Interview with Jack Mundey

What do you think of reactions to your previous interview with ALR?

Clearly the most favourable reaction came from militant, progressive workers in the factories and other workplaces and from radical students. A wide range of people and organisations were openly hostile to the general concepts enunciated in the interview. The most vitriolic attacks came from the employers' organisations, the press and the rightwing of the Labor movement. Also critical were many senior union officials, including some communists and other so-called "left" officials, many of whom I consider to be well and truly entrenched as part of the status quo in Australia.

Quite frankly, I was surprised at the volume and breadth of comments and the persistence with which this ALR article was
trotted out. In many Arbitration Court cases, the employers' lawyer or spokesman attempted to use the contents of the interview to demonstrate what a lawless, "way-out" leadership the NSW Branch of the Building and Construction Workers has. On one occasion, a prominent barrister appearing for the Master Builders' Association contrasted the "responsible" leadership of the Tradesmen's representatives with the "irresponsible" leadership of the BCW which, he claimed, was "eroding" not only the employers' position but also the position of the tradesmen's union leaders in NSW!

Following an interview on the ABC on the ALR article, Commonwealth police came to our office with a list of 17 questions. The police refused me a copy and I declined oral answers. The main points of the intended police questions were on my ideas on militant forms of strike action — occupations, combating scabs, retaliation on scab-built buildings, and agitation for workers' control and abolition of the penal powers. It is significant that the police questions were the issues which the forces of reaction took up in their publications.

To what extent has union activity developed in the directions you advocated then?

The strike struggles have intensified, but I feel that there has not been evidence of sufficient new initiatives in action by strikers. Union officials, in the main, continue in traditional forms of strike action and keep a tight control on workers' activities. In the recent building strike in NSW, conservative tradesmen's leaders threw up their hands in horror at the "terrible crime" of a few scab-built walls being pushed over by strikers from the various building unions. Likewise officials in this strike opposed the tactic (which the strike committee finally voted for and implemented) of mass occupations of projects where employers attempted to keep working.

In strikes in the service industries, there have not been attempts to keep trains and buses moving and refuse to collect fares. Having in mind the mood of the public at the recent savage fare increases, such an exercise could have a tremendous impact on the general public. Again, with the unprecedented crisis in education, imagine widespread concerted strike actions by students and teachers and what a challenging effect it would have on authority, particularly if the strike was used by students and teachers to combine for a greater control of education by students and teachers. The Victorian teachers' struggle in particular points in this direction.
One welcome positive social involvement has been in environment control. The Clutha protest, the threat of strike action around retention of Kelly's Bush in Sydney, and the 26 Victorian unions' fight against a warehouse being built in parkland in North Carlton are some examples.

But in general Australian union history is one of concentration on economic issues and a relative neglect of political and social issues. Many unions, including militant ones, content themselves with strongly-worded resolutions on these matters. However these resolutions, made in the rarified air of a state or national conference, rarely see the light of day and rarely is implementation fought for at factory-floor level. Next year a similar resolution is carried and then placed away in the archives of the union.

The ACTU Social Services protest also reveals a problem. Though an increased number of industrial workers were on strike for the half-day, as with the Budget rally last year, very few attended the rallies. I believe this non-attendance is partly due to lack of conviction as to the value of attending rallies, and partly to the dry, repetitive rhetoric dished up at the rallies by union leaders and politicians. In the Sydney rally, which was small and attended by mainly middle-aged and elderly people, there was no climax, no demand for any form of confronting representatives of the McMahon Government there and then when the workers were assembled. No wonder young workers are not attracted to such gatherings.

Again, the glaring need for more education of the workers on basic political issues was the apartheid protest against the Springboks endorsed by the ACTU. In line with the UN and world public opinion, the clear call of the ACTU executive resolution was welcomed by progressives, but union officials and militants at the job level failed to get the support of the industrial workers to a degree where workers, if mobilised sufficiently, could have actually halted the tour. What a victory that would have been as an Australian expression of hate for racism!

Radical students left the industrial workers way behind in their persistent confrontation with our racist "guests". Not only did many "left" union officials fail to even try to mobilise their members, many apparently did not take part themselves. Of course a number of union bodies and workers did play a positive part in the anti-apartheid activities which were overall a notable success. But it is no good gilding the lily. The fact is that in the great controversy on the rugby tour, a significant section of our people emerged as racists, and we in the union movement have not done
and did not do a satisfactory job among the union membership to combat racism and ignorance in this country.

What are the employers and others doing to try to turn back the workers' offensive and develop a counter-offensive of their own?

Since 1969 the unions have, generally speaking, been on the offensive. The employers have not fully recovered their position or composure. However, forward thinking employer organisation leaders such as G. Polites, of the National Employers' Policy Committee, is busy hammering out a new line—a line that will take more into consideration the requirements of the multi-national corporations and their policies which will impact Australia in the years ahead. Australia, still one of the most "politically safe" countries for foreign investment, is receiving the attention of US industrial experts who are influencing employer organisations and their containment plans.

Our union movement has been slow in forging new ideas on collective bargaining to suit Australian conditions. In fact, there has been little dialogue. In the recent months, the so-called Cameron-Sweeney proposals have been put forward with a view to showing the electorate at large how a Labor Government in 1972 would "manage" the capitalist economy. It is designed precisely to allay any fears that an ALP Government would not be "responsible"; to show that such a government would control and restrain more militant and far-reaching demands by way of voluntary sanctions imposed by the workers themselves.

Following the Launceston Conference and the stand taken by the left delegates, there was an extremely strong feeling among the workers that once having broken the penal chains which bound them for so many frustrating years, they will not have a bar of any form of industrial sanctions, let alone self-imposed ones! So while the Clarksons and Darlings holler for law enforcement industrially, the demand of the progressive left should be for agreements of short duration, or better still, open-ended agreements with a pre-requisite of prior consultation of the parties before a change is effected.

What is happening now about the penal powers?

Since 1969, there has been a strong current of opinion not only demanding the removal of all penalties but a deeper opposition to arbitration itself. During 1971 though, some of the big
employer organisations have been again pressing for the imposition of the penal provisions. Introduction of the 32A provision of the Arbitration Act was designed to prevent show-downs on the penal fines after the O'Shea affair.

Some (though too few) unions have engaged in stronger forms of opposition to the Courts, and on many occasions our union has completely boycotted Court proceedings. Because the Australian union movement is not really independent, many of the reformists, with an eye to the possibility of a Labor Party in office, are against any radical changes to the status-quo and actually supporting a reformed Court. Some even favour retention of penalties. Down below there is almost complete opposition to the penal clauses and growing opposition to arbitration itself.

The authorities themselves are somewhat frustrated and so we have seen the introduction of the repugnant Summary Offenses Acts in a number of States and Federally. With the penal provisions rendered inoperative at this time, reactionary State Governments moved quickly to bring in the Summary Offenses Acts, many clauses of which especially attack the right to strike, dissent and demonstration. In NSW, Askin declared that the 1970 strike of the Builders' Labourers inspired part of this legislation. The first person arrested under the new Act was Tom Hogan, an organiser of our union. This was hardly accidental. His crime was “waiting on a building site”. He was there at the direction of strikers to investigate a purely union matter! The NSW legislation was opposed by a wide range of individuals and organisations. It was, however, rank and file teachers and industrial workers who got out a broadsheet, organised protests to the Courts, etc.; and once again most unions contented themselves with passing executive resolutions and leaving it at that.

The tentative steps towards more involvement in outgoing issues began to accelerate with the success of the penal clause struggle. The Santamaria-ites, Riordan, Short & Co., are pressing for the return to mainly economic issues and are violently opposing intervention in burning social and political issues. Their language and that of McMahon, Bolte and Askin is very similar indeed. The “politicalisation” of our union movement is now the fundamental issue at stake. If the progressive section can win this struggle so that it becomes natural for unions to intervene directly in important social and political issues, then unionism has a real future. On the other hand, if the reactionaries and conservatives have their way and the movement is restricted to mainly economic issues, with reliance upon governments introducing legislation and with no extra-parliamentary action by workers on political and
social issues, then unionism has a very limited future and will become less and less a force in Australia.

How much of an issue is democracy within the unions themselves?

All unions — though generally speaking there is more democracy in the left unions — have a long way to go to really involve their members in decision-making on vital policy issues and the actual control of their union. The attendances at general meetings (some by the way do not have general meetings, all power being vested in the executive) are low and there is a strong feeling that the membership have little say compared to the full-time officials. Many full-time officials are highly bureaucratic, their main concern being retention of their position of power. Some use the union movement as a stepping stone to parliaments, boards and commissions — a few even to the Arbitration Commission! There is often expediency on party-political positions, and there are some strange bed fellows when the heat is on at union election time.

There is a degree of cynicism amongst workers about trade union officials in general. Personally, I believe there should be a rotation of union officials; that after a number of years full-time it should be compulsory for every official to return to his place of work for a year at least, or better still a term of three years. This would get away from the careerist approach of many union officials. I also believe there will be more workers' control movements emerge in each industry, with an important ingredient being more control of their union by workers.

Amalgamation of unions has been slow, not because the workers oppose it, but because officialdom jockeys for positions in the new union. Political party differences also hinder the coming together of unions. Everyone's watching the successful coming together of the three metal unions. It would appear the new rules give more rank and file control and ensure more involvement. However size alone does not determine a union's value, and the implementation of policies and the activities undertaken in this decisive industry will have a big influence on other industries and on amalgamations amongst other unions.

There is a great difficulty in breaking through in rightwing union bureaucracies which are closely tied to the capitalist establishment. However, the increasing strength of grassroot movement in the Australian Workers' Union and the breakthrough by left-forces in the Ironworkers' Union on the South Coast of NSW are signs of a move to the left which I feel will gather force in the years ahead.
What are the workers' reactions to the campaign of the government to blame the unions for inflation, and what are the important issues in the wages struggles at present?

There is considerable confusion about who is responsible for inflation. The barrage of the daily press blaming “Hawke and the militant unions” has fallen on some receptive ears, particularly among workers who are not involved in strike actions themselves, but rely upon other unions to do the grinding work of lifting wages for them. The left generally has an immediate need to get more propaganda out to the workers. Other than the fine work of the Combined Research Centre of the AEU-Boilermakers-Blacksmiths and one or two other unions, there is a real neglect in this area.

When one considers that the workers' share in the Gross National Product hasn't risen in the post-war years, yet over the long course there has been a substantial increase in productivity, there are strong arguments to be used. The central point should be that we demand a greater share of the GNP.

Another issue receiving attention is that of what relativity of wages should exist between tradesmen and non-tradesmen. It is in the latter category that we find the most exploited of the industrial workers in the steel works, metal factories, motor car plants, etc., where the profits are enormous. Many of these workers are migrants, who do the less congenial, most arduous, jobs yet are paid far less than tradesmen. The mentality of craftism is strong among tradesmen's officials and this often results in unions, including the left ones, giving prior concern to the tradesmen's interests. As tradesmen constitute a minority, this creates a resentment among the non-tradesmen. Another weakness is the failure of unions to elect migrants to positions of union leadership.

Last year we put forward a wage relativity formula of 100%-90% for tradesmen and non-tradesmen in the building industry. Not only did the tradesmen's officials not agree, but they failed to put forward any alternate relativity. It appears to me that all hangovers of craftism must be eradicated if we are to build genuine industrial unionism. This of course is not just a problem with officials, but extends to considerable numbers of the rank and file of tradesmen's unions.

In changing the division of the national income, we would be also tackling the burning problem of the uplifting of pensions of the aged and invalids and other deprived sections of our “affluent” society. Our union originally put forward the concept of strike action in support of pensioners, and that was only a
start. Longer and more decisive strikes in key areas will have to be undertaken before governments will really act on pensions, land rights for Aborigines, etc.

What do you think of workers' involvement in the struggle against the Vietnam war?

The decade of the 1960's saw a heightening of anti-war activity with a very wide spectrum of the country's people involved in all forms of opposition to the Vietnam war, though the union movement still lagged way behind. Many and varied reasons were put forward for this. Once again fine resolutions were carried at the top. Calls were made from union leaders of the left and some from the centre for the involvement in protests for the ending of this war. After the Pentagon Papers disclosure we even had J. P. Ducker address the moratorium rally in Sydney.

I believe we have failed to show the economic cost of this war; but even more that we have failed to convince the workers on the moral issues involved. There was also a lack of conviction of many left leaders on tactics in demonstrations, sit-downs, sit-ins, etc. Too few leaders were to the forefront of such activities. Again there was too much lip-service and insufficient physical presence in the anti-war demonstrations. In the moratoriums of the last two years there has been an overall growth in the number of workers stopping work, but here again too few unions really worked to get the whole membership to stop. This indecision in leadership was naturally reflected among the rank and file. The failure of the international working class movement to mobilise workers against the war to the degree achieved by the student movement needs much more analysis. In Australia particularly, because of our proximity and our future in Asia, do we need to examine this question.

You have few women members in your union, but what is the attitude you observe to Women's Liberation?

We have a number of women members who receive the same wage rates and benefits as male members receive. Our aim is to retain our present women members and encourage others to join. With changes in construction methods, there is no reason why women should not be employed in this industry. Within our own union office, the girls have a form of virtual workers' control. The division of work, introduction of new methods, staff required, etc., is determined by the office workers themselves. No longer
are they merely there to get tea, and carry out orders from on high. By encouraging their self-action and running of the office, there has been all-round improvement.

I personally believe women’s liberation to be one of the most exciting and progressive social and political developments of our time. Because of our male dominated society, there is an unfavourable reaction among most males generally, and certainly among industrial workers towards women’s liberation. As every male is affected by his dominant position in society, the women’s liberation movement is quite shattering to him. However because of the greater exploitation of women in almost every instance, women’s liberation has an undoubted and historic role to play, and I believe in time industrial workers, along with others, will come to share this belief.

What do you think will be some of the issues at the coming ACTU Congress?

I have already mentioned that increased involvement of the unions in political and social issues is the big question likely to emerge at the ACTU Congress. Already Riordan, Maynes, Short & Co. have gone nearly as far as the McMahon, Snedden and other ruling class spokesmen for restricting the involvement of the ACTU. The “who is running the country” theme is very much like the Menzies’ catch-cry about “advancing yellow hordes”. It is a deliberate and phoney tactic aimed to frighten Labor Party union leaders from pursuing an industrial line which intervenes in social and political issues, whenever and wherever they affect the working people. The “leave it to the elected government” cry and avoidance of extra-parliamentary activities by unionists is the line of the National Civic Council and DLP, and of rightwing extremists still in the ALP. Already this has had some effect judging by various comments following the Maryborough by-election. There will clearly be an attack on Hawke’s leadership.

During the last two years Bob Hawke has made a considerable impression. The workers are impressed with an articulate leader capable of handling the best spokesmen from the employers and governments. The average worker sees Bourke’s as a successful experiment and was particularly pleased with Dunlops and the “retail price maintenance” issue, Hawke’s support for the stoppage in support of pensioners, and his generally positive attitude on political and social matters. While overall his image is still very good, among the more politically conscious it was somewhat tarnished by his involvement in the Cameron-Sweeney proposals, and his stand supporting Federal intervention in the Victorian ALP.