THE PROCESS AND MEANS OF CHANGE

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Introduction

The last decade has seen a remarkable advance in marxist analysis in a variety of areas. A very important work is Professor Barry Commoner's (1) marxist analysis of the "Eco-system — Production system — Economic system". Commoner traces and demonstrates the close links of the three systems and documents the capital crises in the US. He indicates its dimensions and its implications for living standards and the capitalist system. He reveals the capital crises as a basic reason for reduced resources for health, education, housing and welfare. (My reading of Nixon Apple's review of Ernest Mandel's The Second Slump in ALR, June 1979, pp. 45-47, indicates that Mandel's empirical work supports Commoner's analysis.)

Marxist sociologists Francois Lamarche (2), Jean Lojkine (3) and others, have spoken of these as areas of collective consumption: "By collective means of consumption we mean the totality of material supports of the activities devoted to the extended reproduction of social labor power" ((Lojkine, 1972).

These and other analyses provide a valuable indication of how to further the analysis of struggles for worker control, to save industries etc. and how these struggles can be linked with struggles of people in their living situation. The present situation, I believe, poses the question — to what extent and how do these struggles raise the need for immediate, necessarily limited and partial, alternatives to the regulation of production by the world capitalist market — as part of the struggle for a self-management socialist future.

Growth— its role and limits

Growth is necessary to capitalist society because profit or surplus value (surplus or unpaid labor) created in production has to be realised in the market-place.

As capitalism increases productivity it, on the one hand, expands productive activity and stimulates the economy; on the other, it reduces the relative ability of the majority, the workers, to buy the goods their labor produces. Thus growth has always acted as a counter to the breakdown of the capitalist system.
The advance of technology in recent decades, given cheap and apparently plentiful but actually limited energy and resources, has assisted a prolonged period of capitalist expansion. This expansion has been also aided by continued and accelerated exploitation of Third World countries and a relatively stable socialist world market.

The present continued growth of structural unemployment is made the more severe because greater productivity increases the extent of the producers’ alienation from the fruits of their labor.

In capitalist society wear and war production is, among other things, a means of destroying surplus products. Today energy- and capital-intensive war industries provide less employment per dollar invested and, in this respect, are less of a stimulant to the capitalist economy.

This problem has been less obvious because the consumer society, necessary to modern capitalism, has developed a method of destruction of its own, namely, built-in obsolescence, frequent model changes, spare-part rackets, etc.

The problems capitalism, in its consumer society-stage, is facing include the finite nature of planet Earth. In many respects, energy availability and cost appears a more pressing problem in the immediate sense than other raw materials availability. This situation poses important questions of conservation of energy, an un-capitalist activity forced on capitalism. It also poses critical questions about alternative energy sources. Cheap oil, the main source of energy in recent decades, is becoming less available and the search for alternatives in commanding more and more attention and resources.

What is clear at this time in human history is that highly centralised, polluting, resource-destroying solutions, in terms of the human rights of future generations including the young of today, can only lead in the direction of disaster.

The advances in human knowledge and technology arising out of modern industrial and scientific practice have made it possible to destroy our living environment in a few short years. Capitalism is doing precisely that. Nuclear power is the most graphic and frightening example of this. But while the worst, to date, it is not the only possibility. The choice is capitalism — with which goes the consumer society — or a decent society able to utilise the tremendous benefits modern science and technology, properly utilised, make possible. A large number of younger people perceive or sense that the consumer society spells human disaster but do not necessarily perceive it as a problem of capitalism. "If the bomb doesn’t get us
something else will” is a widespread saying and expresses part of the frustration of the young.

The development and popularisation of a vision of a realisable, life-sustaining and humane future, to which present struggles can be seen to contribute, is critical in overcoming the apathy which helps sustain capitalism.

The Australian reality

The reality we face in Australia is that of a society with developed industry, advanced technology and a highly skilled workforce. A country which is controlled economically by multinational corporations and which these corporations, with the compliance of governments, are developing more and more as a supplier of raw materials for production in Japan, the US and Britain. Rudi Talmacs (4) points out that 75 per cent of Australian industry is more than 10 years old, compared with only 38 per cent of Japanese industry and 44 per cent of West German industry.

The imperatives of the capitalist world market discussed earlier demand, in the interests of its multinational controllers, destruction of much of Australia’s manufacturing industry because it is comparatively out of date. Evidence that this process and investment is underway in countries where police states provide cheap labor is presented in Australia Ripped Off. (5)

The Tasmanian experience

Tasmania has long been essentially a supplier of raw materials to interstate and overseas business interests. In recent years iron ore pellets and woodchips go direct to Japan. Earlier, the form of supply of raw materials included cheap (to the big corporations) electric power used in processing zinc, aluminium, ferromanganese, etc. An industry using a lot of energy and raw materials is paper and newsprint production. When it was first established in Tasmania, it brought industrial development and employment. There is still industrial development.

Between 1971 and 1976 output of paper and newsprint increased by 27,546 tonnes or 15.42 per cent but in the same period employment in the paper and paper-products industry fell by 1158 or 22.9 per cent. (6)

In Tasmania employment in manufacture has been falling since the mid-1960s from 33,959 (1966 census) to 31,532 (June 1971) to 27,664 (June 1976). A fall of 18.5 per cent in 10 years. Up to June 1976 the workforce had increased as compared with June 1971, government employment being the main reason. Other areas of increase were retail, finance, insurance, technical and business services and entertainment. Reductions in retail, self-serve, etc. and computerisation of office work, are among developments since June 1976 which indicate a likely fall in the areas of employment which increased from 1971 to 1976.

The number of persons registered for employment with the Commonwealth Employment Service increased by over three times from June 1971 to June 1976, despite an over 25 per cent increase in government employment. (7) In particular areas of the state there is decline — these include the Huon Valley where APM turns trees into pulp pellets for paper manufacture in Sydney. (Collapse in the apple industry is also a factor there.) In Burnie where APM’s fine paper operations are centred, both employment in that industry and the
population are declining. Another notable area of population decline is the once textile-based city of Launceston.

The degree of foreign and interstate control of Tasmanian industry is extremely high. The paper industry is controlled from Melbourne and Sydney, the Electrolytic Zinc Works from Melbourne. These companies are interlinked and their connections lead to multinationals in Britain and the US in particular. Woodchips and iron ore pellets go direct to Japan. Food processing is mainly controlled by Petersville, Kraft (US), Cadbury-Fry (British), and the local Henry Jones, now located on the north-west coast having closed up Hobart operations. Jones is connected with the Commercial Bank of Australia. Aluminium is controlled by overseas interests, TEMCO (ferromanganese) by BHP.

The problem is capitalism

Federal ALP President and Tasmanian deputy Premier Neil Batt, returning from a recent overseas visit, was reported in the press (July 7) as saying, "...Tasmania had to be prepared to compete on the world industrial market". Federal Labor leader Hayden is also on record as favoring the market economy and developing our competitiveness. The market orientation of Fraser, one of Australia's kept men, needs no comment here.

Such a course is surely doomed to failure. Barry Commoner, commenting about America, said:

"Now all this has culminated in the ignominious confession of those who hold the power: That the capitalist economic system which has loudly proclaimed itself the best means of assuring a rising standard of living for the people of the United States, can survive now, if at all, only by reducing that standard. The powerful have confessed to the poverty of their power." (8)

The means of change

The working class's ability to impose a part of its will on the capitalist class has always depended in critical degree on both its activity and its unity. I am arguing that both activity and unity of the working class can be influenced positively by a clearer statement of positive and immediate, if limited, alternatives to the capitalist world market as a regulator of industrial activity.

There are a number of experiences in imposing or attempting to impose the collective will of workers on capitalists in other than wage and job conditions issues. In recent times the worker control struggles I am aware of all challenged directly the free operation of the capitalist market. In Australia Green Bans thwarted plans of the property capitalists and developers. Lucas Aero Space workers in Britain proposed new types of production. Fiat Auto workers in Italy impose different patterns of development (in the underdeveloped south). Renault auto workers in France proposed an end to built-in obsolescence and spare-parts production at various centres around the country. A resource- and energy-conserving, employment-creating, decentralising set of proposals.

At another level, a combination of harsh reality and political action by a broad anti-nuclear movement is beginning to affect investment decisions of some capitalists.

If worker control is about anything other than conditions of labor, pay rates, rights on the job (and it is about these), it is also about the nature of work, what is needed, what is produced, what it is possible to produce, what quality, how much, what for, etc.

The source of all theory is practice, direct or indirect, but all direct, if partial and fragmented, for some individual somewhere at some time. At the same time, ideas do arise from study of experience and concepts are developed in the process of rational thought.

The role of experts (political activists, organisers, politically conscious researchers, economists, planners, sociologists, etc.) includes bringing together the knowledge that comes from beyond a particular industry etc. and the knowledge resident in the workers in a particular industry or job. This creates a suitable framework for the development of policies. As is currently being demonstrated in practice, the class ownership/control question in transport and industry generally is critical to rail workers in struggle to defend their industry. So also are the energy/ecology crises.
The pollution, energy and space waste, and public costs brought about by excessive use of the private car becomes increasingly important as the cheap oil, that made it possible, becomes no longer available. In the near future, considerable numbers of people on low to middle incomes will no longer be able to run a private car as a commuter vehicle. The importance of these questions can be illustrated from practice.

A little over two years ago, Hobart rail workers shunted carriages into the path of a roadway being constructed through the Hobart railway station. The carriages were eventually moved, after several days, but not before railworkers had made some of their points. The public response to the railworkers' militant defiance of authority was such as to prevent a crackdown against them.

Tasmanian railworkers have long been in struggle to save the railways and this stood them in good stead. The public actions of a small group of public transport activists, from outside the railways, who understood and projected in various ways, including via the media, the energy problem and future needs for public transport were very important.

There were local highlights including the exposure on the media of the incompetence of the transport planners by a highly qualified and competent transport engineer which helped this process. But it was, at bottom, the understanding of the implications of the energy crisis and application of that analysis which motivated the non-railworker activists and helped a great deal in winning public support for Hobart railworkers.

Railworkers are at the centre of the struggle for a decent rail transport system in Australia. But who will say that if it were not for the outstanding work by union research officers and the activities of ‘Save Public Transport’ groups, that the ARU would be in the potentially offensive position that, despite problems, it now clearly is, in terms of ideology as regards rail transport.

The problem of alternatives

The question of alternatives in many other industries is a more difficult one. The difficulty in projecting positive alternatives is partly a question of the level of practice but there is, it seems, another dimension to the problem. Massive sackings in textiles has left no problem of supply of textiles and the loss of over 1,100 jobs in paper and paper products in Tasmania has been accompanied by an increase in production.

Examples of the effect of technological change and restructuring of industry, much more dramatic, are well known. Many factors which earlier made industrial development a means of providing jobs and increasing standards now operate in an opposite direction. The process is immensely complex and there are contradictory trends within it. (For example, becoming ‘competitive’ by reducing the number of jobs might gain a market and jobs; another example, the resource rip-off does create some jobs and provides a stimulation which, in turn, creates other jobs but overall it kills job opportunities.) But the effect, in several industries and regions, and the overall result in Australian conditions is stark and clear. Staying in the world capitalist market system means ever-increasing structural unemployment plus other inroads on living standards.

Can we begin to move in a different direction? George McRobie of Intermediate Technology, London, argues that small industries can embody:

....the discoveries of modern science and engineering, in such a way as to reduce the cost of each workplace to a level that is within the reach of local communities to purchase and maintain. Such small-scale industries would be the vehicles of self-reliance, because, besides bringing diversity into local employment and making fewer demands on scarce capital and infrastructure resources, they are often capable of using relatively small ‘pockets’ of local resources, of raw
materials, skills or energy supplies which it would be out of the question to utilise with large-scale technology. (One could add: and trying to compete on the world capitalist market - MB.) And generally speaking, people greatly prefer to work in smaller groups, and under conditions where more demands are made upon their skills and intelligence....

There is a growing realisation throughout the industrial and non-industrial world that the nature of the technologies developed by the rich countries is capital- and energy-intensive, violent in its demands on people, the environment, and the world’s stock of non-renewable resources: that this technology is not only not reproducible throughout the world, it is incapable of being sustained, just as an ever-accelerating machine cannot be sustained. (9)

Some conclusions

McRobie perhaps ignores the “savage laws” (E. L. Wheelwright) which protect capital investments and needs, but his points about non-renewable resources and possible alternatives are well taken. This is particularly so if we recognise the importance of Professor Commoner’s points about the capital crisis and how the need for public monies to maintain capital investment in high technology is drawing off funds from health, education and welfare services in the US. (10)

In Australia cuts in government spending include the areas of health, education and welfare. More public monies are needed to develop the necessary facilities and infrastructures to help the multinationals’ iron ore, woodchip, etc. extraction exercise. The aim is to do this with the help of as much public money, as much profit and as little labor as possible. Not only is manufacture in decline in Australia but this decline in conditions of multinational control threatens the very government income basis which makes education, health and welfare projects possible. Programs which merely deal with problems of consumption cannot resolve the acute and relatively immediate series of crises we face.

As more workers are denied the chance to work, what alternatives to decline are there? Can projects based on McRobie’s “self-reliance” concept be one means of mobilising people and providing localised centres of struggle against particular capitalist plans for destruction of particular industries and work opportunities? From an affirmative answer to the question, a number of issues are raised including the need for work on the integration of such projects into the general economy, and at the same time, into a strategy for self-management socialism; and matters of support in terms of action and resources.

Obviously there is no substitute for workers’ action and initiative on these sorts of questions. At the same time, such initiatives are conditioned and made possible by a particular need and a perceived possibility. Discussion of these questions within the labor movement, in particular, can provide an atmosphere in which possibilities are more readily perceived and capacity to act on the possibilities increased.

REFERENCES


5. Australia Ripped Off, publication of the National Council of the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights Union, 136 Chalmers St, Surrey Hills, NSW.
7. Based on figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.