TALKING DOWN HAMPERS LEFT UNITY

EVERYTHING MAX TEICHHMANN SAYS in his delightfully witty review of the book *The Australian New Left* (ALR 30) may be perfectly true — I haven’t read the book, so cannot judge — but perhaps the sarcastic and patronizing tone of some of his comments does a disservice to the cause of Left unity.

After all, few doubt the sincerity and courage of most members of the New Left, and its aims are close to those most of the Old Left have always pursued, or have lately realised they ought to have been pursuing, whatever misgivings one may have about some of the new methods, or lack of them. Granted that militant sincerity not guided by any sound theory can be more dangerous to its friends than to its enemies, this is precisely the reason experienced Marxists should be trying to help the New Left find a unifying revolutionary theory, rather than dismissing it with contempt and derision.

Did any eager world-reforming youngster ever become a mature revolutionary theoretician overnight, and avoid all romantic illusions about the revolution being “just around the corner”? I certainly didn’t, forty-odd years ago, and, if Max Teichmann ever did, he must be a very atypical revolutionary.

On May Day on the Sydney Domain, I happened to be standing near a group of New Leftists, mostly of the Maoist persuasion, when the Communist Party contingent marched past. Some of them started chanting, “Smash Soviet Revisionism!”, whereupon a hard-shell Stalinist accused them of being in the pay of the CIA, starting a ding-dong slanging match that added precisely nothing to anyone’s understanding of revolutionary strategy. I chipped in, “Don’t you both think it would be best to get together to smash the common enemy first, and settle our own differences afterwards?”

Rather to my surprise, most of the youngsters supported me in the ensuing discussion, despite my balding pate and white beard, and the ringleader of the chanters was reduced to mumbling apologetic excuses for his behaviour.

This seems to give a clue to the correct attitude to the New Left. Most of its members are ready to follow a sound lead, from wherever it comes, so let frank but comradely and constructive criticism of each other’s views continue by all means, but back this up with concrete suggestions and discussion about unity in action around specific demands.

It is true, as Comrade Teichmann suggests, that no army ever won a campaign by making up its tactics as it went along, and deciding the strategy at the end; but it is equally true that no army ever won a campaign by refusing to fire a shot until every private and drummer-boy in its own ranks and those of its allies had graduated *cum laude* from a Military Academy. Marxists have always rejected the Fabian dream that a potentially revolutionary class can realise its destiny through debate, education and propaganda alone; it must be forged
into a revolutionary force in the continual struggle for limited but ever expand­ing demands.

Such a programme of unity in action will quickly leave behind the demagogues, doctrinaires and sectarians of the New Left, along with their counterparts in the Old Left, mouthing slogans at each other in some dingy office, while the Real Left, old and new, marches on shoulder to shoulder to victory.

ARTHUR W. RUDKIN

VERBAL VIOLENCE

AS ONE OF THOSE REVILED in Max Teichmann's diatribe on the authors of The Australian New Left and A New Britannia (ALR No. 30), I should appreciate some space in your journal, not to defend specifically my chapter or those of my co-contributors (How can one respond intellectually to tasteless calumnies!), but to say something about the import of Teichmann's incongruity of thought and tone in a wider sense. Unfortunately, his style of virulence is symptomatic of a grave recrudescence afflicting the entire spectrum of Australia's Left, threatening to kill any meaningful revitalisation.

My condemnation of his style does not mean that I am opposed to fragmentation on the Left, or that I wish to gloss over real differences, or that I am unprepared to debate differences openly if that is what some people would like to do. Quite the contrary! But I do demand minimal standards of civility. I cannot understand why we must verbally assassinate one another on the way to our more humane socialist world. In fact, after twelve years commitment to various left-wing struggles, I'm more convinced than ever that rhetorical totalism is not too far removed from physical annihilation, and is definitely not one of the roads we are seeking. If we are repulsed by the vituperation and the running amok of a Knopfelmacher, why do we resort to the same type of behaviour among ourselves — or even against our right-wing opponents?

My first encounter with this phenomenon of (shall we call it) 'verbal violence', and the realisation of what it can lead to, occurred in the United States when I was working as the regional director of the New England Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy — better known as SANE. This was back in the still very frigid Cold War years of 1960 and 1961, when SANE was being torn asunder by investigations from Senator Thomas Dodd's Internal Security Subcommittee. As we were hauled before his Committee, tensions mounted within SANE, terrible rifts developing along ideological, personality, and policy lines. We may have loved peace and mankind, but we sure hated each other. I can recall one fatal meeting where the invective became so heated that some of the more sincere haters actually exchanged blows and shoves (a scene repeated, in only slightly milder form, at last year's May Moratorium in Brisbane). If the comrades inSANE (one word this time) had been carrying nuclear bombs, one wonders if they would have ended up throwing them at each other. It was as if the words — "Kill, kill, kill for peace!" — popularised in the song by the Fugs, were really intended for us.

Why tell this little tale — a searing experience for one individual? Because I see its contradictions and their consequences reflected in the ambivalence of