A research officer of the AEU-Blacksmiths Boilermakers' Research Centre looks at an issue which is increasingly being discussed by the Left. In its next issue, ALR will publish a symposium of views on the subject.

THE PURPOSE of this article is to express some preliminary thoughts on the subject of workers' control with the aim of stimulating further debate on it in the *Left Review*. For such a debate to be meaningful it is obviously necessary to define what I mean by workers' control so that people know what I am talking about. As a socialist I see action towards workers' control and even the popularisation of the concept as an important ideological counter offensive against capitalist control. The concept at this level means that workers are assisted to understand that industry does not need private owners. As a trade unionist I see workers' control as the extension of the right of the trade unions particularly in the workshops, through their representatives, to have an effective say in decisions made in respect to such matters as trade unionism, safety, welfare, discipline, wage fixation, appointment of supervisory staff, deployment of labor, technological changes, hiring and firing and access to financial records.

This is a pretty tall order when put against the usually recognised trade union rights. But if the word "control" is to have any meaning it must mean at least this, for the purpose of workers' control should be to have decisions made in the matters listed above which will take the needs of the workers into account to a degree that will effectively promote their interests. From the limited information available to me this also appears to be near enough to the understanding of what is meant by the demand for workers' control which is being put forward in Europe at present.

The concept is far from being a new one, for it was widely debated at the turn of the century in the controversies as to what was the best way of achieving socialism. The anarchists supported workers' control as an alternative to the state, which they held to be
an obstacle to the achievement of socialism, and proposed that it should be exercised through the trade unions as a form of working-class self-government. It was also supported by the Syndicalists, particularly in France, by the Industrial Workers of the World, and by the Guild Socialists in Britain. The last proposed that the state should acquire the ownership of industry and hand over its administration under a Charter to a Guild of all the workers engaged in it, both by hand and brain.

The concept of workers’ control was also reflected in a more pragmatic way by the shop steward and workers’ committees movement which developed in Britain during the First World War. At the end of the war the mining and railway unions each proposed that their industries should be nationalised and run by a Council consisting of an equal number of representatives from the unions and the Government. There is even some evidence that the concept of workers’ control had some brief support in Australia at that time.

The difference of marxism with the political ideologies which have been mentioned was that while it agreed on the vital importance of the trade unions it held that the working class required a marxist political party to help it achieve its objectives.

After the First World War, the workers in a number of European countries were able to force through legislation for workers’ representation in industry in some limited form as a concession to the revolutionary mood of the workers, and in Britain it was toyed with on a voluntary basis. But these developments were soon brought to an end by the postwar depression.

After the Second World War the trade unions in some European countries were again able to obtain legislation giving them certain rights of representation with management, particularly in nationalised industries. But the experience was disappointing as the employers were able to isolate the worker representatives from their rank and file, with the result that in practice what operated was a diluted formal participation without the workers having any effective say in the decisions made. This is not of course surprising, for the employing class had in the past proved itself very adroit and successful in diverting demands for effective workers’ control into the diluted form of workers’ participation, which usually finished up as class collaboration.

In a research which I made some time ago on the history of Joint Consultation it transpired that as far back as 1893 a group of industrialists in Britain met and put forward the idea of an Industrial Union to promote harmony between employers and employed and to realise in a larger measure their common inter-
ests. The persistent prosecution of this idea eventually led to the setting up of a Government Committee in 1916 under the chairmanship of J. H. Whitley M.P. to examine the widespread unrest in wartime industry.

One of its conclusions was that, "What is wanted is that the working people should have a greater opportunity of participating in the discussion about and adjustment of those parts of industry by which they are most affected". It also led to the establishment of Whitley Councils in some minor industries and the Civil Service in the post war period. So it is a long time since the employers woke up to that tactic. But the basic attitude of the employers was shown by the bitter fight in Britain between the engineering employers and the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1922 over the demand of the union to be consulted on the working of overtime. The union was soundly defeated on this comparatively minor aspect of what the employers regard as inviolable managerial rights. I am stating an obvious, but often underestimated truth, that the ruling class will always seek to contain, deform and divert demands for workers' control and fight bitterly against anything which actually curtails their power.

The issue of effective workers' control became increasingly urgent to European workers in recent years because of the multitude of difficulties imposed on them by such things as the Common Market, automation, trade competitions, currency crises, incomes policies, alienation from work, growth of monopoly, and the penetration of American capital. In some countries the means exist to assist workers to extend their power in the form of vigorous trade unions and mass workers' parties. In these countries considerable numbers of workers see workers' control as the key to solving or alleviating at least some of the problems which press closest on them at a factory level and perhaps some at a higher level. Active workers know the problems of their industry well and are able to speak knowledgeably of the problems to be faced.

The desire for workers' control is also stimulated by the growing awareness and demand for consideration of the workers' human dignity. This has become something common to many industrialised countries, including Australia, because developing technology has led to increased alienation from work, even though in some countries workers' control itself has not yet become an issue.

The question the foregoing raises for us in Australia is just what significance does the concept of workers' control have for the trade union movement here? It can be said at once that workers' control in the sense as defined by me at the beginning of this article is not a real proposition under present Australian conditions, as the
favourable conditions necessary for its achievement are at nothing like the level which exists even in Europe.

There is a trend of thought that the trade unions have failed to push the idea vigorously and one gets the impression that the only obstacle standing in the way of workers' control is this lack of vigor. One cannot be blinded by the undoubted attractiveness of the concept to the limiting factors which exist in Australia (which includes a very powerful right wing within the unions and labor movement) and the basic groundwork which has yet to be done. For one thing, a major limiting factor is the small size of the Communist Party, for this is the only political party in Australia which believes in actively fostering mass movements and is capable of giving tactical industrial leadership of the required quality to enforce workers' control. But the existence of limiting factors does not mean to say that workers' control is not valid as a long-term objective. Nor does it mean that the trade unions have done all they could to take it as far as they can, within the bounds of the limiting factors that exist in Australia today.

There is an urgent need for the trade unions to intensify the struggle for even elementary industrial democratic rights. These do not as yet exist here, but they must be achieved before any further steps can be taken towards winning workers' control. Such elementary rights include increasing the rights of Shop Stewards, (who at present have little more legal rights than a stray dog in a factory), the recognition of Shop Committees, (which have no legal rights and are denied full acceptance by the right wing of the trade union movement), the abolition of the penal powers, (which are a throwback to the dark days of the Industrial Revolution), the right to consultation over questions raised by technological change, and the right to have a say in the safety protection of members. The challenge to the Left is to promptly seize and develop those opportunities which favor some degree of workers' control in a particular matter. In the industrial field this usually arises on questions of job safety, the rights of union organisation and the right of hire and fire.

A measure of the entrenchment of managerial rights in Australia and the resistance which has to be overcome is given by the recent major disputes where the employer at the date of writing had flatly refused to give even one tenth of an inch on them. These were the refusal of TAA to reinstate what the union considered to be a victimised job delegate, the Tramways Board refused a union request to transfer a member who worked during an official stoppage, and the refusal of the Post Office to reinstate a union member in Victoria who had supported the action of members in New South Wales against strike breakers. I do not know how these
disputes will end. But all three have been intense industrial struggles with the workers concerned exercising their industrial strength. The degree of their eventual success will therefore be a measure of the organised strength of workers, their present capacity to encroach on and limit managerial rights and the quality of leadership of the trade union movement.

These disputes have also shown what a powerful bulwark is the arbitration system to encroachment on managerial rights, and this is a formidable limiting factor to the achievement of workers' control which is peculiar to Australia. It is my view that a vital pre-requisite towards the development of workers' control is the breaking of the stranglehold of this system which so often contains workers' struggles.

The concept of workers' control raises a number of other important questions which space precludes me from dealing with, such as to what extent it can develop socialist consciousness, what is its importance to a socialist Australia, how can the danger of falling into class collaboration be avoided, and so on. These and those I have raised are left to others to develop as it is a subject with wide ramifications and considerable importance the analysis of which could have easily filled the whole of this issue of the Review.