A participant from Australia in the International Preparatory Committee for the ninth World Youth Festival held in Sofia July-August 1968, raises some critical views on the work of the Preparatory Committee and the conduct of the festival.

AFTER ALL THAT HAS HAPPENED in Czechoslovakia since August it is hard to look back on the World Youth Festival and make a clear assessment of a world gathering of youth and students under the slogan “Solidarity, Peace and Friendship” when two weeks after it concluded one of the participating countries is occupied by its supposed friends. But my experience of four months work of the International Preparatory Committee (IPC) of the World Youth Festival (held in Sofia, Bulgaria, from July 28 till August 6, 1968) raised many questions in my mind which seem to be relevant to the situation in which many progressive organisations find themselves. For this reason it may be useful to draw attention to the kind of problems that occurred and the action that was taken in connection with them.

There are those of the left who have attempted to reconsider their positions in the real world at the end of the 1960s. They do this to lay a basis for broader and more meaningful work. To be effective one must put theories to the test and place emphasis on courage and flexibility as well as loyalty. If many young people of the left lack experience, what they offer — opening and question­ing minds — can be invaluable for those who seriously want to be effective in their aims. I believe that the Communist Party in Australia at its 21st Congress was one of the radical organisations seeking to be appropriate in policies and organisation and that it, and other organisations of the left might learn something from the experiences of the World Youth Festival.

What were the aims of the Festival in which about 120 countries as well as many International Organisations participated? First it was seen as a demonstration of support for the people of Vietnam and a protest against the policies of the United States. Second it was envisaged as a meeting ground for people with common aims,
people who could learn from each other and discuss current problems on ideological and practical levels. That was the theory. The problem with this idea, for those who already have all the answers and see no reason to reconsider anything, is that when it is put into practice one cannot give guarantees that everyone is going to reach agreement or that people will not criticise the existing order — in socialist as well as in capitalist countries. You find that people are not very interested in highly organised meetings where they feel they may not hear more than jargonistic slogans and declarations of solidarity. In the circumstances, to avoid spontaneous discussion and unpredictable results, an easy answer is to organise until the meaning had almost gone out of the very questions under study, and above all to keep away from any question which is actually or potentially controversial.

These were the reasons, it seems to me, that the IPC refused to allow the following topics to become an integral part of the Festival discussion program:

The developments in Czechoslovakia from January to July 1968.

The significance of the new radical student movements, especially those of Western Europe.

The actual and potential relationships between the radical student movements and the working class movements.

The significance and interpretation of marxism in the world today.

It may be that there are those who think that such questions ought not to be discussed in a gathering of "Solidarity, Peace and Friendship", yet all these topics have considerable bearing on the actual movements in each country. It would not be true to say that these topics, and many others, were not discussed — they were, not always because the IPC saw them as important but because it was impossible to quell the enthusiasm of thousands of young people who are, above all, determined to find the answers to the problems that confront them. Informal debates and teach-ins were organised when many Festival participants found themselves dissatisfied with the standard of scheduled discussions. In the formal discussions the position was almost always black and white, good or bad and the solutions simplistic. In contrast the spontaneous events were challenging and often produced a genuine unity amongst participants because this was a unity forged out of a desire to understand and learn.

Not only did the IPC dismiss many suggested subjects as unfit for discussion, but it missed the opportunity to take up many
issues. For example, whatever stand one takes in the progressive movement, it must be obvious that there are thousands of young people who feel an emotional pull towards Che Guevara. He is a controversial figure, his role is assessed differently but the fact that he is important to many young people cannot be denied. But the Festival organisers decided it could be ignored. This attitude seems to me to be self-defeating.

In a more serious area of political controversy, but not unconnected, while members of the National Liberation Fronts of Angola and Mozambique and of the African National Congress were present at the Festival, no real opportunity was taken of their presence. It is true that we condemned apartheid and colonialism in Africa but surely more could have been attempted. Some study is necessary of the role of these organisations in the liberation of their countries and what better possibility could there be to hear their views. The same could be said of various organisations in Latin America.

I could enumerate other incidents which left no doubt in my mind that the IPC was out of touch with many of the demands and pre-occupations of the young radicals of today. What is of concern is that the IPC is composed predominantly from the leading circles of the World Federation of Democratic Youth. These leading circles are by and large representative of organisations from socialist countries or individuals with similar views who have positions out of all proportion to the numerical strength of the organisations they are supposed to represent. Some other member organisations of the Federation have been unable to develop a sufficiently independent stand for fear of isolation. Thus those who represent the forces seeking renewal are in a distinct minority.

To those who are already formulating the stock answers, who want to point out for the nth time the difficulties of the anti-imperialist forces and particularly the difficulties of the world communist movement, let me say that one can understand historical reasons for something without necessarily accepting the end result. In this case I found that the IPC was intent on protecting the Festival, not from the right but from those of the left who do not see the Soviet Union in the way that its leaders seek to be seen — as the leaders, teachers and arbitrators. A main concern seemed to be to isolate the new left students (predominantly SDA from West Germany). It was the preoccupation with isolating progressive groupings that really worries me (and others). What is there to fear from these groups? The answer must be found, I am sure, in the ideology of those — particularly some Communist Parties — who believe that their answers are the only answers. One fears what one does not understand, but if there is no under-
standing of what motivates people and what they seek one does not get rid of the problem by denying it or repressing it. The gap only widens.

Many of the criticisms I make may not have been obvious to many individual participants in the Festival and there were many positive features about the Festival. Although it is not so important now as it was in an earlier period to actually demonstrate that young people from all over the world can meet together, it still has some significance. The planned activity in solidarity with Vietnam, the demonstrations of support and the real aid — gifts of equipment, medical supplies and blood — were all important. Then too some of the national Festival organisations were free of the rigidity and dogmatism that was so much a feature of the IPC. The British delegation, for example, involved young liberals, communists, trade unionists and cultural groups. Among the socialist countries the delegates from Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia contributed a great deal to debates because they were willing and free to discuss things in a constructive way — they gave the impression that they felt there were things to discuss rather than to proclaim on.

What relevance then has this for the radical movement in Australia? Perhaps I can be more explicit by saying that I was in a group of Czechoslovaks in Bulgaria on August 21 and I was overwhelmed by their reaction to the occupation of their country. I cannot believe that many people who support the action of the Soviet Union and others would have done so if they had seen and faced the utter desolation that these Czechoslovaks of all ages felt. It was gratifying for an Australian in Europe to be able to talk to people from Czechoslovakia and know that they were aware that the communists in Australia supported them. To my mind the decision of the communists was a test of its 21st Congress decisions, though I think that this is only a beginning.

It is not enough to say a mistake has been made (after all is this the first mistake?) without recognising that having said that there must be examination of the reasons behind the invasion, a close look at the relationship between socialism and democracy, consideration of the economic situation that socialist countries find themselves in, assessments of the past and continuing role of the Soviet Union in the world communist movement.

And what of other questions concerning the development of all the radical forces? Those who are seriously committed to the idea of social change and above all the communists, need to be aware of the preoccupations of different groups on the left, to discuss with others what they want to discuss and not simply talk
about one's own policy. It is not enough for the mainstream of the left, which I think the communists are, to seek to debate Vietnam with Liberal MP's or to talk over common ground with Christians. Certainly it is commendable to say "We are not afraid to put our views in public and we shall listen to others" but what is also needed is debate within the left. Communists might find it useful to know what others of the left see as its role and communist leaders might be surprised to learn how their own members see their role (or more accurately, roles). I believe that many people now are interested in socialist solutions to world problems but that large numbers of them doubt the communists' ideas for achieving socialism.

In this context there are young radicals who express uncertainty of the French Communist Party's role in the May revolt and many feel that the true revolutionaries on this occasion were students. Such views need examination, in the light of all the facts; they cannot be brushed aside if only because they may be right, or partly right. One cannot ignore the impressive radical student movements of Europe, especially of West Germany, and of the USA or the fact that in involvement, developing ideology and action they are often in advance of traditional leftwing organisations. And it would be foolish not to consider the experiences of the liberation movements in Africa and Latin America, to try to understand how and why they proceed as they do, what they are achieving and if there are any alternatives open to them.

To be effective on the left today does not mean that one must find immediate answers to everything; perhaps it is good not to have things too black and white but rather to seek to grasp the real implications of each initiative of the left in a wide and varied world. Of some things I am certain. Young people do not want slogans, they don't want jargon and they will not be blindfolded. Young radicals are not destructive, their questioning is genuine and meaningful. My experience working in the IPC showed me that no one has a monopoly on truth, and that socialism as it exists in the Soviet Union (or anywhere else) is not sacred since sometimes the practice is appropriate in one situation but not in another. Above all I believe that those who are active on the left need to realise that politics is a complex and subtle field and that it is inevitable that one will be continually confronted with new aspects, new ideas, fresh opinions. While all that is new is not necessarily relevant or valid, one cannot be sure of this until it has been looked at, discussed and honestly assessed. It is the preconceived position which must be avoided since this rejects new ideas and can very easily stultify genuine new developments for social change.