NO-ONE, not even the most wildly optimistic, expected that 800 people would spend all, or part, of Easter debating and considering strategies for the Left in Australia. The fact that they did suggests a new seriousness which could serve the Left well.

The Conference for Left Action was not without its problems. While there was some evidence of a yearning for a fresh start, for a real attempt to overcome the worst divisions, the first attempt to consider holding such a conference came from Laurie Aarons, secretary of the Communist Party. This raised immediate problems. For some, notably Newsweekly on the right, it was an attempt to bring under communist control all the new and varied radical forces. But there were those on the Left who had their suspicions too. Was this just another exercise in manipulation? Was it an example of further compromises with petit bourgeois forces? Why was the approach made by Aarons and not by the Communist Party organisation?

Such reservations express in various ways one disquiet of those on the Left who remain unconvinced that the Communists, given their past, their program, their organisation, their attitude, can now contribute meaningfully to socialist advance in Australia. The fact that it was Aarons could hardly be taken as hiding his identity, but it raised at least two important advantages. First, while one may discount anti-communist phobias if one likes, in reality it is easier to decide to join in the initiation of a project with a person than with an organisation. Second the nature of the Left today is that trends are more identifiable with people than with organisations. Even the Communist Party no longer appears, let alone is, a monolith. Other Left trends appear differently from State to State, within organisations or are represented in various "little" journals. Some trends do not even have a public face.

In any event 30 initiating sponsors representing significant but by no means all trends, consulted and decided on the form of the conference. Later more than 100 others endorsed their proposals, added to them, changed some. By the time conference assembled no significant trend was absent although some were more substantially represented than others.
Although the sponsors had sought to discuss two questions, a critique of Australian capitalism and its position vis a vis world imperialism and then to consider various strategies, it was really the latter which engaged attention. Many participants rejected the need to make a substantial critique, claiming that "we know the problems." Unfortunately this is less than the truth. It is because so little is known by workers of the motivations of students, by students of the real conditions of workers, by professional and skilled workers of the difficulties facing the unskilled, by the majority of the real deprivation of the minority, and much more that many Left strategies are still so removed from reality. Who, for example, understood the participation of a twenty year old Maltese migrant, a man who works forty hours doing dull repetitive work for less than $40 and who spent his holiday weekend providing coffee for the ideologists? If the Left Conference showed anything, it showed that most of the homework remains to be done and must be done if an alternative to capitalist myth-making is to ever become the province of more than a few.

Yet there is already sufficient grasp of basics to ensure genuine attempts at socialist renewal. And this despite obvious inadequacies. There still are some communists who believe that they have fulfilled the requirements of militancy simply by prefacing whatever they say with "I am a communist". It's still disconcerting for some, to have to enter real debate and dialogue and something of a shock (not only to communists) that open differences are aired between communists. There are workers and students who substitute wish for reality and declare that worker-student cooperation is a going concern despite the intolerance which appeared even in that gathering. There were attempts to solve deep seated problems by advising students to wash more often and cut their hair as if this was the main barrier separating students from workers. Workers, on the other hand, were told to read more widely and to advance actions incomprehensible to some present, let alone those outside, not to speak of their suitability or otherwise.

Just as those who assumed that the Communist Party was a monolith were surprised so were those who lump together all under thirties as "students" or the "new left". True, most young people present were students representing an important development of new radicalism, but if anything they were more divided than the rest. Far from offering Left alternatives that are new, one heard echoes of every old Left idea ever propagated — the praise of Stalin, a sectarian response to a radical catholic, unthinking hero worship of "the workers" — were some ideas expressed by individual students.
What was new was the coming together, the prevailing spirit that no one (one or two excepted) had all the answers, that the lessons of France had been taken in, if not fully admitted, and expressed in the conviction that the key to social change lies with the working class. By and large then all present were seeking common ground for the Left — students, academics, workers, union officials, professionals—to break capitalism’s hold on the working people, if the means varied the end was the same.

For communists the criticisms offered of their position were, mainly, constructive, if in some cases more perceptive than those they now make of themselves. Notice was served on the Communist Party to continue the present changes, which are respected, to restructure its organisation, to accommodate more of the differing views on the Left, to get more to see that there is no alternative to the development of organisation which can become the centre of the revolutionary movement. For communists in the trade unions it was an unequivocal call for a revolutionary perspective, not just for militant actions but for the development of actions which serve revolutionary purposes.

Whatever the weaknesses and strengths the Left will not be the same again. Some suspicions have been dissipated and replaced by a new tolerance; ideas and programs were discussed on their merits, mostly free of prejudice; the concept of power and the upgrading of demands for control received a new emphasis and the development towards essential worker-student cooperation was enhanced, if only because those revolutionary workers and students present now estimate each other more positively.

For those who were not present, the stimulation is difficult to convey although the quality of the papers presented may be judged since these are for sale. For the future a realistic program was adopted. It dispensed with the “Long live this” and the “Down with that” in favor of a modest effort at research, a registrar of Left and radical organisations and a series of future conferences, the first scheduled for August on workers’ control and self management. All hold the possibility for further Left collaboration.

Where it will all lead to no one can say. In the immediate aftermath, trade unions in Sydney responded, as they haven’t for a long time, to police intervention in a student anti-conscription demonstration. Perhaps this too is part of a new beginning. Someone suggested that no conference of the Left with such diversity had been held since that which led to the foundation of the Communist Party in the 1920’s. It may be that this conference represents first steps for the revolutionary coalition needed for the ’70’s.
THE SCOPE AND DEPTH of the opposition to the penal clauses of the compulsory Arbitration Acts revealed in the struggle against the gaoling of Clarrie O’Shea and continued after his release, has surprised the radical-minded as well as alarming the conservative. This poses a challenge to all, not excluding the communists, even though they have been paid the over-generous compliment by Government, DLP and employers of being held responsible for it all.

However different in form, this great struggle has intimate links with the student revolt, the negro rebellion and the French upheaval of a year ago, reviewed once again in this issue. There is a vast ground-swell springing in ways not yet adequately fathomed, from the very nature — repellent and alienating — of modern society in the throes of the scientific and technological revolution, with its monopoly domination in the economy, its bureaucracy and authoritarianism in enterprises, institutions and organisations, its increasing incapacity to satisfy human needs.

Compulsory Arbitration, enforced by all the repressive power of the State, is the very antithesis of the deepest aspirations of modern man who yearns for self-fulfilment and at the least a measure of independent control over his own activities. Since this authoritarian compulsion involves a far greater number of people to a more intimate degree than any other repressive laws, the fight against it is of correspondingly greater significance.

If hundreds of thousands of unionists cannot run their own organisations, control the disposal of their own persons even to the limited extent of withholding their labor when they think necessary, or pursue without repression even modest aims (as measured by the possibilities of today), how can larger aims such as workers’ control, student power, autonomy for aborigines, meaningful civil rights and participating democracy in general be achieved? This is the question that should be posed again, again and again.

The usual and more obvious reformist attempts to divert the struggle with minor modifications of the penal clauses, or of the arbitration system itself will need to be guarded against, as will the specious pleas for “law and order” which can conceive nothing but compulsion (by and for the Establishment) and regard self-management in any form as a dream — or a nightmare.

No less, however, will it be necessary to combat traditional trade union narrowness, which is blind to the transforming possibilities of the struggle in the present political and social scene, in forging links between workers and students and others, and in impelling the unions into the path of bursting through capitalist containment and integration and becoming instruments of radical social change.