Editors' Comments

SOCIALIST JOURNALISM

AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW'S format has again changed. It aims to live up to the title of Review by containing regular sections on Contemporary Marxist Theory; World Socialism; The Australian Working Class Movement; Australian Socialist History; Australian Literature and the Arts; Book Reviews and Comment and Criticism from readers. In future issues we hope to bring readers translations of Marighela, Peredo, Colletti and Del Pra in the section on theory; to include interviews with and articles by leading trade unionists and the rank and file of the working class, who provide the backbone of any socialist movement; to include in the section on socialist history further first-person accounts by socialists and communists which will cover experiences in the IWW here and overseas, the early socialist and communist parties of Australia, and the Spanish civil war; and, to have review articles of recent books on or by Gramsci, Althusser, Lukacs, Marek and Guerin as well as works on the socialist movement in Australia.

The new format and content of the ALR are no cause for self-congratulation. They indicate that once again the journal is attempting a redefinition of its role; something which it has done several times in its history as the linear descendant of the Proletarian Review formed by Guido Baracchi and Percy Laidler in Melbourne in 1920. Since that time, sometimes at the behest of agencies whose ulterior motives were not clearly a desire for the
conversion of the Australian worker to socialism, the journal has sported the name, Proletarian, Communist, Labour Review and Communist Review. Each change of name indicated a change of orientation and purpose. None resulted in a significant alteration in the circulation or status of the journal as an oppositional organ. While it has succeeded in maintaining its position as the widest-selling left journal in Australia, and, indeed, the only journal read in any numbers by the blue collar working class, it has never made comment on the state of Australian society or anything else which is sufficiently pertinent to win it even the begrudged status of a devil’s advocate among people who are not socialists but who want to get the best account of what is going on. Technical reasons like the fact that we cannot obtain outlets in a retail market dominated by reaction only partly explain this failure. We must look first to ourselves and the journal itself for our failure. What follows is put forward as the partial and perhaps inadequate first step in the reappraisal, and implicit self-criticism, of the role of socialist journalism in Australia, and particularly what this journal should aim to do. By themselves these proposals are merely a thesis: the really valuable proposals can come only as a result of extensive antithetical or supporting comment and criticism from readers, from which we can extract a synthetic policy. We appeal to readers and especially to working class readers to send comment and criticism to the editors on the proposals which follow. Only thus can we tie down our speculation to the real needs of Australia and its workers, eliminating what is irrelevant to the ongoing needs of socialist revolutionary struggle, and retaining what is of value.

The Leninist Model

Lenin’s and Gramsci’s extensive writings on the role of socialist journalism can serve as our starting point, without in any sense being binding upon us as models. Indeed, both men would have been horrified at any notion that their ideas should be automatically transferred in their entirety to a completely different situation.

For Gramsci the role of all socialist journals was to raise men’s understanding of their social being from the level of common sense to the level of philosophy; from an incoherent and frequently internally self-contradictory world view to a coherent world view, which both explained the relationship between society and the individual and indicated how it could be ameliorated.

For Lenin the role was something more “. . . not limited solely to the dissemination of ideas, to political education, and to the enlistment of political allies. A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser”. Lenin’s notion of the organisational function
of a newspaper is different from Gramsci's notion that newspapers should work together under direction from a single homogeneous centre according to a strict division of labor and tend to involve more and more people in the activity of running the newspaper. The difference is clearer when we look at the actual task each man faced, rather than when we juxtapose "Where to Begin?" and What is to be Done? against the relevant sections of Gli Intellettuali and Letteratura e Vita Nazionale.

Lenin faced a situation which was so revolutionary that the slightest spark could "fan . . . class struggle and popular indignation into a general conflagration"; where the pressing need of the moment "... when interest in politics and questions of socialism has been aroused among the broadest strata of the population..." was constant organisational and strategical agitation and propaganda and where "the plan for an all-Russian political newspaper far from representing the fruits of the labor of armchair workers, infected with dogmatism and literariness . . . . is a most practical plan for immediate and allround preparations for the uprising, while at the same time never for a moment forgetting our ordinary everyday work".

Gramsci writing from prison in a situation of defeat for socialism and rule by fascism, foresaw a long struggle to break the capitalist hegemony over minds — no Spark was going to cause a general conflagration in Italy in the early thirties. He warned that "changes in the mode of thinking, in beliefs, in opinions, do not come about through rapid 'explosions' which are simultaneous and general, they come about almost always through 'successive combinations' according to the most disparate and uncontrollable formulae of 'authority'"; and went on to say that realistic journalism should bear in mind the nature of its public and try to establish with exactness the various levels of culture accessible to different types of readers and therefore grade and distinguish its publications (this reading of Gramsci has been contested but it was maintained by Vasoli at the most recent Congress of Gramscian Studies); and that the function of a journal was primarily educative.

The difference in their proposals stemmed from a diverse estimation of the degree of revolutionary consciousness in the masses. In Lenin's case the bulk of the masses were already against the status quo and desirous of major social change, and, therefore were ready for persuasive direction about how to introduce this change, where in Gramsci's case they neither wanted socialism, nor did they see in major social changes the solution to their problems and had to be convinced that they needed these first, before (on a notional not a temporal level) they would proceed to strategic and organisational issues. This distinction sins by oversimplifi-
cation; both writers recognised that education and organisation went hand in hand, indeed, for Gramsci's scheme they were interdependent, but we cannot ignore the difference of emphasis determined by the different degree of revolutionary consciousness they faced, summed up in the names of their journals: Lenin had the Spark; Gramsci had the Citta Futura, Ordine Nuovo and Lo Stato Operaio (The Future City, The New Order and The Worker's State).

What we must extract are the generalisations which are common to both and possibly relevant to the role of a socialist journal in Australia. Both maintain: 1) that the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions (which include the degree of desire for revolution in the mass) should determine the program a journal should adopt; 2) that a correct estimation of the degree of revolutionary consciousness of the potential readership should determine the nature of its content; 3) that the best way of ensuring the effectiveness of 2) was to try to make as many readers as possible collaborators engaged in genuinely common work, exchange of material, experience and forces; and 4) that the journal was never more than one aspect of revolutionary activity besides which there had to be active work.

The object of both Lenin's and Gramsci's journals was education (either how to organise or how to understand society) and never merely information (which suggests that the subtitle of ALR "a marxist journal of information, analysis and discussion... for the promotion of socialist ideas" is appropriate provided we consider the last phrase as paramount). Neither understood by education the Platonic notion prevalent in universities today, and, sadly, among many socialists too, according to which the intellectuals of the movement, like philosopher kings, alone are able to reach into the receptacle of knowledge about how the world runs and then distribute it to the masses who are unable to understand the esoterica of marxism wherein all truth lies. Both Lenin and Gramsci thought of education as a circular process whereby the generalisations (philosophy) which were promulgated as theory by the journal were merely the obverse of the multitudinous particular experiences lived by men.

I suggest that the first fundamental proposal for ALR which we can derive from these two writers is that the mass of its readers, especially the names we have not heard of, start to write for it, and thus supply it with a basis of real attitudes and real problems on which to build a coherent and systematic mode of thought which is relevant to Australians. Many readers may feel that they have nothing to say or contribute, or that they are not competent to write for the journal. They would probably be surprised to discover that the everyday facts about their lives and
work, which, because they live them, they think everybody must know, are unknown to other people. It is not a case of the intellectuals not knowing how the other half lives, but of practically nobody knowing how anybody lives outside their circle. From my experience I know that it is a salutary experience for intellectual leftists to go in search of Australia — all too often Melbourne intellectual circles become so ingrown that they think that the universities, the Carlton commune, two or three uni pubs and Arena are Australia. This sort of limitation goes for trade unionists, teachers, old age pensioners and the myriad other groups. Few transcend their own limited particularism. So we appeal to everyone to follow Gorky's admonition that every man should write his autobiography. Our readers should write articles about the social problems of their occupations so that trade unionists should understand students, old age pensioners should understand teachers and migrants understand aborigines and so on. We are all appallingly ignorant of what goes on in this society, and ignorance is no starting point for a theory of socialist action.

Of course, not all the material the journal receives will be published. It will have to be sifted and only the best, the most enlightening particular cases, or those which appear to illustrate problems which the inflow of material has indicated are common to many, will appear as they were originally written — the rest may be chopped up and used in part or incorporated in the more general articles which the editors themselves write. In turn a limited group, the editorial board, will have to do the sifting. There are not only practical reasons for selective use of material (like the limited amount of type space we have) and a selected group doing the sifting, but the fundamental ideological rule that the journal must at all times avoid becoming a vehicle for populist attitudes. Its object is to homogenise in an organic fashion the raw material of experience which the mass of its readers send to it in their articles and letters, in order to create a coherent line in which the raw material of common sense is raised to the level of a marxist philosophy of life, on which a programme of action can be built. And this in turn explains why the journal must be controlled by a limited homogeneous group which sees eye to eye and which can thrash out a general line in response to the material they receive. Moreover, it explains why the bulk of the journal should be written by regular contributors, who synthesise the lessons about life which the general readers' correspondence has taught them. Too many cooks would not only spoil this broth but would make it so thin and diffuse that no coherent synthetic philosophy could be offered back to the readers by their co-dialoguers (the editors) for their approval, amendment or rejection.
This brings me to an examination of the role of ALR in the context of Australian socialist journalism. If Lenin's envisaged audience was homogeneous in its opposition to the status quo and therefore had one basic organ, Iskra or Vperyod, Gramsci envisaged for advanced capitalist society a number of disparate audiences all at different levels of cultural preparation and revolutionary consciousness. His optimum situation was one where a number of journals catered for different audiences and where there was a planned division of labor along these lines. Each journal, depending on its aim and its audience, would have the appropriate content and speak the "appropriate language". He warned against assuming that because there should be a homogeneous directive centre, all journals should present a homogeneous content, irrespective of their audience. A journal full of high marxist esoterica is incomprehensible to most people, indeed, I suspect it is often incomprehensible to its authors.

Of course, it is possible for Australian Left Review to work out a division of labor with Tribune, but many of the other important journals of the left in Australia may be hostile to the notion that there should be a division of labor, either because they think that they have the monopoly of the truth, or that we are untrustworthy. We should still work towards an agreement about a division of labor. I suggest that in the meantime because of its superior links with the blue collar working class movement, ALR would be most suitable in the role of the middle sort of journal, the link journal between mass opinion and intellectual synthesis. Gramsci defined this sort of journal as the "critical-historical-bibliographical" source which sought its readership among non-specialised readers, who were, however interested in coming to grips with cultural matters. Without demanding that we subscribe too much to his lengthy suggestions about the style of this type of journal, it is worthwhile noting that he laid stress on the need for clarity of exposition and bore in mind the difficulty of conveying philosophic concepts in everyday language. The readers must understand the contents — or it is a failure.

Finally, the fundamental problem of every periodical (daily or not) is to secure stable sales (if possible growing continually). . . . Certainly the fundamental problem in the fortunes of a periodical is one of ideology, that is, the fact that it satisfies determined political and intellectual needs or not. But it would be a gross mistake to believe that this is the sole element and especially that it is valid when taken "by itself". We should take particular notice of this suggestion — a "correct" line which has no readers is useless, what we have to find is the line which is correct and which the readers think is correct.

A.D.