THROUGHOUT AUSTRALIA TODAY, many rank and file trade unionists as well as their leaders are asking the question: “Where is the ACTU going?” a pertinent question in this, its fortieth year.

Because of the decisive role of the national union leadership, the capitalist class and all its agencies exert every effort to limit or divert all ACTU sponsored activities into ‘safe’ channels. They use the secret police apparatus and files of the National Civic Council, massive propaganda and repressive legislation to try to determine the nature of the leadership and policy of the unions and to place formidable obstacles in the way of militant activity.

That these and other measures have fallen far short of their initiators’ original plans testifies to the deep going democratic traditions of the trade union movement and the tireless and principled work of the militant progressive forces in the labor movement of which the communists are a necessary and important part.

The present position is in marked contrast to the stand taken by the ACTU in earlier years. For example the 1955 Congress reflected the vigorous struggle going on against the anti-union policies of Santamaria and the Industrial Groups, and of the US Labor Department which quite openly interfered in affairs of the Australian labor movement. The defeat of reaction was evident in the progressive policy decisions made by the Congress on many issues, including the basic wage, margins, long service leave, equal pay, education, social services and an overseas shipping line. This Congress also adopted the valuable foreign policy decisions of the Hobart Conference of the Australian Labor Party. Furthermore it laid the basis for representation through union
groups on the ACTU Executive, in addition to the representation from the State Labor Councils. At subsequent Congresses in 1957 and 1959 these decisions were further advanced and important new policies adopted.

During these years the ACTU not only adopted progressive policies but carried many of them through in an effective way. There was much encouragement to unions and workers to show their support for margins and basic wage demands which were before the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission. Union and shop committees were developed; labor councils were strengthened; special conferences of federal unions and subsequent decisions of the ACTU Executive further encouraged unions and their members to participate in the struggle. At the same time, there was a firm stand against the penal provisions, and against the State and Federal Arbitration Acts, while ACTU attitudes on world peace, notably the 1959 Trade Union Peace Declaration, attracted people beyond the labor movement to join the struggle against atomic weapons, and for disarmament and peace. The ACTU took practical steps to promote international understanding by sending delegations to socialist and other countries.

This period witnessed a further strengthening of the trade union movement with the emergence of the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations (ACSPA), the organisation which unites the 'white collar' workers at the national level. The ACTU and ACSPA have co-operated on many issues of common interest to all workers, in particular on basic wage and margins campaigns.

However this growing unity of trade union organisation round workers' needs was not to the liking of the rightwing, the Industrial Groupers, and the US elements, which no doubt were inspired and financed, partly at least, by US Central Intelligence Agency funds, and which all aimed to turn the trade unions and the ACTU into 'tame cat' organisations. The Australian Workers' Union also threw its weight into the struggle to move the labor movement to the right. To this end, its leadership projected plans for a separate trade union federation intended to provide organisational backing for reaction in the unions. At the same time there were increasing attacks on ACTU policy, especially on trade union peace committees, on reciprocal visits by trade union delegations, on shop committees, and on methods of mobilising trade unionists behind ACTU policy.

The right wing planned to force drastic changes in ACTU policy, to retard or at least neutralise the mass movement of
the workers in support of their demands, and to secure a position of strength in the leadership of the ACTU. The first open challenge by the right wing came at the 1961 ACTU Congress where a group of unions led by the Clerks, Ironworkers and Australasian Society of Engineers, with the AWU in the background, used the levy for reciprocal visits as the basis for a boycott of the Congress, in the belief that this would force the ACTU to succumb to their pressure. However they were not at this stage successful and the Congress continued without them.

In 1963 they were back at the Congress. In 1965 confident that they had the numbers the right wing made another bid to establish their domination by seeking to have the group representatives on the ACTU Executive elected by the whole Congress instead of by the delegates of the unions concerned. This overt attempt to secure rightwing control was also defeated. The return of rightwing representatives did, however, increase their influence in the ACTU Executive.

Some ACTU leaders quite clearly set out to defeat any form of mass action, using any pretext for the purpose. Similarly conferences of federal unions have been almost dropped. The last one of any significance was marked by a clumsy manoeuvre to damp down the struggle against the penal powers. The affiliation of the AWU to the ACTU must be considered in the context of a strengthening right wing. Without the AWU the right wing inside the ACTU felt uncertain of the 'numbers'.

One of the aims of the extreme right is to copy the American pattern of turning the trade unions into 'big business' type organisations. Such a move, while portrayed in glittering terms about efficiency, expertise, the need to meet the boss on equal terms (including of course salaries, allowances and perks) is in reality designed to emasculate the fighting strength of the unions, stifle democracy by denying the members the right to make the decisions and to control their own affairs, (which are to be left to experts) and to limit all activity to the Conference table and arguments in the courts. The opponents of this 'big business' concept do not deny the need for efficiency, experts, research, etc. But they see them as means to assist independent trade unions, controlled by the members themselves, to win their demands, and not as ends in themselves.

Another example of right wing ascendancy in ACTU policy making is the shift in relation to Vietnam. The Boonaroo-Jeparit incident showed that the standpoint of certain ACTU leaders differed little from that of the Holt government. The government
was obviously preparing to introduce industrial conscription and threw down a clear challenge to the ACTU on the issue. But instead of the ACTU taking up the challenge, it was left to the Seamen's and Shipwrights' Unions to take a principled stand against industrial conscription, against the bombing of civilians, against escalation of the war, and for peace in Vietnam. A similar weakness on the part of the ACTU was evident in the conference against the French Tests held at the end of 1965, when issues affecting Australian workers and Vietnam were deliberately excluded. It is evident that on many international issues, the ACTU follows the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions whose policy has strong US overtones. In this organisation recent disclosures in the United States underline CIA manipulation and bribery.

In view of the shift in ACTU policy over the last five years, it is no wonder that many workers and unions feel that the ACTU is not championing their cause, is not giving a strong lead on economic and other issues. Concern is frequently expressed that workers are losing ground, that the ACTU is weakening organisation, and that its failure to encourage mass support on basic issues has held back the advance of workers' conditions. There is growing concern about the lack of enthusiasm for ACTU basic wage policy, no doubt because the ACTU does not give the sort of leadership to enthuse and encourage workers to organise the massive opposition necessary to the employers' total wage for example.

However, a contradiction exists between the drive of the right wing to take control of the ACTU and the mood and need of the workers for action to defend and improve their position. Struggles have taken place outside the ACTU. Some unions go ahead in spite of it, while others don't allow the ACTU to get hold of the issue, comparing the tragic ACTU handling of the GMH struggle (from which GMH workers have so far had no real gains) with the Mt. Isa struggle which, though not completely successful, did have considerable positive results.

As the burden of the Vietnam war rises and there are new imposts to meet the expenditure, as wage and other gains become harder to extract, such problems will increase for the rightwing leadership. Indeed, they are already to some degree conscious of this, and different attitudes on how to meet the situation are likely to make them rather less than one happy family, particularly when squabbles over the 'succession' are already appearing, and with the entry of the AWU with its long-standing policy of 'dominate or destroy.'
There are also growing demands for strengthening the ACTU apparatus to act on policies in the interests of all workers, for the ACTU to develop its own policy of industrial unionism to match the growing strength of international monopoly and big business in Australia, and that the ACTU seek a wider basis of unity with ACSPA on matters of common interest to all workers, particularly in problems arising from technological developments.

The trade union movement will be compelled by the very change in industry to give more attention to wider social problems including education, retraining of workers arising from automation and new technical methods, to health and social services, and to asserting demands for democratic control and a union say in changes taking place. More acute political questions are arising because of the Government's foreign policy and its support for the war in Vietnam.

These issues have to be faced up to, they cannot be resolved by retreating or acceptance of Government and employer demands. The main difficulty facing the ACTU leadership is the growing gap between bureaucratic right wing control and the developing mass movement of trade unionists in the industries. This conflict can be seen in the current basic wage and margins cases. It is reflected in the right wing call for support for their bankrupt arbitrationist policy on the one side and the united action taken by workers to press home trade union demands on the other side.

The ACTU Congress will be faced with these issues also.

What will the Congress do? Will it move further to the right, which can only weaken trade unionism, or will it move to the left and develop more reliance on the fighting qualities of the trade unions, developing unity in action for the demands of the workers, and fostering democratic control by union members. One of the great needs today is improvement of democratic consultation between trade union leadership and members with the aim of increasing understanding of the policies and objectives of the trade union movement.

The forthcoming Congress of the ACTU will be held under the close scrutiny of trade unionists all over Australia to see how it responds to these problems.