EXPLOITATION ON THE INCREASE

BERNIE TAFT well opens an important subject in his article “Exploitation in Affluent Society” (ALR, April-May, 1967). As he demonstrates, marxists have never viewed exploitation in terms of a simple point of production formula, even though the point of production is its main seat. Exploitation under capitalism has always been a complex all-enveloping shroud that remains essentially the same but assumes different shapes as some surface features of capitalism itself change.

The rate of exploitation is increased by directly raising the intensity of labor, or, as is more usual nowadays, by raising labor productivity through technical change, and by minimising wage increases, increasing the working week, and raising the cost of living. A higher rate of exploitation of labor and a relative decline in living standards are primary but often underrated facts of present-day Australia. And as the application of advanced technology to production gathers momentum the rate of exploitation will undoubtedly snowball with it, as it has in the United States where the marxist economist Victor Perlo estimates a rise in the rate of exploitation in manufacturing of 25 per cent between 1958 and 1964.

In Australia the relative decline of living standards is best shown by the length of the working week, and the hours of labor contributed to production by the average husband-wife unit in return for the socially established and acceptable average standard of living for their family.

But first let us take a look at the hours worked by the adult male. Through systematic overtime and other devices the real working week in industry is increasing, and today is little behind the levels of the early 1940s.

In 1944, at the height of war production and under a 44-hour week, the average working week for adult males in industry was 43.61 hours. In 1964, in this so-called age of affluence, the average working week for adult males in industry was 42.84 hours, or about 45 minutes less per week than twenty years earlier. But at the heart of heavy industry, in founding, engineering and vehicle production, the average working week for males in 1964 was 43.91 hours or eighteen minutes a week more than the all-industry average of 1944!

By taking the average home unit or husband-wife contribution to national production in relation to their material returns, the picture is worse still. Before the second war, when far less than 10 per cent of married women worked, a family when employed enjoyed the average standard of living in return for a husband-wife average of about 50 hours of work a week. But today, as most ‘one-worker’ families will testify, the average job with overtime tossed in will not return the average living standard. Today the weekly average contributed to national production per husband-wife team is more of the order of 60-65 hours for relatively the same return as before the war—that is, the socially established and acceptable standard of living. This is exploitation and relative decline of living standards of a very high order. Affluence (which is des-
cribcd by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as ‘freely flowing, copious, abounding’) is paid for dearly by Australian workers in long hours of toil. This is an economic fact of prime political importance and one the labor movement does far too little about.

In terms of practical politics I believe two things are needed:

First, well-planned research of the different facets of exploitation in Australia with more emphasis on the ‘harder to see’ aspects that are presently smothered by the fact there has been an absolute improvement of living standards. This should be followed of course by clear but profound dissemination of the findings with suitable emphasis on the moral and humanist factors.

Second, and most important, perhaps the whole labor movement should seek a new, offensive attitude on wages and wages campaigns. Of all the issues in Australian society crying out for radical reform none cries louder than wage levels and the cumbersome, one-sided wage fixing procedures.

In my view the labor movement presently stands flatfooted and in a malaise on wages campaigns and wage fixing methods. This will probably be aggravated by the not unexpected success recently of the employers’ total wage claim over which the capitalists are now so jubilant. The unions appear to stagger continuously through long and costly court procedures before wage tribunals that do not seem to have clear terms of reference, but whose bias is perfectly clear.

The labor movement could usefully set its sights on an offensive campaign aimed at the political goal of reconstitution of wage fixing procedures. The precise nature of such procedures can’t be spelled out in advance but it seems likely that on the judicial side—and we probably shan’t escape the mercies of such for some time to come—the main need is for clear, legislatively established terms of reference for wage fixing tribunals to work upon.

From the labor movement’s point of view, such terms of reference should not rest on a single formula or index but on several indices including productive capacity, price movements, profits, the needs of the family, and the moral factors of exploitation in a supposedly enlightened society.

A campaign for political and legislative reform of wage fixing terms, and such a campaign would no doubt embrace varying levels of industrial and political action, would have enormous unifying possibilities among rank and file workers who, I believe, are becoming increasingly disenchanted with the gross injustices of our ‘affluent’ society. Such a campaign would also help put the labor movement as a whole on a much-needed front-foot offensive on the most important economic issue of all.

CHARLIE GIFFORD

SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY

EDGAR ROSS, writing in ALR (August-September 1967) quoted from the booklet Revolution in Russia and Australia by R. S. Ross.

Ross was a remarkable man who saw the danger of uncritical support for the Soviet Union or, worse, the attempt to turn legitimate Soviet experiences into a theory applicable everywhere at every time.

Ross argued for the labor movement to base itself on Australian traditions.

“As a fact, the more I read on Russia and its situation and problems—the more I read by Lenin himself (and he grows bigger and ever bigger
to me)—the more I can see the possibility of Australasia finding its separate way, as greatly as Russia, to the New Order, and the supremacy of Labor.”

He placed great value on Australian democratic practice and democratic institutions. He raised the possibility of transforming parliament into a genuinely representative body. His call for action on the political front was for nationalisation and his call for action at the industrial level was somewhat more than ‘One Big Union’. He raised the demand for workers’ control of any nationalised industry. Above all he was aware of the British heritage in Australia and called upon Marx’s views on Britain to suggest the possibility of a ‘peaceful and legal revolution’.

It is of significance that Ross headed one chapter of his booklet The Road to Power—in Australia. He argues against those Australian revolutionaries of the time who centred their view on the relative levels of democracy in both Australia and Soviet Russia. He criticised those who sought support for the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form then being practised in the USSR—that is with the disenfranchisement of certain classes and strata. Ross must have felt that this idea had important support since he argued heatedly against it. In considering a strategy for social change he sought not to reject Australian institutions and experience but to make the point that, “oppression and exploitation can be as simply and as surely ended by developing and strengthening our own industrial and parliamentary weapons as by seeking to overturn them in favour of weapons we are not fundamentally in tune with nor know how to apply as usefully as we do our own”.

In this respect he took to task those who claimed that democracy in Australia was a “sham and delusion”, although he regarded it as “incomplete”. He warned that hard won democratic rights must not be let go.

“If the suffrage be a moral right,” he said, “it must be immoral to disfranchise. We cannot copy the Bolsheviks in this matter. To suggest it is to invite our own disfranchisement. To coquet with the idea is to seek disaster. Our Australian system of the ballot and adult suffrage stands high as achievement and practice. If we say we have a bourgeois democracy, that may be correct as designating our social order, but it is not to say that the universal vote is bourgeois, for the universal vote is mass action of a very advanced character. We can, indeed, amend the details of its operation to provide for the recall and the referendum, but to insist that proletarian dictatorship demands its repudiation is to ask for confusion and conspiracy.”

His cry was for more not less democracy.

Ross put into his program as number one priority for a socialist movement, free speech, “the right and urge to say anything . . . in a word, no censorships whatsoever—none, and again none and still again none.”

He regarded free speech as fundamental to achieve socialist political action. While he saw nationalisation as a main aim he called for action in the name of socialism to lessen hours of work, increase wages, abolish militarism and the laws of inheritance. Summing up his view, he said, “Socialism is not merely a system, but a process.”

Industrially, he saw the need for “One Big Union”, but this was but one of his six points. Together with free speech and socialist political action, his fourth point was internationalism, amply demonstrated by his support for the Russian revolution, which he saw as one of the great
events in the history of mankind. His fifth and sixth points indicate something of the depth of the man. They were opposition to sectarianism and his stress on the role of ideas or as he called it “character culture”, the moral values of socialism.

Ross therefore wanted to emulate everything in the Russian revolution which would assist the movement for social change in Australia, but he had no hesitation in rejecting those parts of the Russian experience he considered irrelevant or harmful.

In this sense he was truly a pace-setter, worthy of study today.

—MAVIS ROBERTSON.

RESEARCH FUND

THE first research appointment has just been made by a Fund launched in Australia early in 1967—the Socialist Research Fund. The Fund was formed because its sponsors considered that in Australia the development of serious inquiry and research into problems of concern to all socialists was hampered for lack of direct encouragement and support. Its initial statement says:

“If a new level of consciousness and direction is to be found on the left, fundamental re-thinking is needed. The increase in the flow of isolated pieces of research, in Australia and abroad, suggests that such re-thinking can now be more soundly based and fruitful than in the past. But what is lacking is the opportunity for serious theoretical work in the field of socialist ideas.”

The extent to which such work can be assisted, and the variety of ways, will depend on what support socialists give the Fund.

As a first step, the Trustees decided to raise sufficient funds to support, on a minimum stipend, one research worker for a two-year period. An appointee was to be invited who would “inquire broadly within the socialist perspective and the marxist method,” and would be entirely independent as to the questions studied or the use to be made of any material produced. Support in the early stages was sufficient to show the Trustees that an immediate appointment in these terms could be made. Mr. J. D. Blake of Sydney has now accepted the first appointment, as from July, 1967.

GEOFF SHARP.

HELEN G. PALMER.

Trustees: Socialist Research Fund, Box 2227T, G.P.O., Melbourne.