British workers' control conference

“WORKERS’ CONTROL — THE MOVEMENT OF THE SEVENTIES”: Such was the sign over the speakers’ platform, Birmingham, England, where over one thousand shop-floor delegates attended the Eighth National Workers’ Control Conference in October 1970. The continuing strength of the shop steward movement in England contrasts sharply with our Australian experiences and is clearly reflected in the fact that this Conference of Workers’ Control was the 8th and largest of its kind held on a national basis.

Contrary to a prevailing Australian reformist viewpoint, there is no one more equipped or capable to deal with the deep social issues directly affecting workers than the workers themselves. Nor is it accidental that many union leaders, unionists and union delegates originally of the left have lost sight of the democratic and potentially revolutionary qualities that reside within the Australian working class movement. Nor does it require an analysis in depth to determine wherein lie some of the root causes that have led to such disastrous effects for the Australian revolutionary and working class movement as a whole.

Dogmatic materialist concepts almost devoid of the essential dialectic, derived from a stalinist hegemony, and its efforts to refute christian idealist dogmatics, has and continues in no small degree to delude the revolutionary movement on the fundamental role of working class, participatory democracy. That delusion, in itself, calls for deep and continuing analysis of its causes, and effects on the Australian scene.

Such distortions of the fundamental basis for the promotion of socialist ideas of democracy have been further compounded by the related acceptance of the “lawful and orderly” system of compulsory arbitration on which most of the Australian trade union movement has come to rely. The absence of this type of

Bob Campbell is Newcastle organiser of the Sheet Metal Workers’ Union. He was elected by representatives of 14 unions to attend a conference organised last year by the World Federation of Trade Unions on the problems of young workers. This conference was held in Bulgaria, and with the approval of his union Bob Campbell took the opportunity to go to England to attend the Workers’ Control Conference.
system and the refusal of important sections of the British trade union movement to be intimidated, due to its more democratic base, probably best explains its contrast with the movement here in Australia.

In many ways the conference was a significant step forward for the British workers as well as a valuable example for all serious left activists in Australia. The flow of discussion was in high key and as each speaker finished, the chairman had dozens of choices for the next. The vast majority of the contributions came from the floor of the conference whose composition was much younger than one has come to expect at a meeting involving unionists.

One very healthy aspect of the conference was the tremendous number of organisations represented. As participants walked into the hall they could expect to be handed material from every tendency in the left in Britain, ranging from Maoists, Trotskyists of varying brands, the unemployed, organisations for the freedom of African States and anti-apartheid groups, to the Communist Party and the Labor Party, together with many other marxist and leninist groupings.

One of the major concerns of the conference was democracy within the unions. This was well summed up by Mr. Ernie Roberts, Assistant General Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering and Foundrymen's Union, when he said: “The major job for workers at the moment is to take control of their own organisations, that is, the trade unions. Until this is done it is useless to begin to attempt to control the boss. If until the present day, the unions have made many gains, both in conditions and wages, ways must nevertheless be found to make real demands on the boss which will challenge his right to hold complete control over our lives.”

A phrase heard many times during the conference was extra-parliamentary opposition. The disillusionment of most speakers at the performance of the Wilson Labor Government is closely related to this. Governments, regardless of their shade or leanings, are always much more vocal in opposition than when in power. When Labor politicians in Britain today express horror at the Tory Government’s attempts to introduce its Industrial Relations Bill — which is similar to our penal provisions — they don’t sound very convincing. For the Wilson Government Bill “In Place of Strife”, which was resisted by the workers, was designed to do much the same job. One delegate said: “Well, the Tories are back in power if, indeed, they were ever out of power, for they have always had control of the Stock Exchange.” Valuable lessons can be learned by the Australian left from these examples, particularly.
by that section which see election of a social democratic party—the ALP—as the path to socialism.

A major point which came through was the need for international co-operation between workers in the face of international corporations. Instances were raised showing clearly how huge monopolies were transferring production from one country to another to cut costs at the expense of the workers. Particularly is this true of the motor vehicle industry. Dialogue between Japanese and Australian workers could be an immediate step in this direction for us.

As a result of attending this conference, I feel that the British working class is moving in the direction of having control of their lives put into correct hands—their own. A most valuable aspect of the whole conference was the fact that workers from some particular establishments or industries came forward with complete concrete programs for the control and management of their job. The situation in Britain certainly lends itself to this type of program for there are far more nationalised industries there than in Australia. Any proposal, however, would be impossible to implement in any way without complete control over every aspect of the program by the workers directly in contact with the job.

**Australian potential and obstacles**

From the "vantage point" of Newcastle, the potential for a challenging workers' control movement on a national scale in Australia seems rather restricted. There must be analysis in many centres throughout the country. This article therefore concentrates on practical obstructions to industrial democracy and workers' control in the Newcastle movement.

In the State Dockyard in Newcastle, we have a perfect example of an industry in which a policy of industrial democracy could be implemented to a considerable degree immediately. Firstly, it is State-owned; secondly, it has a history of mismanagement; and, thirdly, there is some evidence of responsible action by the trade union movement in settling problems—for example, the Newcastle Trades Hall Council intervention in demarcation disputes.

There have been attempts by the State Government to convince the workers that they have some say in the running of things by appointing Mr. John Ducker of the NSW Labor Council onto the management board. They even have the Newcastle Lord Mayor, Ald. McDougall, on the board. Anyone with any experience in the dockyard will agree that this ploy is even more useless than it sounds. Workers in this establishment, as in Britain, are in a much better position to understand the needs and requirements
than anyone else in the community. An initial move would be the involvement of the works committee in all aspects of safety and on other committees.

For many years, the dockyard unions have been tearing each other apart in useless, senseless, demarcation disputes; in many cases with the “assistance” of union officials who cannot, or will not, see any further than their narrow union interests. This situation was allowed to continue until, in 1969, there was a genuine threat to completely shut down the works. The Newcastle Trades Hall Council, at that time, advanced a code for the settling and prevention of inter-union demarcation disputes. The basis of this code was that both parties should agree to abide by the decisions of an independent arbitrator from the unions, agreed to by both parties. Since this proposal was implemented, the dockyard has been relatively free from major demarcation disputes.

There is an urgent need at Newcastle, and other dockyards, for a single industry union. However, when this was advocated by the Newcastle THC, in a resolution which said “This Council deplores the increase in situations in which unions are contesting each other instead of initiating understanding towards industrial unionism”, and given coverage on the front page of the local press, it was met with horror by many union leaders, including some on the left.

The Newcastle struggle in the BHP and subsidiaries for a 33-1/3rd per cent pay rise for all workers was not itself successful, but the gain was a campaign which was, for the first time, controlled and directed by the rank and file. The meetings held during the struggle were the best attended meetings ever for Newcastle, the workers responding to the call for a rank and file campaign free from top decisions. New shop committees emerged, together with a greater awareness of the positive character of extended trade union democracy, in comparison with the innocuous bleats of the past for action by leaders at the top. This struggle exposed the self-imposed containment and conservative restraint that still obstructs the movement. BHP had only to mention deregistration for some union leaders to look immediately for some compromise and ways to extricate their unions from a possible confrontation with Australia's largest monopoly. Hardly the way to win workers to more militant unionism!

The issues of democratic decision-making and involvement need much greater promotion than that given to date, and evidently, if the Australian unions are to become an “offensive” movement, its inhibiting “bullock wagon-like” structure, complete with whip-crackers at the helm, will have to go.
Extracts from Stephen Bodington's paper at the Workers' Control Conference

Trade Union Demands and the Technological Revolution

THE CONTEXT of industrial struggle for better wages and working conditions is being changed and will continue to be changed more and more rapidly as new technologies, scientific management, etc., make their impact more and more felt. No worker can be sure what the future holds for himself, still less for the community to which he belongs. Operations of industrial concerns tend to be determined by national or international management policies that pay scant regard to the interests of the communities in which their component units are located. To wait until problems are obvious is a great mistake. If the shipyard workers on the Clyde had, in the years following the war, insisted upon the right to ask all the questions they could think of about the future of the shipbuilding industry it would have been possible to hammer out a much better future for themselves and for the Clydeside. This, of course, would have taken time, facilities for meeting, research into the background of questions asked, facilities for presenting information in the clearest possible form, facilities for workers themselves to study the background of the problems raised. Many thousands of hours would be needed to make such investigations fruitful; but is one not talking about many millions of hours of working and living time for people in the regions? So the first suggestion is the need and right of workers to deliberate on the future of their own work activities in conjunction with people of the community in which the activity takes place. (It is obvious that work life, community revenue and much else is primarily dependent upon basic production and basic economic activities located in the region.)

The right to meet and to discuss

The struggle of the Italian workers in the Autumn of 1969 in the engineering industry in addition to winning big wage advances, won a number of other demands of which one in particular is, in principle, of great importance. Employers who in many cases previously had not even allowed trade union representatives to enter the factories, were forced to concede the right of all workers to use the factory premises for meetings of those who worked in the factory and for ten hours of such meetings a year time spent would be paid.
Genuinely democratic demands are demands formulated by people themselves and this takes time and calls for discussion. Workshop meetings and discussions are crucial to the democratic process and there is no subject of interest to the meeting of workers that should be excluded from the scope of such discussions. Only by such discussions can ‘reasonable demands’ be formulated. Out of such ‘reasonable demands’ the momentum for socialist struggle is likely to be generated; what appear to the collectivity of workers feasible and ‘just’ will become the object of struggle. The onslaught on the structure of the capitalist market economy will become concrete. As the capitalist organisms attempt to meet ‘reasonable demands’ they will adapt themselves and develop whatever potential they have, and insofar as they have not got the potential to meet feasible demands, the struggle for these demands will be transformed into a struggle for socialism.

Scientific management and democratic involvement

Efficiency measured in terms of ability to produce goods for exchange profitably is demanding more and more ‘scientific management’. Scientific management essentially means integration of workers and machines as elementary components in a flow of production designed to proceed over time with a minimum of interruption. The worker becomes more and more a mere cog exercising no individual power of decision or initiative, but carrying a heavy responsibility to ensure that the chain of production processes, the flow of production, is not interrupted or, if it is, to take the most urgent remedial action. Such routinisation of work is a preparation for fuller automation, that is, the automatic linking of machine processes with less and less human intervention.

Because they live their lives within the production process the industrial workers are the most richly informed about the nature of these processes and best able to design production flows in such a way as to improve the product and at the same time take account of the interests of the workers themselves. In point of fact the industrial workers are the last people to be consulted as a rule. Processes are studied over the heads of the workers by ‘experts in scientific management’ and once new production plans have been worked out workers are confronted with plans for reorganisation that have been settled and agreed and wrapped up in mathematical formulae which must be accepted on the grounds that ‘the experts know best’. Of course, the production process involves questions of high technical specialisation but the reorganisation plans as a whole, of which the technical points constitute no more than component parts, are more intelligible to those who operate the production processes than they are to the decision
makers who, as directors, represent the owners of capital. 'Scientific management' is kept away from the shop floor not for practical reasons but to ensure that control is linked to the ownership of capital and does not pass into the hands of the collective of people engaged in the production process.

Control over 'scientific management', involvement in production reorganisation right from the very start, would seem therefore to be an important objective of industrial struggle. It is essential to the protection of the workers' immediate interests but, more importantly, is a stepping stone towards socialist control of democratically organised highly automated industries. Once again the problems are complex. Time and study are required to understand them. This again points to the need for making discussion time, information, training, special research at public expense the objective of struggle. The fact that all resources for research, education, special enquiries, etc., etc., are at the disposition of people who see the problems in a different light from that of the workers' needs to be called into question. If the workers are to win social freedom they will need to win a stronger command of the sources of information and scientific understanding. Large public resources are devoted to such ends; but decisions about how these resources are used are democratic only in the most formal sense of expenditure being approved by Parliament, etc.

Finding alternatives to authoritarian organisations

Struggle that takes the form of people in organisations, such as workers in factories, or members of a local community expressing concern about where the organisations to which they belong are going, sounds simple enough. In fact it is far from simple because it is calling into question the basic principle on which all social life has been organised throughout past centuries, namely the principle of authoritarian decision. Society has evolved checks on authority but self-organisation of people by themselves is something new. It will take a great deal of time, thought, experimentation and conflict before really democratic ways of running things gets established. For this reason one cannot underestimate the importance of time to allow people to argue, express their differing points of view, learn about and enquire into the things they do not understand, get first rate information in a form that can be quickly grasped. The demand for education is an old one in the socialist movement. Now we want to learn something that no one can teach, something we must learn and explore for ourselves. So the new demand is for 'self-education'. We need to establish new standards of behaviour, new outlooks, new attitudes to one another, new attitudes to work.