THE FIRST QUESTION to be asked about the future of trade unions is what are the possibilities and what are the limits of trade union activity? I paraphrase that question from the title of an article by Perry Anderson “The limits and possibilities of trade union action” in The Incompatibles. This article doesn’t get far beyond the views of Lenin, particularly of Lenin’s polemical pamphlet What is to be Done, and I think that Lenin and Anderson saw more clearly the limitations than the potentialities of trade union action. If unions continue to be no more than they have traditionally been throughout the 19th century, there is nothing to indicate that they possess any value of themselves as instruments of social change. If they are going to be instruments of social change they have to develop their own sets of values.

Traditionally the unions have accepted the values of the society in which they have operated — they have been in fact, part of capitalism. To use Anderson’s terms they have developed corporate values instead of hegemonic values. They have to cease merely to accept the values of the hegemonic group in a society, that is of those who own property, and they have to cease to work within those values.

This assumes that one wants to see unions as instruments of change and of course this is a big question. I believe that the trade unions can be and should be instruments of social change and that this is almost now a social necessity.

Here in Australia, basic social change is not immediately on the agenda: it’s a long-term goal. But there have to be intermediate goals too, so first of all I want to examine the narrow conception of the union, as an organisation, as an institution concerned to ameliorate the conditions of working people in capitalist society.

The traditional role of the union has been aimed at improving the condition of workers within capitalist society and of protecting workers against capitalism. Perry Anderson makes the point that the trade union in society has been a mark of capitalist society. This is a negative quality in the traditional trade union function.
Now it may very well be that there has been no better instrument devised for protection against capitalism than the American business union. I know of no union which has been able to get more for its members than unions like the United Automobile Workers, for example. At the same time they’re marked by extreme conservatism, both political and social; all too often (though not as often as the anti-union press would have) by corruption. But the American union, especially in the hands of a man like Jimmy Hoffa, for example, is not to be despised. The American experience does suggest that very many small increments to welfare, a concentration upon the daily or the weekly aim at the expense of long-term issues, don’t indeed can’t, amount to basic social change at any point — this is just the Fabian myth restated in an American context. But the immediate struggle of the union — this daily struggle — is important.

The union has to be effective in the daily struggle so that it will have members which give it political power and financial strength. We have to remember that workers of necessity are primarily concerned with this daily struggle to live. So in Australia the question is how is the union to become effective again or to remain effective?

We have to look at the setting in which unions operate in Australia. Increasingly our economic destinies are in the hands of large corporations employing a very significant proportion of workers. The multi-national corporation, usually American-based, is the instrument of modern capitalism. The scientific and technological revolution is transforming the nature of the skills that are required in industry, the proportion in which those skills are needed and the relationship of man to the productive process. The distinguishing feature of the industrial revolution was the lack of control possessed over the process by the men and women — not forgetting the children too — who worked in industry, who worked in the factory which, far more than the machine, was the symbol of the industrial revolution. There was a total acceptance among them of most of the values that were being inflicted upon them by the new capitalism of the 19th century, simply because the factory worker didn’t possess the means of devising and giving effect to his own values. It was only late in the 19th century that factory workers became organised in any large measure into trade unions.

But workers in the scientific and technological age do possess these means in the form of trade unions. Hence the first target of the union is to get, and to hold, some degree of control over the process of scientific and industrial change. This necessarily involves a greater degree of emphasis upon organisation at the plant level, the shop floor level, the factory level, the office level.

And here I’m not talking about worker control. There are two different things spoken of all too often when people talk about
worker control. Worker participation and worker control are not the same things, and all that is implied, up to this point, is worker participation. It's not possible to lay down in advance precisely how far this sort of participation has to go or all the things that it would be concerned with, such matters as design of jobs, the allocation of work, negotiation of rates, discipline on the job. These are all important, but perhaps the first two, the design of jobs and the allocation of work, are the most important, because these go to the very root of the industrial process and if unions or workers have participation in these then they've achieved a great deal indeed. These are precisely the areas in which employers are most loath to allow participation by employees.

Nor is it possible to lay down in advance precisely what sort of organisation will be needed at this level because there are so many factors that have to be taken into account. There's the existing structure of the unions involved, there's the nature of the industrial process, the kind of skills that are involved; and all these change very much from one industrial situation to another. But there are some other aspects of the problem that can be discussed more precisely. First of all relations between manual and white collar unions; secondly the structure of trade unions; thirdly, union democracy; and fourthly and inevitably in this country of course — the arbitration system.

On the question of white-collar unions and manual unions, I want to outline briefly the thesis of John Kenneth Galbraith. Galbraith is an economist, Canadian by birth, who has written a series of books *American Capitalism*, *The Affluent Society* — a term which Galbraith coined — and *The New Industrial State*. *The Affluent Society* in particular I think is one that everybody ought to read. It's a diagnosis or a study of the symptoms of the sickness of capitalist society, of neo-capitalist society. It has no solutions but the diagnosis is still of some importance. But what I want to refer to is his *New Industrial State*, and the relations between white collar unions and manual unions. Very briefly the proposition is this: that in the mature industrial corporation (and we have some of them in Australia like the Colonial Sugar Refinery and Broken Hill) effective control rests in the hands of the techno-structure, the people like engineers, sales executives, accountants, scientists — all those trained professional or semi-professional people who make decisions within the corporation, as to the direction, the order, the character of production.

These people, erroneously, are said by Galbraith to control society and according to Galbraith they are above trade unionism, trade unions represent substantially manual and the lower grades of white collar workers, and the role of the union is limited in the mature industrial corporation to serving the ends of the techno-
structure. This isn’t quite such a load of garbage as it may sound, because to some extent it does picture the American situation. White collar unionists, the techno-structure, are badly organised in America. The position is different in Britain, to a great extent, and also in Australia. There’s nothing inevitable about this inability to organise the white collar worker, or even the techno-structure, the supervisory grades that are affiliates of management though not themselves management — the engineers, surveyors, draftsmen. This is a process that is going on in Australia; and indeed the white collar unions are growing at a faster rate than the manual unions, largely because in our modern society the number of the white collar workers is increasing much more rapidly than manual workers.

It’s extremely important that this process of the unionisation of white collar workers should proceed and also that there should be closer relationships between the white collar and manual unions than at present exist. There is suspicion on both sides, arising from social and economic disparities and these have to be overcome. This is part of the program for effective participation in industry.

Secondly, there is the structure of unions. Australian unionism is a product of the 19th century and the *forms* of unionism have been frozen almost though not entirely under the arbitration system. It might be a bit too simple to say frozen by the arbitration system because they have also been frozen to a great extent in Britain where you haven’t got an arbitration system; but the union structure is still basically that of unions of the 19th century and particularly of British trade unions. There is a tendency, and you see it in the number of demarcation disputes that take place for example at the Newcastle dockyard, to cling to craft forms which are becoming increasingly irrelevant. There is secondly a need to avoid the sort of situation that takes place in Britain in the steel industry when negotiations go on with employers and one of the major troubles is that of getting the almost innumerable unions represented in the steel mills to come into line, one with the other. This of course is quite disastrous because if the unions are struggling amongst themselves this, obviously, is a tremendous advantage to the employer and renders the possibility of effective participation considerably less than it might otherwise have been.

You will notice that I’m not giving any answers to these problems because I don’t know myself what the answers are, except in a very general sort of a way. But it really isn’t the business of the academic to give the answers; he has an obligation to help if he has any sympathy with trade unions but the answers in the end lie with trade unionists themselves.
The third thing is union democracy. Australian unions are bureaucratically run in a very high measure. Whether it's an effect of apathy which is a characteristic of the trade union movement both in Australia and Britain or whether the apathy is consequent upon the lack of union democracy I'd be very hard put to say. But there are one or two American unions — the typographers and Actors' Equity — that are better than anything we've got in Australia, and that have a fierce internal democracy and a very high level of member participation. These two elements of worker participation and union democracy are essential in order to engage the minds of workers with the unions.

And then of course there is the arbitration system without which, regrettably, no discussion of the Australian situation would even start to look complete. A great many people fail to see how deeply the arbitration system has bitten into Australian society. Keith Sinclair, the writer of a short history of New Zealand, remarked that perhaps no other single statute had done more to mould New Zealand in its history than the Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1894. This was before there was any conciliation and arbitration in Australia which was of course copied from New Zealand — a New Zealand heritage to Australia. Sinclair is probably right in what he says about N.Z.; but how much more so is it true of Australia?

It has moulded union attitudes and particularly the attitudes of leadership of trade unions far more effectively than any other single environmental factor. The arbitration system was not designed as a revolutionary influence — it is essentially conservative, concerned to conserve into the present the values of the past. And the people who are appointed to it — you look them over, from Kirby C. J. to Mr. Commissioner Winter — are not men who are prepared to overturn the state, or even to upset the applecart; they're not appointed for the purposes of social revolution, this is in the very nature of the arbitration system. It is exhibited more clearly than anywhere else in the pronounced emphasis of Commissioners and Judges alike, whether in Commonwealth or State jurisdiction, upon the sanctity of traditional employer prerogatives.

Any trade union officer who has tried to get a Commissioner to agree to changes in methods of production, manning scales for example, knows how difficult it is to get past the statement that this is something within the rights of management. This again is an essential part of the arbitration system.

This means that if you're seeking worker participation, you're running in the face of the arbitration system. There is another way too of course, which I've dealt with in an article I wrote for Outlook last year. This deals with the question of consensus, start-
ing from the book *The Incompatibles* which is sub-titled "Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus". And the Australian consensus, like the British consensus, lies in the realm of wage policy. Union and employers alike have developed through the arbitration court a concept of comparative wage justice that is quite incompatible with negotiation at plant level. This of course was shown handsomely by the decision of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in the General Motors-Holden case 1965 in which the Vehicle Builders and the various metal trade unions at General Motors down in Victoria and South Australia were seeking a £3 bonus and got nowhere. All they really got out of it was some hefty fines from the Industrial Court. Here is really the consensus; in the case of G.M.-H. an attempt was made to break through that consensus.

This is the sort of thing that Galbraith talks about, too. Galbraith says that one of the great needs of the techno-structure is stability of wage levels, and if you substitute for techno-structure the capitalist owners of industry then this is true — they do want stability and the arbitration system provides them with stability, at the expense of workers.

These are only some of the things that could be said about arbitration but there is one thing more that must be mentioned and that is of course the attack upon the penal powers, as they're somewhat erroneously called, particularly in the Federal Act. In the end nothing can happen while the penal powers can be used, or can potentially be used, in all their ferocity. All that I've said so far is the sort of program that could be undertaken without basic disturbance of the status quo. It remains, however disturbing it may seem, a program of amelioration and not of social change, and eventually I always have to come to the point of whether the union has in the long term a role in this basic social change and if so what is that role. I believe that marxists have been too prone to accept the rather negative leninist analysis of the nature and functions of the trade union. One has to remember that when Lenin wrote his pamphlet *What is to be Done* he had just translated into Russian Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Industrial Democracy*; and I believe that Lenin was profoundly influenced by what the Webbs wrote about the nature of trade unionism in Britain. Secondly of course he was having factional warfare within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party with the so-called Economists and *What is to be Done*, which is the basic document conveying Lenin's views upon trade unionism, shows the effect of these two influences much more than it shows the influence of Marx. Very briefly the leninist approach is of course that the trade union is capable of developing only a trade union consciousness — that its struggle will be essentially economic, it will be concerned with relatively immediate
demands of workers and, while it will undertake political action this political action will be of a limited character. The value of the unions is as a training ground in the struggle against capitalism which will be really waged by the advanced party of the workers. That's a massive simplification of course of what Lenin said but I think it's not unfair. Look at this country — here there's been a total failure of nerve and of ideology in the only mass party, the ALP. There exists no major movement dedicated to social change — that's the first point. The second point is that right at this very moment we see trade unions, perhaps political parties working through trade unions but nevertheless the trade unions, in a political confrontation: for make no mistake this present upheaval about penal clauses is not an economic issue, it's a political issue and this is only one of the reasons why somebody like Albert Monk will try to crawl out from under.

I've always believed that there's something wrong with the socialist theory of the trade union. Perhaps this is an emotional approach but I cannot concede that the only mass groups of the workers are, as Lenin suggested, ultimately politically impotent. Nevertheless up till May 1968 I think I probably did go along with the writer Herbert Marcuse who found that the unions had ceased to be a significant, progressive force in society (he is thinking of course of the traditional 19th century trade union). But in that month of May 1968 two things became apparent.

First of all there became apparent the basic character of the social ferment that was going on in France and that was developed into action by the students; and the second thing was the capacity of workers for social action. This to me is in many ways far more important ultimately than the situation that developed among the students.

This action was nipped in the bud and the analysis of these events is still incomplete. The social malaise that became evident was connected with the intense bureaucratisation of society which is characteristic not only of France but also of all advanced contemporary societies and it was connected also with the fact that man is conceived of as another unit in production, as something subordinate to the process by which commodities and the means for producing commodities are produced.

We have become slaves of commodities in more ways than one. Workers are almost inevitably slaves to commodities because they're regarded as instruments in the production of commodities and because their lives are bounded by commodities. Incidentally I agree with Geoff Sharp's criticism in the latest issue of *Arena* of Richta's *Civilisation at the Crossroads*. This I think is a fascinating
book and an exciting book but I think in the end it does fall down for the very reason that Sharp makes, that it doesn’t provide anything like a sort of prognosis of the quality of civilisation and it doesn’t provide anything like a program for getting out of the productive morass and this sort of production psychology in which we’re immersed. But it’s the question of work that comes squarely within the scope of the trade union and if we continue to believe that there is some relationship between the relations in production and society in general, then whoever strikes at that point, at the workplace, takes the very first step to strike at society at large. In spite of the Galbraithian analysis we still do live in a class society, and this is a fact that impinges upon us every day of our lives. That class structure is still based on the power to control property or the rights to property. Unlike the student in his claim to power in the university the worker in his trade union is confronting society at large. I don’t think that the two questions of worker-control and student-control are by any means homogeneous. They’re different kinds of things because the worker in seeking control in the factory is in fact confronting a class society. But if society is to progress not only in material terms but also in terms of the quality of life then the consensus that has characterised the traditional trade union has got to change to this sort of confrontation — a real confrontation in which to use the terms of Perry Anderson there are two hegemonic sets of values, or two dominant sets of values confronting each other. A lot of this has been said by the French marxist Andre Gorz and there is an article of his I’d recommend called “Work and Consumption”, in a Fontana publication Towards Socialism which appeared in 1965. Gorz shows, and here I think he makes a basic point, that the ideal of the employer is the worker who is educated up to a level that is compatible with his employment and no further. If he’s educated further this creates psychological difficulties for the worker and therefore, economic difficulties for the employer.

The first emphasis of course is on education and the quality of life, on the idea that people are complete beings and that education is a process of leading out, to assist in realising the potentialities of people. This is an ideal that has to be developed; to do this the trade union movement must have teachers within its ranks — this is of quite fundamental importance.

Gorz also points out the disparity between the formal freedom of democratic society and what he calls the despotic and authoritarian society which is industry; for industry is a despotic and authoritarian society — this is the whole history of industry from the beginning of the industrial revolution. What Gorz says is that if the working class is to realise a vocation as a ruling class it’s got to attack working conditions in the place of work. It’s under this
heading of the broader area that we come to the question of workers' control.

Somewhere or other Adam Smith, a much despised bourgeois economist who's really well worth reading for some of his insights, said that you can only tell the difference between a porter and a philosopher by what the porter and the philosopher have made of their capacities. This is not entirely true because in fact men are unequal — I don't think there's anything snobbish in saying that some people are not as highly endowed with intelligence as others and that the village idiot can be a fact of life, but nevertheless the differences are not nearly as enormous as they appear. They're not of the order of the difference between the porter and the philosopher. The realisation of the potentialities of men can only come with this education, with the opportunity in the work place to transcend this idea of being merely a productive unit and of becoming a sensate human being with all his capacities developed even if he is only doing the work of a porter. Gorz goes on with some sort of program for what he describes as counter powers. I think there's a great deal of criticism that can be made of Gorz's analysis but once again I would suggest that anyone who hasn't read it should do so. His idea of counter powers is the idea of a hegemonic and a subservient group and I think this is quite wrong, I think it's got to be the confrontation of people organised into trade unions who possess their own values, who believe in those values, who are prepared to assert them in society against a group that has traditionally always laid down the values of the society.

That of course is getting pretty well, as it were, into the realm of speculation if you consider the instant problems of Australia. But what it does suggest to me is that whether you say that the trade unions have a specifically political role or not, thinking of politics in terms of party politics, the fact is that they have got a role, a very important role, and I believe quite possibly a fundamental role in the process of social change because they attack the problem at the very point at which the modern sickness of society originates, and that is in the industrial process.

All these things that I have attempted to outline in a sort of intermediate program are essential for the realisation of any long-term program. You have to re-assert the existence of a working class by having people, white-collar unionists, manual unionists, working together. You have to destroy the arbitration system — you have to have a trade union structure that is built for the times, not for 100-150 years ago, and you have to have participation by all members of the trade union, or as many as is practicable. These things are all important but in the sort of long-term, what you might call it if you wanted to be critical, the airy-fairy future, they are instrumental only.