5. Murnane’s criticism on the absence of any solid ideological framework to show why the working-class willingly acquiesced other than hegemony contradicts her final paragraph where she says I locate ‘the story of Australia in a universal context’. I attempted to place Australia in its imperialist perspective. Thus working-class acquiescence is presented in terms of Lenin’s theory of a labour aristocracy. It is this breaking away from the contemplation of the outback to a concentration on Australia as an outpost of Empire which most markedly distinguishes my approach from that of Russel Ward.

6. It is finally alleged that I do not ask or answer ‘whether the Labor Party sharpened the liberal conscience into conceding social welfare programmes’. Might I suggest she read p. 234 again?

HUMPREY MCQUEEN

JOHN SENDY AND THE ALP

JOHN SENDY (ALR 29) discusses some of the fundamental questions of socialist strategy in present-day Australia, and in particular the relation between the ALP and socialism, and between socialists and the ALP. In doing so, he comments on an article I wrote in Labor Times (Vol. 1, No. 2).

Inevitably, there are some basic differences between Sendy’s position and mine. Sendy writes as a Communist seeking an appropriate strategy for Communists in relation to the broad labour movement and the contemporary protest movement; he believes that there are no meaningful prospects for socialists within the ALP. I write as a socialist (of the libertarian Marxist variety) who believes that meaningful socialist activity can best find expression through the ALP, and who is seeking an appropriate strategy for socialists within the ALP. It seems to me to be important for the socialist movement that there is a clear understanding of these differences.

I start from a number of assumptions. They are all arguable, but they are the ones I hold.

1. It is not right for socialists to impose their vision of society on the mass of people. (In any case, it is self-defeating. Experience suggests that the fact of imposition, or “commandism”, necessarily produces institutions and power structures which deny that vision.)

2. The only possibility of achieving socialism is through the creation of a mass socialist consciousness.

3. There is nothing in the present Australian political climate to suggest the existence of such a mass socialist consciousness — or the immediate prospect of one developing. (The militant protest movement on Vietnam, urban development, “quality of life,” etc. is in my view insufficiently developed, either in numbers or theoretically, to offer any more than a limited increase in socialist consciousness — desirable in itself, but not enough.)

4. History (particularly the depression experience) suggests to me that the mass of the people are not prepared to move beyond “democratic” and parliamentary solutions so long as they believe that their conditions can be ameliorated and their problems at least in part solved by these means. There is nothing in the present political climate to suggest the possibility of any such revolutionary transcendence. (The militant protest movement may seem to
I do not mean that this is the only strategy for socialists. Vanguard organisations and movements, acting on the fringe of or beyond the existing norms of the mass movement, have an essential part to play. Without vanguards, no change could occur. But the vanguard cannot substitute itself for the mass movement. It seemed to me to be significant that John Sendy, discussing the various crises in the history of the ALP, mentioned 1916, 1931 and 1955 — but not the split in NSW during the early war years, when the “Evans-Hughes group” was expelled from the ALP and formed the “State Labor Party” (which later merged with the Communist Party). This was an important example of the vanguard trying to substitute itself for the mass, and “getting done” in the process. That experience has relevant lessons for Victoria now.

My objection to the former leadership of the Victorian Labor Party — apart from its authoritarian and bureaucratic method of running the party, and its lapses into opportunism (the deal with the NSW right-wing) — was its political sectarianism, its concept of itself as a vanguard rather than a mass party. This sectarianism was expressed in the concept of “street politics” as the correct tactic for the Labor Party, and a corresponding denigration not only of parliamentarians but of the parliamentary process, an approach which went far beyond existing mass consciousness.

I do not want to deny the value of direct mass action — though when this passes beyond protest and resistance to an imposition of will, it raises the question of principle I suggested earlier. What I am asserting is that, in the present political climate, the labour movement requires many kinds of action to advance its ends — industrial and community and parliamentary action. The ALP is that part of the labour movement whose job it is to win parliamentary power — and as such it is a necessary part of the movement. To win parliamentary power, it must seek a broad consensus within its natural electorate (industrial workers, white collar workers, small farmers, the professional intelligentsia) on a realisable programme of radical reforms, relevant to the massive economic, social and political problems Australia confronts, and consistent with a socialist objective.

I do not conclude from this (as John Sendy suggests) that such a strategy will automatically transform the ALP into a socialist party. That will require a great educational effort by socialists, and new kinds of experience for both labour movement activists and the mass of the people. However, I still adhere to a position I argued when I was being expelled from the Communist Party in 1958. If the ALP is a “two-class party”, within which ideological struggle will inevitably continue, how can one assume that, in the long run, and as mass consciousness changes and develops, the ideas of socialism will not prevail?