The workers' struggle to defend living standards is an important aspect of the class struggle. An examination of how this struggle is developing -- its strategy and tactics (if there is a strategy), together with the nature of the workers' demands -- is an important analysis necessary for developing a deeper understanding of the movement and a deepening revolutionary consciousness.

It has already been said that the present workers' struggle around economic demands is the biggest in the post-war period. It embraces the widest and most diverse sections of the workforce, ranging from heavy industry and services to bank clerks and other sections of 'white collar' workers. Yet the movement itself has little 'class' cohesion, with workers seeking to resolve their problems more or less piecemeal, as sheer necessity forces them to struggle to maintain their living standards.

One aspect of the spontaneous character of the economic struggle is this fragmentation of the movement. Workers have tended to seek satisfaction of their economic problems by making demands against individual employers, or groups of employers, all of which tends to obscure the broad class character of the struggle.

Some of the factors affecting this process are ---

† the historical development of the Australian trade union movement which has meant the 'mushrooming' of literally hundreds of trade unions which cover occupations and not industries. Even with a number of amalgamations, there is still something in excess of 300 unions. Between them, they embrace just over half the total number of wage and salary earners in Australia.

† the multiplicity of industrial awards and agreements which came out of the arbitration system and the proliferation of the workers' organisations. This reinforces the tendency to see the economic struggle in terms of the arbitration system to the exclusion of the boss for which this system acts. Workers tended to identify only with those covered by their particular award or agreement as this became the focal point of their particular struggle.

† this tendency was further reinforced with the unleashing of the over-award campaigns in the second half of the 1960s and which has continued ever since.
The loss of expectation, even disillusionment, with what could be obtained from arbitration saw the workers embark on an important and large-scale offensive to obtain satisfaction of their economic demands against individual bosses. The advantages quickly became clear to the workers. With a relative shortage of labor, stoppages, guerrilla tactics, or even short strikes were sufficient to wring substantial over-award payments from an individual employer. The benefits of this to the organised and militant section of the workforce can be seen by the fact that the average over-award payment in the metal industry in NSW is about $22.

While this secured relief and some satisfaction for the better organised and more militant workers, it has not helped those in the less organised shops and industries who have still had to rely, in the main, on arbitrated awards, flow-ons, and the national wage case hearings, for their wage increases.

These combined factors influencing the apparently unconnected nature of the economic struggle have contributed much to the spontaneity of the movement. While it is true that the metal unions consciously advanced the campaign for over-award payments, it required little urging by workers once it started.

However, there are a number of questions involved in how the economic struggle has developed, and its effect on class consciousness.

The national wage case at present proceeding, and which affects the whole of the workforce, arouses very little interest among workers. This arises because of the usually complex formulation of the claim which defies comprehension by even the most advanced worker, the nature of the arbitration proceedings which are remote from any direct worker participation and involvement, and the prevalent view among workers that the result is peripheral to what they can get directly from the boss by collective militant struggle.

Yet a claim for a minimum living wage, properly presented and campaigned for among workers could have the effect of mobilising the whole of the workforce around a demand which affects all.

The trend towards collective bargaining and away from arbitration has enhanced the potential for widening the class involvement around particular claims. In the present Metal Industry Award proceedings, the federal organisations of both employers and unions are negotiating a log of claims involving half a million metal workers. Thousands more workers are involved indirectly by a ‘flow-on’ of the results and are moving for direct participation in the struggle. At the time of writing, negotiations have broken down with an offer by the employers of a $12 weekly increase and improvements in annual leave entitlements. The struggle involves, also, opposition to a ‘closed’ agreement, with the employers determined that acceptance is contingent on a package deal including agreement that the campaign for over-award payments will cease. It is almost certain that the employers, following the breakdown in negotiations, will refer the claims to the Industrial Commission.

The offered terms of settlement by the employers include the following proposal:

“It is accepted by the parties to the agreement that the changes in wages and conditions are in settlement of the Unions’ log of claims and that no further claims will be made by the Unions either (1) to the terms of the award (other than by national test cases) during the twelve months’ period; or (2) for increased over-award payments or improved conditions of employment against individual employers. (My emphasis - J.P.).

This latter point is part of the strategy of the employers which, together with the ‘closed’ agreement concept seeks to spell an end to the ‘over-award’ movement and contain the metal workers in a package deal agreement.

It is conceivable that the metal workers, precisely because of the largely spontaneous character of the wages struggle and the lack of any overall strategy by the unions, will not take much persuading to accept something in the vicinity of the $12 offered.

Given the overall pattern of the wages struggle, the metal workers could be excused for thinking along the following lines...

“With a couple of 24-hour stoppages we have succeeded in bumping up the offer of the employers from $8 to $12 a week. If we can squeeze a little extra, so much the better. We should be able to get something out of the national wage case, at least $4 or $5, and then we can settle down to punching a bit more out of the boss at work within the next few months.”

If this occurs, there will be some immediate but temporary benefit to a limited number of metal workers. But it will continue the disconnected character of the present econ-
omic struggle with the better organised and most militant workers satisfying their interests at the expense of other sections of the workforce.

The national income is divided roughly between what is paid in wages and what is appropriated by the capitalist class by way of surplus value or profit. There are no really accurate figures to reveal exactly what the real position is. The Commonwealth Statistician, for instance, includes salaries of directors and top managers with workers' wages in determining what is paid out in wages and salaries.

On the other side, incomes from property are also not specified. One way of getting a rough comparison is by taking the added value of all manufactured goods after production costs (materials, power, maintenance, etc.) and excluding wages, salaries and depreciation.

In 1967-68 wages (and salaries) amounted to $3,666 million or 49 per cent. The portion that went in surplus value, or profit, to the employers amounted to $3,765 million, or 51 per cent. In 1957, the ration was 58 per cent to the workers, and 42 per cent to the capitalists.

Even these figures present the situation in its best light, for the workforce has expanded much faster than bosses and top management staff. In 1954 there were three million employees and in 1971, 4.5 million. In the same period, the number of employers had grown from 250,000 to 277,000.

Any overall economic strategy of the unions and workers must aim to increase absolutely the workers' share of the national income and correspondingly reduce the share going to profits and bosses' incomes.

There is a prevailing view among some workers that they can do better in more localised campaigns rather than join in a large mass action embracing whole industries. It is seen to be easier to win against a single employer rather than the combined strength of employers in a whole industry. There is a big element of truth in this, born of workers' experience. But such actions rarely make any real impact in altering the workers' share of the national income. Mostly, such increases are gained at the expense of other workers. In other words, the redistribution takes place only in that portion of the national income already going to the working class as a whole, with some gaining and some losing.

This partly explains the vast discrepancy in workers' incomes, with a minority of workers earning between $7,000 and $12,000 a year, and a vast number earning between $4,000 and $5,000. (The average weekly wage, on seasonally adjusted figures, is now $111.80.)

What the working class should be aiming at in the economic struggle is not merely to maintain their share of the national income, but for a radical redistribution of that national income, i.e. seeking all the time to lift the portion of the national income which goes to the working class as a whole, and to reduce the portion which is appropriated by way of profit.

This means, in addition to localised campaigns, the raising of demands and developing of campaigns which embrace the widest possible sections of the workforce.

The national wage case, when it begins to reflect the demand for a minimum living wage and grips the imagination of workers can provide the possibility of a large-scale national action which can make real inroads into the distribution of the national income, and expose the class nature of capitalist exploitation.

Taxation, used under capitalism to effect a redistribution of the national income in favour of monopoly, is another area providing the potential of large-scale class action. The nature of the taxation system, its class character, and the presentation of an alternative which relieves the working class of its present crushing burden is capable of mobilising the working class and deepening consciousness. Many demands, such as abolition of taxation on a certain minimum income, the introduction of a capital gains tax, etc., have been raised in the past and made part of trade union policy. But they have never become the medium for a sustained, widespread campaign involving workers' action.

Yet such issues as taxation, social services, shorter hours, etc. are an integral part of the workers' struggle for living standards which can only really be tackled by large-scale mass action.

There is an essential need for the left in the trade union movement to formulate and develop a counter-strategy around economic issues. The problem of the fragmentation of the wages struggle which obscures the identity of interests of the class as a whole can only be tackled when such a strategy is developed. Until it does, the working class will continue to seek solutions in isolated and sectional actions which, however widespread, will be easily contained by the capitalist class.