A close observer of industrial affairs comments on the reasons why the Congress of the Australian Council of Trade Unions produced results which surprised many commentators.

The 1967 ACTU Congress which was the most significant of the post-war years had also the most unexpected outcome. For months experts of various kinds had confidently predicted that the shift to the right which had occurred at the 1965 Congress would be taken further and consolidated at the 1967 Congress, due particularly to the presence of the large Australian Workers’ Union delegation. In fact, the entry of the AWU into the ACTU was seen as part of an overall plan to strengthen right-wing domination of the ACTU.

In light of this the outcome of the Congress was remarkable: not only that the right wing failed to strengthen its domination—it suffered the biggest setback for a long time, far reaching in its consequences.

The defeat of J. Riordan and R. E. Wilson in their respective groups, and Mick Jordan, Secretary of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council for the vice-presidency were the most spectacular aspects of the right-wing failure, but the real dynamic of this Congress went much deeper. It could be seen in the decision of Congress to accept the Australian Labor Party policy on Vietnam, after the ACTU had consistently taken a weaker stand on the war in Vietnam than the ALP. It showed up in Bill Evans’ devastating criticism of the work of the old executive and the extraordinary response this got from the delegates at the Congress. It was also reflected in the lack of initiative of the extreme right-wing forces. Their passivity at the Congress created a deceptive appearance that nothing was going on.

This Congress lacked some of the fiery debates of earlier ones. Yet it is likely that it will be remembered as the one that initiated a new stage in the history of the trade union movement. It laid the basis for deep-going changes, which will make it possible for the trade union movement to confront the problems of modern
capitalist society in the age of the technological revolution. It cracked the crust which was smothering the trade union movement.

How did it come about that the very Congress which was expected to harden right-wing domination opened the way for a progressive transformation of the ACTU? Puzzled commentators have advanced a variety of, mostly superficial, reasons. Mr. Santamaria’s *News Weekly* claims that “the moderates had the numbers, but lacked organisation. The left-wing had the organisation.” It laments that “it seems that some moderate leaders will never learn.”

Yet even the very young and innocent know that the right-wing forces do not lack finance, trained cadres, the backing of the mass media and powerful outside support. The advantages are all with them. It is not that they did not try, they tried and failed. Why? There were a number of factors, all of which played some part in the outcome of the ACTU Congress:

The inability of the right-wing in the ALP to achieve at the Federal Conference the changes in policy and structure that they had campaigned for. This applies particularly to the policy on Vietnam.

The growing opposition to and uncertainty about the war in Vietnam, and the questioning of the policies of the Holt Government and their effects on living standards (e.g. the Government could not “afford” to increase pensions, the growth of taxation and the cut back on University finance).

The pressure of the upsurge of industrial struggles involving large numbers and different groups of workers, including white collar workers.

The total wage decision, particularly insofar as it demonstrates that reliance on the Arbitration Commission for improvement in living standards is based on sand.

The frustration of growing numbers of unions with the inadequacy and inefficiency of the ACTU leadership.

The attempt by the ACTU officials to take more and more under the wing of the ACTU, even to try to take over the functions of individual unions whilst at the same time being less and less able to act effectively on many important matters, has created widespread opposition. There developed a sort of anti-establishment atmosphere directed especially against ACTU secretary, Mr. Souter, who wastefully used up his own small fund of initiative to stifle the initiative of others.
The reluctance, even unwillingness, of the ACTU as expressed through its secretary, to co-operate with the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations and other white collar bodies. This at a time when the need for closer co-operation is felt by most to be more urgent than in the past.

It has been suggested by some that the outcome of this Congress was due to the manoeuvring for the succession to the presidency after the retirement of Albert Monk. Certainly such manoeuvring occurred. But it was not confined to one group. The outcome was determined by deeper and more serious reasons than the skill of this or that individual.

The deeper causes on the basis of which the factors enumerated above operated, are objective changes in the Australian society of our days — changes in the economy and the class structure. Technological changes in Australia have increased in number and enhanced the importance of the more highly skilled and better educated sections of the working class. These are younger workers with a broader horizon. They merge with some sections of white collar workers. Technically and ideologically for these workers the borderline between industrial and white collar workers is becoming blurred.

They are the new working class, conscious of their increasing power in the technological society. They are certainly interested in higher wages, but they are interested in a number of other things as well. They want an efficient and up to date trade union movement. They have a vision of a trade union movement which will weld together industrial and white collar workers.

They are a growing social force in our society. Their most conscious elements, which they throw up as leaders, are aggressively and intelligently radical. They are left-wing in broad terms. But “left” and “right” have only limited validity in describing their attitudes. They are sick of the tired, old “do nothing” reformist leaders, of the barren anti-communism of the extreme right-wing.

As a social force they are the response to the deep changes which have taken place and which are going on in Australian society, changes which have thrown up a host of new and complex problems, which demand attention and action by the trade union movement. Yet these problems are not attended to by the current right-wing leaders. They are unable and unwilling to deal with them. It is no longer possible to hide them by pigeonholing them or to keep them off agendas by manoeuvring. More and more people can see that it is impossible to carry on in this way.
In this sense one can talk of the bankruptcy of the policy of the right-wing leaders. The much-discussed internal divisions among the right-wing forces often expressed around personalities are really due to this crisis of their policy.

What of the future? There is ample ground for co-operation between the left forces. The main task is in front of them, for only some of the groundwork has been laid for policies that the trade union movement must embark on to carry out its historic role in society. Immediately there is the urgent problem of extending the whole scope of trade union activity—the wider social problems of education, old age pensions, health and social services, automation, democratic control, etc.

There are also bound to be some differences between the left forces. Some of them centre around the nature of the urgent modernisation of the trade union movement, others are concerned with perspectives.

These inevitable differences must be resolved by discussion, in the course of common activities where all views can be put to the test of experience. In all this the left forces must not lose sight of the fact that the main enemy is monopoly capitalism, more powerful and better organised than ever. Neither can we expect that the right-wing forces will meekly accept their setback. They will try to reverse the process. They have powerful friends and ample means to do this. They will try to foster divisions and diversions.

The current developments provide the trade union movement with new opportunities for advance. Provided the left forces act in unity and with skill and determination, this Congress could well become an important stepping stone for the advance of socialist ideas among the Australian working class.

THESE are the basic rules for dialogue between Catholics and Communists:

First, both sides must be willing to avow their past sins and mistakes, admitting their mutual responsibility for past antagonisms and enmities.

Second, each side must acknowledge that they have something to learn from each other and that they are willing to talk TO each other and not just AT each other.

Third, both parties must dialogue without any ulterior motives.

Fourth, each party should remain true to its own principles and not attempt to achieve any kind of false compromise.

Max Charlesworth, Catholic Worker, July 1967 (from a talk given to the Victorian Fabian Society).