. What is, is the practice of “revolutionaries” in them and among the workers.

Why were the trade unions formed and why do they exist today? What are their characteristics?

They exist to represent the interests of the working class within capitalist society. The trade unions merely express the fact that classes exist. Whether they can be transformed into something different is the point at issue.

Their legal recognition by the State (admittedly as a result of prolonged struggle) enmeshed the workers’ organisation in the framework of capitalist society and capitalist laws. In the nature of things this was inevitable.

MILITANCY AND ITS DIRECTION

Revolutionary politics is often expressed simply as trade union struggle. Militant trade unionism, and its promotion, is seen as the essence of revolutionary work. The need for political programs of struggle is often relegated to the background or narrowed down to achieving immediate and realisable demands within the system.

The conditions for revolutionary change do not include the prerequisite of the revolutionising of the working class as a whole. It never has previously and its possibility is as doubtful as its necessity. The neutrality of the majority or a passive tolerance towards the advanced forces and their actions would seem to be a more appropriate requirement.

The militant workers are those who are active unionists, who act in militant ways in pursuit of their own interests but who, in most cases, support the system. The importance of militancy on matters of self-interest is still grossly over-rated as a base for developing revolutionary consciousness.

Outside the militants, who are the minority, how do the workers really see the trade union movement? Often as something akin to the way they regard health funds. As a begrudged expense, necessary in terms of social insurance, the structures of which are the property of others and have but a remote connection with those who belong to them.

"New unionism" has been advanced as the way to change this and there have been some notable developments in some directions in recent years. Some trade union officials (particularly builders laborers) in seeing the need to take a new direction have "intervened" against bureaucracies in social issues. In using their position among workers and in the trade union movement to this end, they have put their own position on the line. Attempts to involve the workers and release the latent mass initiatives that are so often untapped have met with some success.

Generally, however, within the trade union movement, this intervention has been narrowly based and restricted to top decision-making bodies, such as the ACTU, some TLCs and union executives. They have not involved the workers (and often meeting with widespread hostility) because union bureaucracies are hopelessly tied to the system.

To encourage changed attitudes on racism, sexism, pollution, the environment is (or should be) basic to any who regard themselves as siding with the people’s interests. The involvement of trade unions in those causes formerly espoused by academics and middle class do-gooders is to be welcomed and fought for. But it does not necessarily mean some sort of revolutionary turning
point in the activity of the trade union movement.

WHAT ARE REVOLUTIONARY PRIORITIES?

In the above, where does the revolutionary vanguard (party? group? Marxist viewpoint? -- what you will) influence the particular issue? Who draws the longer-range conclusions? Who seeks to invest the movement with a revolutionary consciousness that enables the struggle to be ended so that it advances the understanding of the participants that the whole system is wrong and has to be destroyed or that results in another victory for militant reforms of the system while leaving it intact and able to absorb the changes?

Every struggle should be studied in this light. On the job -- work-ins, refusal to be sacked, actions against managerial policies, actions for job control. Outside -- resistance to developers, to the building of freeways, to defeating bureaucracies that are heedless of people's needs and lives. Should not the criteria in all these struggles be whether there were advances in revolutionary ideology of the participants, could there have been in the circumstances, how could these have been enhanced?

Where do the priorities of revolutionaries lie?

Consider the time spent in fractions of trade unions and or industrial groups in discussing trade union "tactics," in meetings to discuss trade union elections, in meetings to discuss rules, constitutions and administration. Consider the time spent in executive and committee meetings and even those deadly union meetings (followed by the all-male piss-up in the pub afterwards) because the past hangs to us and it is the thing to do. Whereas it is all mostly sterile and useless. The time spent in these internal matters would be much more usefully devoted to consciousness raising on those issues that will help produce a new radical outlook. Revolutionary ideas have a power and attraction of their own. If there is added to this an attempt to give life to those ideas, particularly by personal example in living and on the issues of non-self interest (war, racism, sexism), then one can sense and in fact show a growth of radicalisation which takes a new leap with the involvement of others.

WHAT KIND OF JOB ORGANISATION?

There needs to be a continual confrontation and challenge to bourgeois ideology. Lessons of the anti-war movement in forcing liberals and opportunists to reveal their real position or change, need to be related to the human, personal level -- on racism, sexism, human liberation. One does get responses.

Priority should be given to building workplace organisation of revolutionary and militant workers -- in developing and presenting their own, independent Marxist view on issues while participating in them, and relating these to the wider and decisive struggle to alter each other and the whole system. Such groupings should be non-exclusive and embrace all Left tendencies and ideas.

The main energy should be directed to such job organisation, outside any official structures of the trade unions. Organisations that will concern themselves with consciousness raising, education and developing Marxist ideas and attitudes. The retort that this is sectarian, elitist, revolutionary purism is predictable. All revolutionaries are part of the struggles of workers among whom they work and participate in them (or they should). This is a different matter from playing at being a Left reformist who can prove to be more militant than some Rightwing counterpart.

Such revolutionary groupings are not adjuncts of the trade unions, nor connected with them, but alliances of people with mutually respected outlooks, aimed at taking up issues of the ideological conditioning of people and the issues that will bring those they influence into direct confrontation with the system. They could help give validity to the view that the purpose, contrary to much practice today, is not to solve the problems of bourgeois society but to raise consciousness that will enable people to act for real social change.

-- Hal Alexander.

WORKERS' CONTROL

Much of the discussion around workers' control quickly arrives at a position where it sees the unions and their leaders as significant roadblocks standing in the way of industrial action of all types by wage and salary earners. The trade unions are held to be too authoritarian, too prone to making decisions at the top which affect members and on which the members have strong views, too slow to make decisions, and too slow to act on them, too closely integrated into the capitalist system, and too predictable in their reactions to industrial events.

The kinds of responses of trade unions to events are held to be too limited in number, and the range of issues with which they deal
too narrow. Some of the unionists who are more political see trade unions as not being the agents for revolutionary transformation they were sometimes thought to be, and conclude that they must therefore be for the status quo, or at best agents for minor reform, capable of being realised within the capitalist system.

How much substance is there in these views? Many unionists will have experienced the high-handed attitudes of trade union officials telling them what they (the members) must or must not do. No doubt some of the reasons for this can be traced to the pressure of work on officials, and to the notion that such an approach gets rid of the problem quickly and allows them to get on with the next job.

It might also be because the official has experienced that problem before and knows precisely how to deal with it to resolve it quickly. It would be very frustrating for him/her to have to wait while the members think the problem through and perhaps decide upon a line of action despite the contrary advice of the official. Lack of patience and increasing frustration could well be the price of greater experience. On the other hand, it must be remembered that many sincere officials will want to draw on their experience and argue forcefully to try to prevent members from “getting their fingers burnt” and will see this correctly as a legitimate function of a trade union leader. Many union activists, let alone officials, in their experience in that same action initiated from the shop floor, in a genuine attempt to improve a situation, can produce disastrous effects, even, perhaps, destroying the shop floor organisation in the process.

The official’s general outlook to industrial disputes will be important. Some take the view that they should handle every problem in order to justify their existence to the members and ensure their re-election. This attitude too may be born out of experience. As a student at a recent AMWU shop stewards’ school said: “Often the members come up with a problem and when I begin to discuss it with them in order to help them to solve it rather than solve it myself, their reaction is ‘You’re the shop steward, you solve it’.”

Some officials discourage members acting on their own behalf, being concerned that no competent rank and file should emerge who would be a threat to them at the next election. Others handle every problem so as to prevent the rank and file gaining experience of industrial action. Still others have the ego problem.

Another reason for authoritarianism or decision-making by groups at the top is that it is easier. If decisions made can be handed down and accepted, the initiative will remain with the top committees and subsequent action will be along the lines with which they are familiar and with which they can cope.

Thus, at a union-organised meeting at GMH at Pagewood recently to seek endorsement of the company’s pay offer, those organising it insisted that there should be no comment from the floor of the meeting to the propositions that were to be put. It was only the stronger insistence of shop stewards that they would not be prevented from speaking on something with which they disagreed which permitted the rank and file to be heard.

On the other hand, at a recent mass meeting in Newcastle during the BHP dispute, the opportunity arose for the rank and file organisation to raise its objections to those aspects of the conduct of the dispute with which it disagreed, and yet not a word was said. Thus, in one case, the union officials attempted to stifle any discussion and initiative from the floor and were prevented from succeeding only by the experienced shop stewards taking a stand. In the other case, the hearts of some officials would have been gladdened if the rank and file had shown some initiative and had had something to say. The important point is not to lump all trade unions, committees and officers together, but to distinguish between those who will encourage and facilitate greater involvement and action by wage and salary earners in their own interests and those that won’t, even if that action is aimed at improving the quality of the union.

As to the question of whether or not the trade unions are too slow to make decisions and too slow to act on them, on some issues they are guilty on both counts. Take for example the series of nuclear tests planned by France for early July. With all the past policy resolutions about opposition to nuclear testing, how many central union bodies issued protests by media releases outlining their policy, or, better still, how many initiated some action on the issue, and how long did they take to do so? The lack of response will no doubt leave the critics of the trade unions able to say, “That proves the point,” but then how many unionists have asked themselves “What did my mates and I do to give life to our union’s policy of opposition to such testing?” or, alternatively, “What did we do to change our union’s policy to one of opposition to these tests?”

Lack of activity by the central body of the union does not prevent activity by the rank and file. The problem is to get activity by the rank and file even if the central union body has acted. But unions are not always slow to decide on activity. Groups of citizens in such areas as the Rocks, Wolloomooloo, and Centennial Park were no doubt very
pleased with the speed with which the Builders' Laborers' Federation responded to their calls for assistance to prevent destruction of their homes or of parkland.

To the question of whether the trade unions are hopelessly integrated into the capitalist system or not the short answer is probably "yes;" but having said that we haven't said much. It is not only quiescent trade unions which are integrated, but militant trade unions actively pursuing higher wages and better conditions also perform a function which contributes to the evolution of the capitalist system. And yet they are necessary. There remains a pressing need for strong organisations to which wage and salary earners, militant or otherwise, can turn to handle the host of small and large problems they encounter daily. It is not practical to think in terms of some other form of workers' organisation supplanting the trade unions, or that wage and salary earners can improve their position in the absence of some on-going organisational form. The more appropriate question seems to be that given the existence of trade unions, which have been established by wage and salary earners at great cost to preserve and advance their working and living conditions, how can these institutions be transformed in such a manner as to assist them to obtain greater control over their working environment and in other ways to create the kind of future they want? This question is not easily answered and there is a great temptation to throw up one's hands and say "We'll never change the trade unions." If by saying this we mean that we will never change the attitudes of those who attend their union branch meetings then we can reasonably expect that it will be even more difficult to change the attitudes of those who don't (who are by far the greater number). This indicates the size of the problem. If on the other hand we mean we will never change the attitudes of trade union leaders then we need to look carefully at our whole approach to basic social change and how it comes about, and the respective roles played by leaders and by the rank and file.

An often valid criticism of trade unions and their activities is that their reactions are predictable. To what extent have patterns of behavior become so firmly fixed as to be not only anticipated by employers but brought into their planning? To what extent do both union officials and the rank and file search for variations in their activities which will enable them to retain the initiative and will not be predicted? There are other factors too, such as an awareness of the total environment in which an employer operates -- for example, knowledge as to who are his suppliers and customers, and consideration of the extent to which they can be recruited as allies in any dispute or their opposition neutralised.

Those trade unions that restrict themselves to the income side of the members' affairs immediately narrow the range of activities on which they can be relevant to their members. If they take the broader view that they are concerned with the affairs of the member as a citizen outside the factory as well as within it, then the expenditure side comes into focus bringing with it all the activities of Government, and the other institutions in society which affect price, quality and the availability (or the lack of it) of goods and services.

In all the circumstances of the wide diversity in approach, in tradition, in area of operation and of power of the respective trade unions, the most sensible proposition seems to be that the ideas of workers' control should continue to be discussed and actions should be initiated in which wage and salary earners see that by their own actions they can influence the course of events. In this day of massive aggregations of power of all kinds such a realisation is extremely important. While actions on their own behalf may be only of a limited nature, the educational process will be invaluable and could well stimulate action around other issues previously considered too big to tackle.

It is in the nature of things that some section of any movement will have advanced ideas and if, in the case under discussion, these ideas lead to action these actions could well have a much greater chance of success if they take place under the protective umbrella of an established trade union. This is not to say that actions should not be taken without the support, tacit or otherwise, of the union organisation -- indeed the speed of events may dictate the course of action irrespective of how long the union committees take to formulate a policy and whether or not they finally offer support. What is being said is simply that if the existing organisation and power of some sections, large or small, of the trade union movement can be geared up to support those taking the advanced action, they will have a much greater chance of success.

While such advanced actions are being planned and executed, the bulk of the under-staffed union apparatus can get on with the so-called mundane activities, such as arguing about logs of claims with employers, or trying to convince them of their minimum obligations under the award, which activities the voting members insist be carried out.

The workers' control movement and the trade unions are thus seen as being complementary to one another -- the trade unions
as benefiting from the stimulation and perhaps the success of new actions to change the distribution of power on whatever level in the society, and the workers' control movement benefiting by the established trade unions using their power, influence and organisation to attend to day-to-day problems as well as providing a protective umbrella under which the workers' control movement can flourish. The key to the success of such a relationship is the support of significant numbers of rank and file unionists and officials who will carry the new imaginative ideas of working class action into the trade unions, working to gain acceptance of them and showing by example to other wage and salary earners, organised or unorganised, that new forms of action are practical and that they have the desired effects.

-- Gerry Phelan.

REPLY TO JOHN MANIFOLD.

In the article by Mr. John Manifold with the above title in your May issue, quite a lot is said about my book -- "On the Origins of Waltzing Matilda" -- that I hope you will let me comment upon. He is obviously criticising my book by comparison with another book soon to be published, but with which he seems to have prior knowledge. I have not seen the contents of this new book, so limit my comments to what Manifold says, as it affects my position.

He is obviously criticising my book by comparison with another book soon to be published, but with which he seems to have prior knowledge. I have not seen the contents of this new book, so limit my comments to what Manifold says, as it affects my position.

He says: "The original song came into existence in 1895 at Dagworth Station," and adds that this tune has been discovered by a Mr. Magoffin, the author of the new book. But by Manifold's description of it it is clearly not the same song as we sing today -- the Marie Cowan. He says the song is in manuscript, music and words, and in the handwriting of its composer -- Christina Macpherson -- and is quite clearly an imperfectly remembered version of the Scottish tune, Bonnie Wood of Craigielee. He says that this "original" version by Christina, "spread across the country by word of mouth, getting gradually altered in the process."

Now, with that statement as it stands I am in complete agreement and it does not conflict with anything in my book. But -- is this the song that is claimed to be behind the origin of the Marie Cowan song? With this I disagree, and give the evidence for that in my book. Manifold dissects and compares the new MS tune and the Cowan tune, and clearly demonstrates that they are NOT the same tune however much he finds some resemblances to each other.

Such resemblances can be found between tunes in numerous instances of quite unrelated tunes, and can have no significant importance, as such, in this instance. But such resemblances do not bring together the tunes to make the Cowan tune as being composed by Christina. If the new MS tune is Christina's, then so is the tune we sing today Marie Cowan's. There can be no dispute on that. Things that are different cannot be the same.

Without knowing the new MS tune when I wrote my book, I foretold of the existence of such a tune from a close study, detailed in my book, by a process of reasoning in much the same way as astronomers have foretold the existence of heavenly bodies before they were actually discovered at a later date.

There are a number of versions of Waltzing Matilda in existence other than the Cowan, known by the general term "Buderim," in which both the tune and words are very distinct from the Cowan.

Up to date no unchallengeable link of the Cowan with any tune composed by Christina Macpherson has been produced. And the new discovery does not do so.

The words of the new MS do not follow those of the Cowan but do follow those of the Buderim and other similar versions. I suggested in my book that the Christina "original" tune would be that from which the Buderim group had descended, and, from Manifold's descriptions, it looks as if that prophecy was correct.

I have not denied that Paterson wrote the actual words of Waltzing Matilda, as we have them in the song, nor have I denied that "a" Waltzing Matilda song was made by Christina Macpherson and A. B. Paterson, under "some" circumstances at Dagworth and Winton. But -- "which" song -- is the issue.

Another song comes into the matter in the form of "The Bold Fusilier", the tune of which is practically identical with that of the Cowan tune, and, most significantly, the framework of the verse and chorus are identical, whereas both the tune and framework of the words in the "Buderim" are distinctly different. But, the words of the new MS tune ARE the same as the Buderim.

Manifold's explanation of Paterson's hypothetical misunderstanding with Marie Cowan's identity will not stand rigid ex-
amination. If the new MS song is, as he says, the "original" of his and Christina's cooperation, it is surely incredible that he should have failed to recognise the difference between it and his own original when it was submitted to him, and he replied, "Your song received, very satisfactory. Marie Cowan has done a good job. Good luck to her."

Manifold says that the Cowan song has descended from the new MS song, and that this seems all the more certain since Christina's "original" preserves the attribution of the text to Paterson, i.e., the Cowan says the words are by Paterson. But the "Buderim" group's words are far more, practically identical, with the words by Paterson in his own works, than are the words of the Cowan, and Paterson's own words, with those of the Buderim and this new MS "original," contain the expression "Matilda my Darling," which the Cowan does not.

Manifold also, rather by insinuation and fantastic theorising, tries to cast doubt on the authenticity of the antiquity of the Bold Fusilier as given to me by Mrs. Kathleen Cooper. It seems that by some means or other, no matter how, "some" kind of relationship "must" be schemed up to link the Cowan song with this "original," now found, by Christina and Paterson. Anything but admit the obvious! To bolster his theory he has to bring in a number of other songs to link up and carry his theory of what "could" have been the process by which the Bold Fusilier first descended from the above "original," went to the South Africa war, then to England, then returned to Australia and then became the Cowan song. But what position does all this put the "original" in? Simply a very far removed and insignificant position in relation to the Cowan song -- the one we sing.

To discredit the memory of Mrs. Cooper's grandfather, Manifold refers to "Ring, Ring the Bell, Watchman" of which Mrs. Cooper's grandfather said it was in existence "a hundred years" before his time. Manifold says it was far less ancient than he thought. Well. I happen to have written to the English Folk Dance and Song Society on that subject and got a reply saying "We have been unable to find anything about the history of that song." All they could do was to send me the words as published in England, and re-published by E. W. Cole in Melbourne. If Mr. Manifold has any evidence as to its antiquity let him produce it. As a matter of fact Mrs. Cooper told me that the song we sing today is a different version to what was sung by the Chippers, which indicates that their version was the older, or "original." Mrs. Cooper's account of its singing by the Chippers is ignored by Manifold who instead casts an unsupported imputation against her story.

He stretches his own credibility as an impartial student when he also distorts the true position regarding the existence of an "Old Bush Song" on a Waltzing Matilda theme said to have been heard prior to the Christina/Banjo song. He says: "No song on the subject could be 'an old bush song', the implication being, of course, that such a song must have been on the same theme as the Christina/Banjo one. Now, Manifold knows very well that that is not the position at all. All that has been said was that an old bush song had been heard about "Waltzing Matilda," or that "a" Waltzing Matilda song had been heard before 1895. Brady who says he heard such a song says that the words were different. Now, I have given in my book what I regard as practical proof, backed up by extensive evidence, that this old bush song clearly was an old German folk song about Guild apprentices being "On the Walz with their 'Matildas' (girl friends)," brought out to Australia by German migrants in the early days -- yet Manifold ignores this, (why?) and deliberately gives a twist to the matter by trying to link that song with the Dagworth one in 1895!

Manifold says that this new MS "original" in the handwriting of Christina Macpherson was "discovered by Magoffin." Perhaps I might make the same claim, because I independently "discovered" it with people living in Hobart, Tasmania, and was in correspondence with them for some time about it when I was told I could not have a copy because it was going to be published in a book and the persons concerned had been asked not to give a copy to anyone else! But I was told that the words were as sung by Leonard Teale, those of the Buderim version. I immediately formed my own ideas as to who could have put a prohibition on letting me have a copy. Very strong ideas, too! I seem to have been beaten to the post.

There are a number of other aspects about the "origins" of Waltzing Matilda, but I limit myself to only what Manifold has said in his article.

-- HARRY H. PEARCE