IN THIS ARTICLE I want to compare the analogy which is widely drawn between student power and workers' control, and suggest that the analogy is frequently exaggerated, particularly by students. Secondly, I wish to defend the concept of workers' control as something which is not necessarily reformist, as part of a revolutionary socialist strategy, and as something which provides a new framework for political and industrial agitation.

At bottom, the two slogans, student power and workers' control, have the same criticisms of modern society (capitalism, if you like). This set of criticisms is associated more with the New Left, here and overseas, rather than with the orthodox communist movement this century, in the advanced societies of the West. The criticism says that men are isolated from real control over the issues and decisions which affect their daily lives, the "quality of life" as experienced under capitalism; they even lack any sense of confidence in their ability and competence to discuss matters outside their jobs, families, and leisure-time activity. Decision-making, in this view, is centralised and concentrated in the hands of irresponsible elites, which are unaccountable to those "under" them, who are vitally affected by the very large scope of the decisions made. In short, the critique underlying both student power and workers' control says that society today is undemocratic; that it is either largely out of control, or that control is vested in the hands of men of privilege, and not exercised in the interests of the mass of the people.

In Australia, the major difference between student power and workers' control, in practice, is that (since the early 60's) students have been able to develop a viable, though inherently unstable, political movement led primarily by revolutionary students, which had adopted a student power program; this movement has begun to work profound changes in the nature and structure of education in this country. Workers' control, on the other hand, is not an
integral part or basis of a real political or industrial movement of Australian workers — it is at this stage only a theoretical concept. (This does not mean that many workers' struggles cannot be embodied within the concept of workers' control, just that no unionists have openly placed their struggles, so far, in this light.)

This difference has an important danger within it: that the success of the student power movement will be unreasonably expected of any workers' control movement that might develop. I use the words "unreasonably expected" because some very real factors necessarily limit workers' control, at the same time as making student power necessarily a more practical proposal. That is, the application of the slogan, or strategy, of workers' control, its use as a guide for struggle, will always be more complicated and easily confused than the concept of student power. There are three reasons, I suggest, for this being true.

First, the type of criticism of society, mentioned above, meets a better response amongst students, teachers and educators, than amongst any other grouping or class in society. Radical students have been able to get much support from more "moderate" staff and students because of this, whereas they have not been able, often, to obtain the same agreement on issues like imperialism and the Vietnam war. This is because it is in the education system that basic beliefs about society (such as the notion that society is democratic or otherwise) are taught, learned, subjected to criticism, etc. This is to say, it is in the education system, most thoroughly and openly, that the "culture" (attitudes, values, information) of society is passed from generation to generation.

A second reason for student power getting off the ground is that the ideals of liberal and humanistic education are in themselves democratic and radical, especially in Australia. When people say that the aims of education are to produce critical, thinking, independent citizens, they are saying something which is a basic democratic assumption, and in conflict with the actual reality of Australian condition, thus giving rise to dissatisfaction and a basis for political action.

Thirdly, the ideas which we associate with "student power" — self-government, grass roots democracy, communities, participatory democracy — are intrinsically easier to apply to educational institutions, than to ordinary work-places in our society. Not only do students, teachers (or some of them) think it a better idea for students to have a say in their own education, but it is much easier in practice to apply this than to apply it to a work-situation.
A classroom contrasts with a wharf, an oil rig, a transport depot, a public service office, an assembly line, to take various examples, in that these jobs entail functions and processes that are much less independent and self-contained. This is just a reflection of the fact — now a cliche — that modern society is very complex. Most jobs, that is, are specialised, and merely segments, portions, of much larger operations, and processes, and industries. This generalisation does not apply so much to any classroom, or school, or university or college.

Another factor breaks down the analogy — or the simple analogy — between student power and workers' control, and that is the "scientific and technological revolution" underway. The most visible agent (and symbol) of this "revolution" is the computer. Already many jobs within banks, and clerical positions in the public and private bureaucracies, have been greatly reduced or even done away with by computerisation. Which jobs we will be left with in, say, twenty years time, and how much working-time will be needed for them, cannot yet be predicted.

It is true, then, that two very important factors break down the easy transfer of the success of student power to the realm of working experience in our society: the complexity of society, and the rapidly changing structure of the work-force. It is also true to say that these factors are powerful influences on many of the people who would like to accept the idea of workers' control, but sense that it just isn't practical.

What does this type of difficulty mean for practical political and industrial struggle around issues? It means that whereas students have been clearly able to present a set of demands (or a program) based on the idea of student power, and which has served as a radicalising program for many students in universities, (it has served to enlarge the Left); workers, and their leaders, on the other hand, will always be in a certain amount of deep water trying to get a comprehensive and unambiguous set of demands from the idea of workers' control. In the case of students, they have been demanding things like control of courses studied, methods of learning and teaching, methods of testing and assessment, control of student and university governing bodies, control of discipline, and so on.

With workers' control, though, the problem is more complex and not so clear-cut. This fact is acknowledged in a number of frequent criticisms of the idea of workers' control, considered as something new, as a new way of orienting and giving direction to industrial activity, rather than as something which is a new name for the old pattern of trade union activity:
1. That even if you could achieve "workers' control" on the job, over things like union organisation rights, rights of entry, safety, hours of work, etc., you would still not be affecting workers (and their families) in basic areas of their lives. Their lives could still be struggles for survival under very difficult conditions.

2. That workers' control demands would ignore the traditional issues of the Left in the unions — living standards, wages, conditions, the penal powers, etc.

3. That demands for workers' control can be "bought off" by the bosses and by parliamentarians, with things like "co-management" (of a trivial kind), profit sharing schemes, no-strike agreements, and the like.

The conclusion of all these arguments could be that workers' control, if it is anything new at all, is a new deception for the workers' movement, and that it is a reformist and not a revolutionary demand. The arguments of this article, however, and the argument of those who genuinely believe the trade union movement is in a crisis and needs new strategies, new forms of action, is that workers' control can be a framework for activity which breaks out of the existing defensiveness of the trade union movement, and its preoccupation with wages and conditions ("economism"), and that the new direction can be (though need not necessarily be) a socialist and revolutionary one.

To make this clearer it is necessary to break down "workers' control" as a vague idea into three things: 1. A criticism of society (as outlined earlier); 2. A carefully prepared set of demands; 3. A set of organisational principles.

The third, the organisational principles, links workers' control with the ideas of participatory democracy of the student movement's rhetoric, and also with the tradition in Australian unionism of shop-committees. It also involves considerations of tactics like the validity of the strike weapon, and so on.

What distinguishes a reformist approach to politics, and a revolutionary one, ultimately, is that the radical or revolutionary considers problems like injustice and poverty as part of society as a whole, and says that the whole basis, or structure of society needs changing, because the society is organised in such a way that poverty, injustice, etc., are necessary and logical outcomes of the system, and not just accidental features. Reformism, by contrast, says that injustice, and so on, can be removed from the existing system without fundamental change. It follows from this that a revolutionary, in practical politics, putting forward proposals for reform of society (because it would be foolish to put forward the demand for socialism and revolution when no-one wants or understands it), can only distinguish himself by virtue of the
reasons he gives (publicly) for advocating one particular reform, or demand. Frequently he will be placed in a position of agreement with, or close agreement with, people with a quite different view of what's wrong with society. In this situation, then, you can only maintain any demands, whether they are workers' control demands or traditionally phrased demands, by giving different reasons for supporting them, a different critique of society.

In addition, for clarity, a critical separation must be made between two sets of workers' control demands — those which are limited to the job situation itself and those which more widely affect the worker's life and family. The first type of demand was mentioned earlier, and includes many of the demands which would figure in any log of claims prepared by a more militant union, including election of foremen, and so on. The second type of demand includes wider social and political issues, which must be raised by the workers' organisations, otherwise the real decisions affecting people in society — to do with health, education, housing, and how much work and what type of work you have to do, will remain untouched. Ultimately, this means the abolishing of the usual trade union distinction between industrial and political activity, which has served to prevent workers' organisations tackling the major areas of vested power and privilege in society.

To give a more concrete example — in an industry like the vehicle building industry, workers are vitally involved in making (or rather supporting the making) of monopoly decisions about the types of cars being produced in Australia, how safe they are, how "built-in obsolescence" is maintained, how many brands are being produced of cars that are essentially the same, and so on. As well as countless workers' control demands for control of conditions and time spent on the job, and wages, etc., a revolutionary workers' control program would have to concurrently raise the demand that workers no longer comply in the making of unsafe, built-in obsolescent, overpriced vehicles, and that they use their industrial power to bring about "reform" of this type. Ultimately, however, reforms made with this perspective, and combining with principles and clear statements about one's reasons for making these proposals, will become a mass movement aiming at the abolition of monopoly, and the control of society for the interests of a few, and against the interests of the majority of the people. A socialist movement aimed at the overthrow of capitalism, that is. The people must control the basic decision making processes in Australia, and the top public servants, monopolists and politicians who maintain power by manipulation and control of people, must be removed from power.