Since its inception, the trade union movement has been concerned with the question of alternatives. In its day to day activity, it has been concerned with putting up alternatives to situations created either by governments or employers. Most, up to this period, have been related to economic issues or in defence, or pursuit, of conditions.

A great expertise has been developed, not so much in creating alternative programs but more in the ability to overcome dead-lock situations arising from negotiations between workers and employers.

Most strike situations or, for that matter, any situation where workers take some form of action to achieve an objective, is precisely a situation where they plan and carry through an alternative proposition. The degree of victory is determined by how much of the alternative is achieved.

But is this the type of alternative situation we want to discuss? I think not. If so, then maybe our time and effort would be wasted because there is so much knowledge, experience and ability within the movement that it does not need this type of discussion to develop it further.

What we are talking about is a much more significant type of alternative; one that has a great deal more challenge, and which, if taken to its final conclusion and enforced over the opposition of a government or an employer, takes those involved into an area of decision making hitherto denied to working people.

This form of alternative takes the participants away from the reflex action type of situation in which the trade union movement has been engaged and opens up a new field of activity which has a tremendous amount more challenge to it than the economic campaign alternatives referred to.

Because of this, the creation of new alternatives opens up an entirely new area of thought and action. If it is to be successful, those involved must have a theoretical knowledge of why they are seeking the alternative and how it is to be achieved.

Why is this?

From my point of view it is because the end result of such actions, where these alternatives are achieved, has an element not contained in day-to-day alternatives taken up by the unions. That is, it really challenges the decision making prerogatives of those who regard decision making as their inalienable right.
From the beginning, the capitalist system has always demanded that decision making be the sole right of the owners of the means of production or of those to whom decision making powers have been delegated.

They have resisted, and will continue to resist, any attempt to take away those rights.

There have been many bitter disputes in the past over such questions as "hire and fire" and unless there is some legal breach committed by the employer, there is no law to deny him the right to dismiss. Not only does he assume that right, but he is also given that right by law - and the law invariably upholds that right.

Therefore, when any organisation or group of people set out deliberately to challenge an employer's rights by proposing an alternative which he does not want to accept, one of three things usually happens: they lose the fight because of the strength of the employer; they reach a compromise; or they have a victory compelling the employer to accept their terms and conditions.

The instances where clear-cut victories are achieved are few indeed and mostly occur with the smaller, less class-conscious employer. But it's a horse of a different color when you set out to challenge the bigger corporate employer. He will fight to the bitter end, even challenging the law itself when it tends to deny him his 'inalienable' rights of hire and fire.

This was evidence in a case over a dismissed shop steward, Ted Gnatenko, who had been dismissed more than two years ago by GMH in South Australia. After two years of job actions and legal argument, his union finally won his reinstatement.

Witness also the negative response of an employer when a worker, fully qualified and proud of his acquired ability, refuses to do a particular job because it is against all the principles of workmanship and quality that he has learned over his working life. Particularly where the fall-off in quality relates to an increase in profit, the employer will adopt a hard-line attitude of "do it or else" and the worker in question has to swallow his trade pride or be dismissed or, in many instances, sack himself.

This is getting to the real guts of the question before us, because this is an issue which is causing increasing concern in the minds of many, especially professionally trained people.

Of course, it goes much deeper than just quality of product. What remains is for us to change the situation from where management prerogatives reign supreme to a situation where the profit motive is not the sole criterion of whether a project should be designed and developed or not.

For quality of life and the preservation of our natural resources to become a fundamental consideration in our design, planning and manufacturing processes, something big has to happen. A change has to take place for the abovementioned criteria to apply to any project; the will of the people concerned will have to prevail. For that to happen as a continuing fact of life, the nature of the system under which we live and work must fundamentally change.

That is not an easy task as many people have discovered. However, after many years of activity to achieve a better life style I am fully convinced that for a lasting change to occur to the work ethic of the capitalist system, the system itself must change.

Recently I saw a photo of the tomb of Karl Marx. Deeply engraved on the tomb were these words:

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

These words, first written in 1845, have a great relevance today.

That, I suggest, is what we are about. The world, in its many complexities, has been explained time and time again. The kind of change and how this should be brought about is still a matter of intense debate.

The cleavage of ideas on this matter is international. It has torn asunder philosophers and political parties and continues to do so.

One factor which emerges from the polemic on this subject is that whatever the change it will only be brought about by an ever-expanding section of society which has grasped the philosophical need to break finally and absolutely with all the past ties which are continuously being renewed to enforce the perpetuation of the capitalist system.
That is what this great debate is about. How to change the social relationships which bind the mass of people to a socio-economic system which has not only passed its developmental zenith but daily enters crisis situations for which it has no real answer other than continuous expansion of its power over the creativity and aspirations of the working people.

We live in the era of multinational corporations, possibly the final extension of the capitalist system. Their power to make decisions which determine the direction and extent of social development is massive and, as far as Australia is concerned, unchallenged to any real degree. But challenge it we must if we are to change, for the better, the future direction of our lives. There is a developing movement on a worldwide scale which is setting out to challenge the decision-making authority of the multinationals and for the extension of rights and responsibilities of decision making to those who carry out the production process and those who use the commodities produced.

Why should those who produce, and this includes the professional as well as the production worker, not have full rights and responsibilities to say what is to be produced and why, and the qualities to be included, as well as deciding the price both in terms of sale and cost of physical and natural resources?

Once this idea of changing social relationships takes hold of people's minds in a mass way then the future of the capitalist system is challenged.

Other people are thinking this too. The managers and ideologists of the capitalist system are becoming increasingly aware that this area of power and authority is the Achilles heel of the system.

The continuing alienation of people from the work ethic of the system within the workplace and in society generally is now assuming the characteristic of being a force for change; the incidence of "drop out" from society is being reduced in the sense that people are now starting to look for alternatives.

In answer to the continuing crisis within the capitalist system and the increase of people seeking alternatives by way of a greater say in decision making, the ideologists of the system are coming up with propositions which will widen the area of decision makers but at the same time eliminate any real challenge to the system.

Many programs and systems of worker participation and job enrichment have been developed to contain and reduce the growing challenge to the system.

As the crisis widens and deepens these efforts will be stepped up or force will be used to maintain the status quo.

We have two examples of these attitudes in operation at this moment.

The first is the thoughts of Gordon Jackson, General Manager of the CSR, and Chairman of the Jackson Committee which, during the period of the Labor government, undertook an investigation into the manufacturing industry.

This report advocates, among many other proposals, the strengthening of the position of the manufacturing industry and the introduction of systems of worker participation.

The fact that Jackson both publicly advocates and defends the principle of worker participation is unique as far as a person of his position is concerned.

Not only is he courageous but he is becoming more frank about the essential need, from an employer point of view, for an extension of worker participation as the economic crisis increases in intensity.

In a recent address to the 3rd National Productivity Conference he had this to say:

"Worker participation in management and employee ownership of shares only distracted from the real issues of industrial relations and were not the solution. The challenge of improving industry should be just as great to the trade union movement as it was to management and government.

Involvement would mean the trade unions becoming part of the system and committed to its success - gaining new power to influence the direction of affairs from within but giving up the option of remaining outside the system, free to confront its direction or even its existence."

The other example is that of the attitude of the Federal government.
As it wallows in the mess of its own making, it is setting out to destroy that section of the trade union movement which constitutes the main challenge to its policies.

As each day passes the intensity of attacks on the militant union leaders mounts. All the blame and responsibility for the economic crisis is thrown at them by the big five - Fraser, Anthony, Lynch, Street and Nixon. One could well believe that union leaders are making all the economic decisions which are taking the country deeper into the depths of the crisis.

I believe that the capitalist system will ultimately accommodate itself to mass systems of worker participation, despite the fact that there is still resistance to it in many areas, even to limited forms of participation.

Consultative Committees, Worker Directors, and works councils are but a few of the areas where management will make concessions. But, in a real sense, these do not constitute a challenge or alternative to the power and authority of the system.

We can, and must, develop alternatives. How far we can go with them will be determined by the level of understanding of the need for change which we can develop in the outlook of those involved in the process.

It is dangerous to oversimplify this proposition. Not only will the resistance of the employers be a barrier against an extension of power and authority being taken by the workers, but the resistance of workers to the need for change and all that it means has, and will, assume tremendous proportions.

Conviction is needed throughout all sections of the work-force.

In Australia, what little has been done by the worker to assume greater power has been both spontaneous and isolated, especially in the sense of the whole work force in a particular work place. Clerical and professional workers, as well as sections of production workers, have either sat on the side-lines with bemused smiles on their faces or been active opposition to those struggling for greater rights on the job.

We must change this situation and eliminate age-old divisions, both academic and craft, so that a whole work-force in a particular establishment goes into action
around an issue which has any semblance of an alternative or challenge in it.

In the process of developing alternatives, we cannot underestimate the need for an ideological understanding and conviction which will not only inspire such movements but give permanence of action and determination once they commence.

One of the points of conviction must be that there is no easy road or short cut out of the continuing crisis.

The massive unemployment situation that now exists will remain for a long time, if not permanently. Many of those who are not out of a job will most certainly never return to their old occupations. Why? Because they have vanished. Either because the job they were performing is now being done in an overseas country to be imported back into Australia or the job has vanished because of automation or technological change.

So, is there any percentage in wanting to return, if it were at all possible, to a so-called stable economy?

Is there any lasting benefit in continuing the rat race of a consumer-oriented economy in which commodities are valued not for their use to society but for the quickest and biggest return on capital invested? Do we have to continue to churn out commodities which have an inbuilt obsolescence and many of which, for example, the motor vehicle, stuff up the atmosphere and destroy the environment? Do we design and construct engineering projects for the purpose of extracting our mineral wealth without regard for our future resources. Do we set out to invest large amounts of capital in the manufacturing industry in the hope that it will bring about an end to unemployment, knowing that the new capital investment is designed to reduce the labor content of the manufacturing process and will increase, rather than lessen, the number of unemployed? Do we, in the hope that jobs will be created in the building industry, agree to the perpetuation of the madness that destroys valuable buildings, people's homes, in many instances part of our heritage, and in their place construct massive edifices solely for investment purposes, for them to remain empty when there is a crying need for public buildings that would serve a human need, knowing that because of advances in technology fewer and fewer building workers would be employed?

Do we, in a form of collective madness, proceed with the uncontrolled extraction of uranium ore and its refinement and the construction of nuclear plants, knowing the dangers inherent in these processes?

Do we bolster a system which has created these and many more problems - a system in which power and authority is being vested in ever smaller numbers whose powers, as individuals and organisations, are becoming greater than many governments?

I think not. For to do so is to perpetuate all these miseries and sufferings that human manipulation has created to maintain power and authority over people and the environment. Despite all human effort of the past and the tremendous advances of sciences and technology, poverty and misery continue to grow on a world scale. Therefore it is futile to return to the old order to find relief.

The time is long overdue for alternative work programs to take the place of this continuing madness.

Unfortunately it is not only the capitalist class which offers opposition to a cessation of all the work activity that is destroying the environment and exhausting our natural resources through criminal wastage.

Many others, including workers, justify the continuation of the process because it means a job to them. This human problem cannot be ignored or swept under the carpet; it is a real problem and one that must be answered.

Consumerism, even in a more rationalised form, is no permanent answer to unemployment.

Even the question of shorter hours, generally supported by the trade union movement as a part answer to unemployment, is no real solution.

Its logic is that you shorten hours but continue all the destructive production processes - by efficiently using fewer people by more automated processes.

Capitalism has always been able to accommodate demands for a shorter working week, despite the dire predictions of
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those who claim that society would collapse once shorter hours were granted.

Sure, we have shorter hours but not to justify the maintenance of the capitalist work ethic - we need it to enhance the life style of the people - by the more humane and scientific utilisation of people rather than to justify automated monsters and the continued production of non-essentials.

What are some of the areas where we can commence to develop alternative work programs which will both fill the gaps caused by the crisis and start to challenge the decision making prerogatives of the employer?

The quality of goods and their price, elimination of inbuilt obsolescence, the more rational use of our natural resources; is the end result of a particular process going to be detrimental to society, either socially or environmentally? If so, it should not be produced. These are but a few areas where joint action of all productive workers, including professional workers, could be commenced.

Whole alternative work programmes can be developed and acted upon, such as the Lucas Workers Alternative Corporate Plan in the U.K. Alternative work programs to fight unemployment, to prevent the alienation of people, against misuse of natural resources, and, more particularly, a program of action which combines a multiplicity of unions and people in a common action.

There is a further aspect of the Lucas experiment which needs to be considered when talking of alternatives and that is the role of the multi-national corporation.

Lucas has a counterpart here in Sydney. Should the British Lucas workers engage in some action to enforce their demands the Lucas workers in Australia could well be used against them in many ways. So that when we are talking of alternative action, we need to take into consideration trade union and working class internationalism as part of the plan to change social relationships.

The same situation exists a little closer to Australia. Capital and machinery and production processes are being exported to Asian countries in a big way by an increasing number of employers. This is all part of the economic crisis and also part of the drive against the Australian worker.

We need to develop better relationships between our own and the Asian workers if we are to develop viable alternatives in place of the transferred industries.

One fact stands out in the Lucas experience: it should not be left as a negotiable issue. If there is to be any real challenge, any real alternative, then these and other workers should be determined to produce the alternative plan irrespective of whether management agreement is reached or not.

There are many and varied concepts on forms of worker involvement in self-management and co-determination. All have the element of alternative or change. How we go about our involvement in them or the degree of ideological conviction achieved will determine the ultimate outcome.

The big issue is whether we continue to be contained, or be contained more by involving ourselves in schemes devised by employers and governments, or whether we help to destroy the social relationships that maintain the system by developing Alternative Work Programmes irrespective of management agreement or not.

The issues of Worker Control and Self-Management as ultimate forms of social existence are, to me, not just good ideas or an academic ploy. No matter what title it may be given or where it might be applied, if carried through in a mass and international manner with the degree of ideological conviction that I have raised, then it must surely give life to those words of Marx when he calls for a “change to the world”.