ON READERS’ COMMENTS

THIS IS just a brief editorial note to thank those few readers who responded to my appeal to write to the journal indicating just what they want it to contain. If there was a poor response, this does not mean that mass apathy is to blame. As revolutionaries, we must always look to ourselves and the inadequacies of our methods to seek the reasons for our lack of success and then we must modify our policies. Only then is it possible for us to blame the mass for their apathy or their quietism. What the few letters I did receive indicated was readers’ irritation with the number of theoretical pieces which were difficult to understand and with the imbalance between reports about Australian issues and overseas issues. They want more Australian content.

I, personally, am dubious about eliminating sections on theory, for this is to lapse into populism and to forget Lenin’s famous dictum that “Without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement”. It is in my opinion, and I look forward to correction from my readers, that much of the failure of the socialist revolutionary movement in Australia can be ascribed, to lack of an adequate grasp of theory, not to a lack of militancy, though it may be that that too is disappearing today as “One Dimensionality” supersedes positions of criticism in our society. The assertion of Kavanagh that communists should “Go back to Marx” before they could make a revolution seems as valid forty years after it was made as it was in the late twenties. Simply, I am not in favour of reducing the amount of space devoted to theoretical issues.

However, I believe this journal must recognise the force of reader criticism that nearly all theoretical material in this journal has been too esoteric — in fact, so difficult to understand that they have not even read it. In future, I think, the journal should exercise a rigorous editorial policy of demanding that all articles on theory be written in a way that can be understood by the general reader. If the material cannot be presented in such a lucid fashion as to be understood by all, then it should not appear. Moreover, it is arguable, against the mystifiers of marxism, that Marx intended all his work to be understood by the workers, and certainly was intensely hostile to the meanderings of philosophers. We can even go so far as to assert that marxism is common sense raised to the level of philosophy.
Outraged sophisticates of marxism should recall, before taking up cudgels, that Marx himself was always very careful to point out that no idea became real as a social force until it was taken up by the mass of people. The purveyors of theory should therefore take especial pains, when writing for this journal, to make their points simply enough and to use simple enough language for their argument to be understood by the mass of its readers.

Reader demand that there be more concentration on Australian issues is a point well taken. Henceforth this journal will make the most energetic efforts to become more Australian in content. It will need to draw on the resources of more and different writers — people who are knowledgeable on matters Australian. This increased emphasis on Australian matters will not mean the complete elimination of reports on overseas matters, but it will mean more regular reports on Australian economics, Australian imperialism, Australian foreign policy and on Australian racism. We look forward to receiving material from readers on these issues.

A.D.

THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT. WHERE NOW?

In a relatively short space of time all the old debates about the Vietnam war have ended. Nobody enters the debates any more to speak of "threats from the north", the "menace of China", or "saving Vietnam for democracy". Even our obligations to great and powerful friends hardly rate a mention in the media. One might conclude that the anti-war forces have won the debate, which, in a certain sense, they have, but to leave the matter there is to assume that we have also won our "war", which we have not. It is just too early to pack up our demonstration kits and go home.

The temporary difficulties experienced by the Liberal-Country Party in adjusting their line to the new emphases in United States policies may afford some satisfaction to those who have opposed the Vietnam war and supported normal relations with the Peoples Republic of China, but satisfaction should not delude us into an assumption that anything basic has changed.

Why is there so little debate? Obviously silence is a tactical refuge for the government. A debate assumes that two sides contend. When one lapses into silence the sharpness of the other may be blunted or turned in on itself. The pro-war forces do not want a debate, even the old debates were forced onto them, because they want people to believe that the problems have all been resolved. Above all they hope to delude the anti-war forces into believing that there is nothing now to worry about. If the combat troops are withdrawn in a suitably emotional atmosphere —
bring the boys home for Christmas — who will notice that the training and advisory personnel are to remain? Who will believe that it is such troops, American and Australian commanders, experts and technicians who will continue to run the war, using local puppet troops, against the independence movement of the Vietnamese people? And if people do believe there is still a problem won’t the United States and China fix it up together?

All that is left (the government hopes) is conscription, always the lesser question in the mass actions against the Vietnam war anyway, and who will worry over much if the conscripts do not have to do Vietnam service, especially if the term of service is cut back by six months? It is the anti-war movement which needs the debate to counter the confidence tricks, to avoid confusion which would lead to immobility, and to extend the movement. Right now, at the level of the media, a public debate just isn’t on while within the movement the debate tends to turn in on itself. An important exception has been the debate that has been taken up in workshops. Workers who still maintain the arguments once advanced by a Gorton or a McMahon have begun to confront the issues with anti-war activists. The results have been positive and found reflection in the increased stopwork actions against the war on June 30th.

But the issues were, and are now, more complex and not easily conveyed in a lunch break or, for that matter, a university front lawn meeting. The movement has to estimate that while mass demonstrations against the war have continued to grow mass consciousness has not greatly increased. Certainly sentiment against the war is broad but because it is not very deep it can be suborned in the changing situation. It does not help much if the left debates with itself, often confining its arguments to such questions as the dates and routes of demonstrations or that ration of speakers and rock bands considered to be most suitable for the ears of the demonstrators.

And the left, in large degree, continues to project itself simplistically, creating an impression that the key to the problem of consciousness about the nature of Australian foreign policy lies in telling people long and loud that the Vietnam war is a major part of the global strategy of US imperialism. That there is no easy solution, no simple answer and certainly no particular form of propaganda to solve this problem, has to be faced. A comparison between anti-war material issued in various States would rate Adelaide highest on one form of anti-imperialist propaganda yet it would be rash to assume that mass consciousness is higher there than elsewhere.
The movement was built, and should continue to be mobilised, on the demand for immediate and total withdrawal. It should not settle for less. The partial withdrawals should be assessed as a partial victory but insufficient to justify a contract out of responsibility in favour of government promises, big power settlements or the hope of a future Labor Government. In addition to army commanders and advisers, the government intends to keep intelligence personnel, navy units, some RAAF units and RAAF men engaged with the US Airforce in Vietnam for as long as they are allowed. Those who seek to step back from the demand for immediate and total withdrawal should note that McMahon was quoted in The Australian on July 29th, 1971, saying: “Total Allied withdrawal would not solve the Vietnam problem”.

The exact nature of a changing relationship between China and the United States is open to speculation and not easy to estimate. No one should quarrel with China’s wish to normalise relations with particular countries, to improve trade, to win even tacit consent that Taiwan is not a separate nation and to end, or minimise, the costly isolation imposed mainly, but not entirely, through imperialist policies. At the same time it would be foolish for the anti-war movement in this country to now assume that the United States, or Nixon, has suddenly become rational and generous, or by implication, McMahon. Heavily pressed at home by a growing anti-war movement which now includes considerable sections in the ranks of the armed forces, it may well suit Nixon to play at peace making while bargaining in other ways for the stakes of Vietnam. It is not unlikely that Japan will, as she can, shoulder much more of the military burden for imperialism in Asia. This, together with some troop withdrawals from Vietnam, can be used to buy off some of the movement. More importantly, Nixon has been seeking an international conference to settle the Indo-China conflict.

McMahon, again playing internal politics, treated with scant attention Whitlam's telegram from China announcing his belief that a new Geneva style conference could be called in 1972. Certainly the idea is being floated and whether in response to such speculation or not, it is important to note that the Vietnamese liberation forces have recently made explicit statements affirming that Vietnam’s future must be determined by the Vietnamese and not by anyone else. After long years of successful struggle they will not negotiate away the positions they have won, and the United States has lost, in battle.

Nevertheless there is a view in the movement that Vietnam may now be facing pressures which could materially affect her fighting
Such a view adds strength to the idea that, in the long run, big powers determine everything but it is not well founded whatever impression Whitlam may have received in China in May. An official Chinese statement, early in August, ridiculed the concept of an international conference and reaffirmed that the condition for settlement in Indo-China is total, immediate and unconditional withdrawal of United States troops. The one hard fact that emerges for both the American and Australian movements is that by forcing the total withdrawal of the military presence of the imperialists from Vietnam we could put Vietnam beyond compromise, real or imagined. While recognising that both big and little powers, under threat, are sometimes forced to make compromises our aim should be to avoid those compromises of our demands which would, in any way, legitimise the presence of any of our troops in Indo-China.

The condition for the greater mobilisation of the anti-war forces is the reopening of the public debate throughout every section of the community and the extension of the debate so that it embraces the nature of Australia's foreign policy and the meaning of the present changes. The fact is that, in addition to the forces that will remain in Vietnam, strong Australian ground, sea and air forces are stationed in Malaysia, Singapore and Papua-New Guinea. In all cases they are there for the same reason as in Vietnam—to destroy by force the democratic movements of the local people, for true independence and freedom from the exploitation of Australian, British, Japanese and American capital. Even though it may shift some troops from one place to another, the Australian Government, like the United States, is aiming to continue its real policy in Asia—armed intervention, using conscript soldiers to maintain its imperialist power.

The situation requires the continuance of a genuine national anti-war coalition which can promote the public debate while developing significant national mass actions involving all areas of the coalition and extending further into the organised work force. All these elements are essential if mass consciousness on the real issues of Vietnam is to be deepened and not dissipated. The movement will be impeded to the extent that the coalition, now expressed in the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign, continues to be turned into an organisation responsible for every facet of the movement. Such a form substitutes for, and ultimately curtails, the initiatives of each component part of the movement and subjects it both to the risk of take-over bids and co-option into respectability by those who give first priority to a parliamentary solution.

M.R.