IT STARTED EARLY. 1969 had hardly begun, with most factories still closed for the holidays before industrial action began to swing. Trans-Australia Airlines was reduced to skeleton operation by a strike of 600 men against a rigid bureaucratic structure behind which stands the Federal Government’s authoritarian policies. The postal service is ready to erupt again because of the same bureaucracy and the Liberal Government’s determination to hold the economic line by maintaining “proper” relations between master and servant. Newcastle steelworkers came out against the other giant Australian bureaucracy.

And this is only the beginning. Engine drivers and other railwaymen are still boiling over the way their claims were handled, and their indignation can be seen as expressing the general feeling of low-paid workers who get least from “work-value” cases. Bank officers, public servants and other unionists affiliated to the Australian Council of Professional and Salaried Associations are poised ready to make 1969 a year of militant action, in a most sensitive area for employers and governments.

On the other side of the industrial fence, the top policy-makers are spoiling for a fight. The Federal Government is today the most intransigent of all employers. Since it disposes of the State’s legislative and executive powers, it can spearhead the employers’ strategy. It is no accident that TAA sought and was granted an order under which individual strikers could be fined up to $100 a day (and jailed if they could not or would not pay the fines). No accident, because the Government is looking for a showdown—it tried much the same tactic last year with postal workers under service regulations, and learnt nothing from having to leave the fines uncollected. No accident, because the present TAA head is airforce brass-hat Sir Frederick Schergei, conditioned by military concepts of discipline and its concomitant arrogance. And perhaps no accident because a TAA stoppage helps Ansett, the second private-monopoly airline.

The Government has announced its intention to bring the public service under legislation that can punish unions for strikes and other industrial action. This declaration of intent foreshadows a whole concept of labor strategy integrated with the economic strategy of income regulation to keep wages low, maximise profits
and investments and increase military expenditure for the “new” foreign and defence policies incubating in the top circles of military advisers and Cabinet. This column predicted two months ago that “1969 will be a year of industrial action”, and suggested the need for an effective counter-strategy by the trade union movement.

A MILITANT COUNTER-STRATEGY should not only meet the impending employer-government, administration offensive but develop a counter-offensive designed to shift the working class movement from the defensive in which it is placed by the constricting arbitration system. This counter-offensive would challenge the whole official concept of wage fixation, that puts wage- and salary-earners constantly behind scratch as prices and taxes rise. It would raise new and bold demands for a living wage, equal pay, shorter hours and longer holidays, protection of workers’ rights in conditions of technological change. These demands are in no way excessive even within the capitalist system, when scientific advance and technological innovation is raising the level of production and when all of this rise in national surplus is appropriated by the capitalist monopolies and the Federal Government’s taxation policy. Recent Arbitration decisions have put the judicial seal on the present division of the social product, in such a way that the trade unions can at most keep the workers’ “share” as a constant percentage and never raise it; in fact this share tends to drop. These conditions will continue so long as the unions are content to work within the present Arbitration framework and rules.

The 1969 Congress of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, to be held in Sydney in September, will have to make important decisions on these issues, but events will scarcely wait until then. Immediate and urgent questions are raised by economic policy and political decisions.

WORKERS’ DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS are the most immediate of these. The penal clauses of state and commonwealth industrial legislation have become a major area of oppression. Their extension to new groupings of workers, and the probings to apply them to individuals, adds a new urgency to trade union confrontation of this attack on democracy. Workers all over Australia are looking for a fighting lead, so far not forthcoming from the national trade union leadership or indeed, from most State Trades Councils. While no one would object to negotiations in efforts
to settle disputes like the present TAA strike, on terms satisfactory to the workers and averting the use of penal powers, many workers have the uneasy feeling that threats of penal action against unions and workers are used to intimidate the unions and provide a basis for compromise more favorable to employers than workers. The ACTU style of mediation, again illustrated by Mr. Monk’s intervention in the TAA negotiations, continually reveals its limitations. In this case there was not even a compromise.

It is time to make a change, to confront the legislation by militant counter-action whenever it is used. Unionists are in this mood today, for every strike (and even more limited forms of industrial action) is immediately blocked by bans, orders, fines and still more draconic threats. When the employers and governments take these powers even further, as in the TAA case, the West Australian boilermakers and the postal workers, and seek to widen these powers, still more favorable conditions are created for a militant confrontation.

The speeded up processes of technological change are introducing continually new issues in this field, at the same time throwing new sections of workers into positions where they feel more and more the need and urgency to assert their democratic rights, at the same time expanding their ideas of what those rights should be.

CHANGES IN THE ACTU EXECUTIVE, ending the power monopoly of the conservative right, have inspired new hopes for a more forthright stand and a new direction in national union policy. Unionists will be looking to the new executive majority for a lead on the urgent issue of the use of penal powers, as they expect other policy changes.

Besides defence of the right to strike, a new and bold program of wage and social demands, workers’ democratic rights have to be asserted in a new way. The TAA strike, like so many others, was sparked off by victimisation of a union delegate, a favorite employers’ tactic of denying elementary democracy. This tactic has the virtue of putting unionism on the defensive. In this sphere too, the best form of defence is attack, the demand for democratic control in which workers can counter the bureaucratic structure of capitalist production, based on the employer’s right to hire and fire, lay down and enforce the regulations and conditions of work with the final say left to the punitive apparatus of judiciary and government.
An important feature of recent industrial actions has been the spontaneous assertion of this demand in varied forms, by diverse groupings of workers. It is already possible to generalise this as arising from a profound social current, caused by the very process of modern production with its vast and remote bureaucratic structure of ownership and control. It is the assertion of human dignity and rights of the individual to a say in his work and the decisions that affect and determine it, with this important qualitative dimension the rights of individuals as workers can only be asserted collectively, by solidarity, organisation and mass action. Unless this demand is consciously developed into a program of democratic control and action, a frightening perspective opens up of a new authoritarian state-monopoly capitalism operated by a bureaucratic aristocracy of owners, controllers and administrators who decide everything.

Shape of things to come, at least in the conceptions of Big Business ideologists, was projected in a recent article in Nation's Business, as summarised in an Australian newspaper.

The top company boss of the future will be dressed . . . in a purple robe. He will sit behind a desk that looks like a jet aircraft control panel. And he will dictate his letters to a topless secretary . . . This special kind of office status will be reserved to future "super-executives", who may also be allowed to have "two legal wives" ("to regularise and legalise a situation that even in our own day exists, though often disguised").

The journal suggests a purple outfit, "in keeping with the ancient connotation of royalty," for the company president, blue for his assistants, and red for staff members. Sun-Herald 19.1.69.

Fantasy? Perhaps, but the thinking behind it is the concealed rationale of Big Business and Big Government, the concept of an aristocracy of wealth, power and talent. The rationale is really as fantastic as its projection, but only because it will meet a democratic opposition. If it should not, this fearsome fantasy could become reality.

SURELY IT COULDN'T HAPPEN HERE? The myth of Australian egalitarianism notwithstanding, the concentration of wealth and power already existing makes it quite possible to speak of a finance capitalist aristocracy, with its inner councils, its "royal marriages" that unite great fortunes and power, its special training schools which train the aristocrats and open to the brightest youth of the "lower classes" — so long as they will conform to the goals, ambitions and ideas of the ruling elite.

A revealing sidelight that illustrates an aspect of this ideology was contained in a recent series entitled "THE Schools", which appeared in The Australian recently. These are, of course, the
top private schools, educating sons and daughters of the rich — businessmen and executives, squatters, doctors and lawyers, and so on. Each school is examined under several headings: numbers (restricted and exclusive) waiting lists (to 1980 in some), fees (high and exclusive), social rating (high and exclusive), tuition and facilities (where money can buy them, excellent). But they are not snobbish, oh no; as the headmistress of one Church of England girls' school says, "It is open to all girls and I do not think the word 'snob' can be applied at all". Anyone can go—if their parents can pay the fees (for a senior boarder at this school $1122 a year—about average). The headmaster of one boys' school says of his pupils "none is really connected to any single group of society." Of course not—they are sons of businessmen, executives, doctors, lawyers, prominent squatters—a real cross-section of society, if this abstraction is given that special meaning which excludes laborers, fitters, wharfies, shearers, clerks, schoolteachers and the manifold other lower orders.

The Australian private school setup is not just a minor foible, a laughable imitation of the British Establishment. It is a part of the system of class rule of the power structure; the number of conservative Cabinet Ministers, company directors, public servants and other powerful men educated at these schools is out of all proportion to their numbers. And the Commonwealth "state aid", is going in similar exaggerated proportions to these schools, is subsidising this instrument of class separatism and perpetuation.

Despite the prevalent ideology for rationalising the exercise of power, and its bolder assertion for an aristocratic elite, there are several inherent flaws in the concepts. One is the fact that money, inheritance, the best of education and training cannot ensure any monopoly of brains and talent. While the system controllers estimate this may be met by buying up the best brains from outside their circle, the growing number of intellectuals critical of their system is disturbing — witness concern at the student revolt. Another feature is the intellectual mediocrity of most business and political leaders, despite their hothouse training — or perhaps because of it.

John Grey Gorton exemplifies this harsh reality. If Menzies was no genius, he acted the part tolerably, sustained by his own certainty that he was; Holt was even less so, but had urbanity, experience and a certain homespun egalitarianism, even if a little self-conscious since obviously assumed. It would be a little hard to blame Geelong Grammar for Gorton's deficiencies, as compared to Wesley's two Prime Ministerial products, but the hard fact remains that Gorton is a mediocrity even by comparison. Stuck
with him, the Establishment is trying to make the best of a bad job, through a massive public relations exercise. The mass media have so boosted his performance at the Commonwealth Conference as to make it appear he was the star performer who acted as Harold Wilson’s righthand man and yet won the grudging admiration and respect of the Afro-Asian Prime Ministers. Having performed less than impressively at home, his PR team is intent on creating the image of a statesman abroad. The actual performance is less than impressive. Mr. Gorton emerged as a firm defender of White Australia, friend of Ian Smith’s Rhodesia regime, in the tiny majority opposing recognition of China, the extreme hardliner on Vietnam even to openly rejecting the usual formal obeisance to the Geneva Agreements.

AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY is not a source of strength for the Gorton Government, but its Achilles heel. The political and military successes of the National Liberation Front, which have inexorably forced the United States to the peace table step by step though reluctantly, have shattered the whole basis of what passed for an Australian foreign policy. Britain’s withdrawal East of Suez and understandable United States reluctance to repeat another Vietnam in South East Asia now confront Canberra with an agonising dilemma.

Gorton dreams of a strong Australian capitalism assuming a leadership role in South East Asia — or at least that small part of the region which is pro-“Western”. There is an insoluble contradiction in this dream which will turn it into a nightmare; capitalist Australia is not a great power despite all its development and its industrial strength relative to South East Asia.

This weakness, together with its exposed situation on the periphery of Asia, far from Western Europe and North America, the two centres of monopoly capitalist power, enforces a special type of dependence upon Australian capitalism, reinforced by inadequate economic power that puts an additional lever into the hands of foreign capitalism (the United States, Britain and Japan). This creates specific psychological tensions for Australian capitalism: fears of Asia with the impulse towards the “US Alliance” (and the more general fear of the “colored races” that leads some extremists to dreams of a Rhodesia-South Africa-Australia triangle). This explains the virulence of anti-communism, the pathological fears of Asia so inadequately compensated by protestations of an “independent Australian role”, the love-hate relation with the United States (also the new hate-love relation with
Britain), also the hysterical violence which can erupt through the thin veneer of "civilised" rational and democratic political life.

Entrapped in the web of geographical reality and historical necessity of Asian national liberation, this dream of a special Australian role in Asia can only lead the nation further into difficulty and ultimate disaster. Warning signals are already flying: a high and dangerous level of military spending that must grow (and complicate the balance of payments problem); increased dependence upon the United States (with its new Nixon administration likely to demand more military commitment from Australia and to adopt tougher trade policies); higher taxation, yet less satisfaction of rising demands for education, social advance and services.

A new political offensive on foreign policy and its internal impact is required from the Left and the labor movement. The Left has a special role to play here, since the uneasy balance of forces within the Australian Labor Party has largely immobilised it in this vital field. Vietnam events of 1968 certainly vindicated ALP policy as compared with that of the Liberal and Country parties; even Whitlam jumped on that bandwagon. But Whitlam's policy is far too American-oriented in its fundamentals to allow him to draw the radical conclusions required to press home the political advantages flowing from collapse of the Vietnam policy. The ALP Left in parliament, who have a much more genuine claim to political foresight and courage, are still too restricted by narrow political considerations and have still not thought through to its logical conclusion the problem of Australia-US relations. Thus inhibited by theoretical unclarity and political considerations of Caucus numbers and electoral prospects, the parliamentary labor Left is unable to break the stalemate and take the Party along with it in the necessary bold challenge to the defence-foreign policy monstrosity now incubating in Canberra.

In these conditions, the Australian Left as a whole has to mount a new offensive on foreign policy, warning of the dangers ahead, explaining the sinister implications of a permanent Australian "presence" in Asia, and relating these issues with the economic and social demands which are calling forth industrial and other militant actions. This integration of political, economic and social actions and campaigning is not imposed but reflects reality. It is the effective and specific contribution that the Left can make to ideological preparation for this year's federal election, with the aim of striking a more effective blow against the policies of Australian monopoly capitalism.