ALR recently organised a round-table discussion on the problems facing socialism today. It was not expected that conclusions would be arrived at, nor were they. The purpose, rather, was to have a relatively informal exchange of views to stimulate the thinking of the participants and, we hope, of our readers, as well as providing some background to the many discussions on the future of socialism now taking place.

If you think such exchanges are helpful, please let us know, and perhaps suggest topics for future round-tables.

Those taking part were Eric Aarons, Linda Carruthers, Phil Hind, Bob Makinson, Joe Palmada and Joyce Stevens.

**Roundtable**

**Roundtable chaired by Eric Aarons**

**Eric:** To kick the thing off — major manifestations of the crisis which I believe exists in socialism today in Australia and other countries include:

Firstly, the lack of moral ascendancy of socialism over capitalism and of an overall offensive spirit such as existed in previous times. This is given added point by the fact that we’ve had ten years of capitalist depression along with mounting problems in other aspects of social life.

Secondly, the lack of a uniting vision or understanding among socialists. There is a parallel, though not identical division among the many people who are engaged in fine struggles, but mostly have no vision of transforming society as a whole, being mainly concerned with their particular issues.

Among reasons for this situation is inadequate understanding and presentation of the socialist vision. Especially, the impression is conveyed that socialism is purely an economic system and that economic conditions are causal of everything else. This does not adequately relate to the many ways people reject and struggle against what is happening to them at present.

Part of this is the longstanding problem of how to transcend economism or narrow trade union politics within the labour movement.

And even the economic side of socialism is often misunderstood (see my review of *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* in this issue).

Then there is the political and economic practice of the countries where capitalism has been overthrown, which does not now inspire great confidence or enthusiasm.

Further, marxism has been subjected to an increasing number of different interpretations, so that there are now few generally accepted reference points which might facilitate the settlement of differences. And I do not believe that anyone in the foreseeable future is going to come up with a version which will serve in that way.

Lastly, related to views of how society changes and of the economic as the basic cause, there is the lack of development by socialists of the moral-ethical or social philosophy side of their vision which I believe to be in a sense the most fundamental, and which contains the possibility of overcoming both the lack of moral ascendancy by socialists and their lack of unity.

**Joe:** I think those questions provide a background to the things we need to discuss, and probably there are others. For a long period there has been a crisis in marxism, with problems...
arising in socialist practice, not only in the countries where social ownership was established, but also as a result of the distortions of dogmatic Marxism which has displayed an inability to solve problems in the more complex social conditions of today.

The other side of the coin, of course, is the fact that the continuing crisis of capitalism has also seen a resurgence of interest in Marxism by progressive forces trying to come to grips with these problems.

Marxism is more a methodology of examination and interpretation of events for the purpose of effectively intervening to bring about change. It doesn't seem to me to be more than that. I agree with Eric that there is nothing in class analysis or class conflict.

Joe: Given that the working class day is largely integrated, and class lines obscured, isn't it a question of a transfer of power.

Joyce: We are trying to bring about a revolutionary transformation in the economy, in the state as a focus of capitalist power, in social relations and in personal life.

The issue is not so much what needs to take place but, rather, what is the motivation, the motive force of social change, and is it class struggle which arises at the point of production, or is it a range of other things.

Even to secure the potential that is in class struggle, Marxism has to change the prioritised position it gives to class struggle, to see the other fundamental conflicts that exist, and to find the connections between them. While people will acknowledge some problems in Marxism, it is very difficult to get over such concepts, held in holiness.

Linda: I'm concerned at the idea that class struggle is seen as just concerned with the point of production. I've always understood it as all the contradictions that capitalism throws up. For example, those which put tremendous strains on families. The post-war period which drew practically every woman, at some point of her life, into production put huge strains on ideological notions of what was proper for women, for children, for men. This was more revolutionary than anything else I can think of immediately.

My understanding of class struggle would encompass the events and processes which drew women into production and drew forth the contradiction between the traditional ideology about femininity and motherhood and the millions of women worldwide struggling around definitions of motherhood, definitions of what is proper in being a woman, control over their fertility, arrangement of working time and questions about the arrangement of tasks in the household, etc. And far from that being a social struggle, and what happens at the workplace being an economic struggle, most social and economic and class struggles are struggles which come out of acute contradictions which capitalism throws up at a particular time.

I think of the struggle for peace in a
"... there is a crisis that extends far beyond that of socialism — there is, in fact, a general crisis of politics and ideology in advanced capitalist countries which can be seen in the level of non-participation, and the elementary level of what popular participation does take place...

Phil Hind is a disarmament activist who has worked in a full-time capacity for the peace movement.
apathy and non-participation in that country.

But more importantly, I think the Soviet union, along with all the other existing socialist countries faces a crisis which is partly of its own making, but largely something which confronts it externally — the cold war and the threat of nuclear war.

And the sorts of fissures and cracks which have built up in some socialist countries — Poland being the biggest example — with a heavy-handed repression of solidarity, all have an impact on how people see socialism.

Concerning the basic understanding of what Marxism is. I agree with Joe re Marxism as a method, as the kernel of what it means to be committed to Marxism. But I have some problems in that, if that is our understanding, then it is somewhat limiting - a method only at the analytical level, where it informs our intellectual work, how society fits together, etc. I don't think that tells us how to go about changing society. Marxism represents something more than a method. It is a theory of social change, or as Gramsci described it, a philosophy of praxis. It's as much about how one works politically as it is about understanding component parts of society, what it is that motivates people, makes them think, that engages them in struggle, and from that and from our own practice, we can learn something about the possibilities of social change.

Eric: I agree, of course, that capitalism faces a crisis, and certainly don't want to downplay that. But it seems to me that, capitalism being in that position point up even more the problems of socialism. Capitalism is in this multi-dimensional crisis, but socialists are not well armed to take it on.

I agree with Bob to a certain extent about the Soviet Union, though I don't know exactly what he means by a basic crisis. But there is a crisis of, shall we say, belief or vision, and that applies also in China and other countries. In a way, they also need to redefine socialism. They are not providing, as they did once, a vision that gave great inspiration to socialists elsewhere. They can't even do it for their own people.

Power, as Joe raised, has a dimension we, in the past, underestimated, but have developed recently in that we see struggles as not just about ownership, but also about power, about control.

But there is another aspect here related to what Linda was saying. It's also a question of power for what. It is true workers lack power to decide whether they will do this, that or the other. But, in some cases, they have asserted power for very good purposes, while in others they have asserted some degree of power for quite bad purposes. For example, on some environmental questions.

Linda: I think this is a really important question. Power is not a thing but is a relationship. I would pose the action of workers regarding the environment in a different way from you. At a particular time, workers had a particular ability to do something about the environment because of complex relationships. Just as examples, there was heightened public awareness, a strong labour market, there was a particular leadership, and the experience of previous struggles, etc. Those, and other relationships, enabled things to happen.

An opposite example is logging on the North Coast, at a time of a bad labour market, the leaders of the union, whatever their own perspective, could not control the situation. If jobs were lost they could offer nothing in return. There was no way out of that impasse. This is a case of the class's powerlessness.

I suppose I take a rather determinist attitude in that what you can do in any situation by good work, or having the right ideas, is, in many ways, very limited. It's a matter of understanding all the relationships and seeing how you can intervene at a particular moment. You can say, even if something reactionary happens in the working class movement, part of that is the powerlessness of people in particular situations to break through that contradiction.

Eric: I agree with that. But if you take it to mean that if only they had the power they would use it for the good purpose, I must say I don't find that very convincing.

Linda: I don't think that follows from what I said.

Eric: It seems to me that it does; or if it doesn't that it is still important to make the point. Part of the struggle of socialists is around a body of ideas that has a future, in that it deals with the things that need to be done, have to be done if the problems that face humanity are to be overcome and disasters which loom over us are to be avoided.

And this struggle goes on also within the working class, by any definition.

Linda: It seems to me that what you're saying is that when a bad decision is made that's the result of the bad ideas they have about it. What I'm saying is that they may have many ideas about it, but in the end what they actually do

"I agree, of course, that capitalism faces a crisis, and certainly don't want to downplay that. But it seems to me that, capitalism being in that position points up even more the problems of socialism."

Eric Aarons was formerly joint National Secretary of the Communist Party of Australia.
about it is a result of what’s available for them to do, given that they need jobs, for example. What you’re saying is that the ideas come first and it’s what you struggle around, whereas I say you struggle around what’s available to you and that the ideas come out of the struggle itself.

**Eric:** This is an important point. I don’t say that the ideas come first in the general abstract sense. People are not born with them. They imbibe them out of what exists around them. But once an ideology or a particular view has come into existence, it can have a very long life, beyond the conditions under which it was born. For example, the attitude of men to women. And this will exist even after all sorts of power relationships have been changed. And the women’s movement is right in fighting on this issue and in not believing the proposition that it will be resolved just because some other things are resolved.

**Linda:** But if you’re going to have some historical explanation for the struggle of women, rather than the germ theory of ideas, you have to have an explanation for why, at some particular moments, that struggle erupts, an analysis of the forms that it takes, and an analysis of why it sometimes dies down. The difference between feminism and moralism on the woman question is that you analyse the relationships between men and women in the ways that show there are real, material privileges and benefits that derive from masculiniuity and real oppressions that result from femininity. The relationships are grounded in real things and not just in the ideas, but in specific practices.

**Bob:** Is it not the case that those practices are often matters of custom which are themselves material and incredibly strong because of the identity which people draw from them, and that a threat to those customs is a threat to the identity those people have? That is an ideological factor, but I would suggest it is as strong as any material factor or relationship.

**Linda:** Oh, indeed, and I think that the contradictions posed between the ideology of the way women were taught to see themselves and the reality of their actual existence in the past thirty years has had a tremendous effect in helping smash through a lot of that ideology. You can have some ideas in your head but I don’t know how long you can afford to keep them in your head if, in practice, you’re having to do something else. A man can hang on to the idea that it’s a woman’s place to look after him. But, in the end, what he’s actually doing when she’s out at work too and has the ability to change power relationships in the family, is he longer forced to do some of the domestic chores. I wonder what real force his ideas about his relationships with his wife actually have in that changed relationship between them. And even if he is stuck with ideas about the relationships and that’s a powerful force, I’m not sure how you’d decide how powerful that force is without looking at the reality of the relationship, the power between them.

**Joyce:** Pretty powerful, by all of the indications of what happened in the Soviet Union. Despite 67 years of there being not only a social acceptance of the fact that women are equal and it being written into the constitution and women being massively engaged in the workforce, women there still do as much of the housework as women in the United States, or Australia, where there’s a larger percentage of women still engaged in fulltime domestic labour.

I think there are unresolved issues about the relationship of ideology and material practices, both in materialism and feminism, and most social theories, but it’s difficult to contest that they both have powerful roles to play. I can see the point you’re making, Linda, about workers in a particular situation and a woman in relationship to a man. Issues are not just resolved by what is in the woman’s head, but also by what power relationships exist in a whole range of material things, into which I would put ideology.

But it also seems to me that in the potential for resolving the struggle an important element is what workers have in their heads. In that sense I agree with Eric that you can’t say that if workers had more power and circumstances were more favourable, they would necessarily resolve a struggle in a particular way.

If you look at some of the relationships in the union movement at the time of the first Green Bans, it was because of reformist, economist and non-socialist ideology in the union movement that the builders labourers were left isolated in many instances, which is not to suggest that no mistakes were made.

**Linda:** But what motivates workers, or anybody, when they go into struggle is part of the material nature of that struggle.

As for economic in the last or the first instance, and whether the contradictions which arise from the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production are the crucial or overriding factors in relationship to socialist theory and practice, it is
It is clear that the origins of women's oppression predate both capitalist and class society. I am not arguing that there are no material factors in the oppression of women by men, but they are as much related to the esteem afforded to the reproduction of the species as to the economic divisions between women and men.

There is no point in analysing women's oppression outside the social relations and economic formation existing at the particular time. But it is a struggle in its own right, with its own area of concern, just as it is in the case of the struggle around wages.

To conflate all these and other forms of struggle into some notion of class doesn't increase our ability to understand why these struggles exist, what are their motive forces, how they are connected with, or sometimes in conflict with each other.

It is more important to understand those connections and contradictions than to shove them all into some total category for the sake of being able to hang onto something in socialist theory which doesn't help you.

**Eric:** I don't know precisely what people mean by the "marxist method". I don't know if there is a specific marxist method beyond passion in the cause and a scientific attitude.

That is not to downgrade Marx. There is still more mental nourishment about human society in what Marx wrote than in the works of any other single person. I call myself a marxist because of that, and because Marx, along with Engels, was the founder of the modern socialist movement.

I recently read a bad book (Wesson's *Why Marxism*) which, after claiming that marxism was a failed theory, seeks to explain why it continues to be so successful. And I agree with his conclusion, though not his point of view. That conclusion is that marxism was a failed theory, seeks to explain why it continues to be so successful because it embodies what people who are oppressed and exploited look to, though not necessarily — not mainly — from a theoretical point of view. They struggle because they think what is happening to them is bloody wrong and they are not going to put up with it any more.

The standpoint, the social philosophy Marx was putting forward was against exploitation, against all forms of oppression, against the concentration of ownership and control and for the maximum development of human potentiality, and so on.

**Linda:** What, then, is the difference between marxism and christianity? Christianity is also against exploitation, and talks about pity for the oppressed and so on. Isn't the difference that marxism is grounded in that philosophy which grew out of the 18th century which said that there are only human events and that human events are potentially able to be controlled by humans and that things don't happen by magic, but because people make decisions and act on them and can make different decisions? But the conditions have arrived within capitalism for that to be done on a world historical scale under the full consciousness of human understanding, without illusions.

**Eric:** Agreed. I think you've put it well. You speak of human responsibility and choice, but that is a moral question. If there is no choice then there is no question of morality. But when there are choices — do this or do that, permit this or permit that, intervene or not — that is a moral issue.

Certainly, the great feature of marxism is that it is materialist. But materialism, as Engels said, also needs to change with each new discovery. Yet the materialism that many marxists have in their heads remains the materialism of the 18th century, which is way out of date.

**Linda:** I agree.

**Bob:** The substance of Eric's point as I get it is that marxism's strength is in the combination of social justice and ethics and the historical side of the analysis. It's the link between the two which has been considerably eroded.

**Joe:** I substantially agree with that. But what we're talking about is what is it that has the capacity to motivate people today. In many third world countries, struggling for independence and against tremendous exploitation, and one takes up arms to change it. But, for us, the position is much more complex. You've got a sophisticated society where exploitation exists but is disguised.
"The big acknowledged difference between what the marxist left is prepared to do now and what it was prepared to do before, is to regard the state apparatus as an area of struggle. To see it as an arena for struggle, for gains which can be held."

Bob Makinson is a biologist who has, till recently, been an activist in the Young Communist Movement.

Eric: Earlier, when socialists talked about power, they meant specifically state political power. There were struggles around all sorts of things, but not about power. Through the struggles, people might learn their own strength and so on, but nothing else would change. In that sense it was purely an ideological outcome.

Perhaps from necessity, we now see it differently. Accepting the fact that the revolution is not just around the corner, as we used to think, we are faced with a long-term struggle.

This, in itself, poses a problem as to how socialists can, in this long-term struggle, sustain themselves, maintain their morale, etc. You can, if you think that the revolution is around the corner, even if the corner is distant, but more difficult if you do not — and I think few think that way now.

Our interventionist strategy comes to grips with that, in that we engage in struggles with a view not only to changing what is in people’s heads, but also changing to one degree or another, the actual power relations within society.

It is not that one preaches that people ought to think in a certain way, though one may do that, but that the issues people face are tackled from a socialist ideological point of view and with a view to changing the actual power relations which exist within society.

Some may see this as a new form of gradualism, and maybe it is. But the point is that you don’t put every change in power relations off until that day when state power is seized. You wage the battle within society now, thus preparing both the ideological and material or relational conditions. In that sense, one is creating a bit of the new society within the shell of the old, which we always used to reject as impossible.

Linda: Could you liken that to giving up the warfare of mass formations in favour of guerrilla warfare?

Eric: I suppose you could.

Bob: You can take that a bit further. The power that one wields is determined both by the forces you dispose of and the terrain you are able to control, or at least contest.

The big acknowledged difference between what the marxist left is prepared to do now and what it was prepared to do before, is to regard the state apparatus as an area of struggle. To see it as an arena for struggle, for gains which can be held. To participate in certain elements of the state apparatus in a contestatory way, in a way that fights the existing mode of state domination.

The other element to be looked at is how to assemble the kind of power base needed to do that, what are the elements of the coalition to do that. Not simply a political coalition but an ideological coalition within the society which will make it possible to challenge elements of the state power and private power within industry as well.
The left has found that it's not just the industrial working class that is needed for that. There have been long-standing debates about the necessity of intellectuals and on what terms there can be an alliance between intellectuals and workers. There's been equally long-standing, though less explicit, debates about the role of small business, small farmers, and others; about what sort of coalition can be put together in society which enables you to challenge that sort of power.

It's not just a matter of saying what sort of political forces are available to form a coalition of the left, because that's governed by those who define themselves as left. What we're talking about is a more long-term strategy of trying to penetrate all such areas of society with both ideas and organisation in order to try to assemble the elements of the new society and to demonstrate to people that there is a coherence about socialism, that it can provide not simply as good, but a better way of living and a more human society.

Eric: The elements are already there in the struggles taking place.

Joyce: In a way, it's the striving to find the interconnections between struggles that politicises the various movements, that takes them beyond the particular struggle itself.

Even though I don't see working class struggles at the point of production as the motive force for social change as Marx saw it to be, I still think it's a crucial form of struggle, just as a whole range of other forms of struggle are.

And the point about the interconnections is not to try to find some world view for the sake of having a world view. The point is how you realise the potential of the struggles that exist.

Eric: I don't think Marx ever said that social change would come about by the struggle of people at the point of production. On the contrary, he said that those struggles were skirmishes, were defensive struggles and that the working class had to assert itself on a wider stage. Lenin put it even more strongly, saying that the struggle between workers and capitalists was too narrow to engender socialist consciousness, at most giving rise to trade union consciousness.

This is important because a lot of misconceptions about what class struggle even is, are based on that erroneous view.

Linda: We seem to be having difficulty in coming to grips with what is the whole relationship between the way societies reproduce themselves, the ideas people have, and the possibilities of opposition to that.

Phil: I have a problem with the way you put that question. You seem to say that capitalist society just reproduces itself, full stop. But I think it's clear that capitalist society both reproduces itself and doesn't reproduce itself. It doesn't reproduce itself perfectly. In fact, it's largely because of the contradictions within capitalist society that it's incapable of reproducing itself perfectly.

Thus, there has to be a political struggle conducted by ruling classes and their intellectual forces to try to cement the bits together and reproduce it at a higher level.

The inverse of that is that there are a whole lot of elements of capitalist society which are reproducing different things, which are not just simply capitalist relations, but different ideas, different forces. It is these that are the basis on which we have to work.

This is a great problem which structuralist theory and Marxism got itself into, and the idea has become quite prevalent that capitalist society reproduces itself absolutely. Therefore, the notion of struggle or where struggle comes from can become nothing other than determinist.

Linda: Yes, but I thought that I said the struggles we see all around us arise precisely out of the contradictions that capitalism throws up. For example, contradictions arise out of the fact that you have an ideology about femininity at a particular time when capitalism is drawing masses of women into the workforce and doing more to smash the family, as somebody said, than a whole bevy of feminists.

It's precisely those contradictions and the struggles that they engender that are the points of intervention, of guerrilla warfare.

But what I was getting at was that people are talking about ideas — what ideas can we get to motivate people. Well, what ideas did people have when they were thrown into struggle around the women's movement? I don't know what ideas were in people's heads. Perhaps they weren't so different on the Monday from what they were on the Friday, but there came a particular time when they had to do something.

We talk about ideas motivating people, about how we get people going, but it seems to me it is not a question of how we get people going, but how we intervene in the ways they're massively struggling everywhere.

Eric: I think that's precisely the point. Capitalism is producing all these struggles. What we were arguing about before was whether we labelled them all class struggles, not whether they existed or whether they were the basis on which we could work. How you designate them is more a theoretical point.

But taking these struggles as being produced by the various contradictions of capitalism, the real point for socialists is how to intervene in them with a view to developing socialist ideas on a wider basis.

Socialists have a particular role to play, and I see nothing unmaterialist in that. Far from it. It also accords with historical experience. Certainly, if the conditions weren't there, things wouldn't have happened, but I think that is rather trite. There have also been circumstances where conditions were there and things weren't done. We have the example of the Long March (that's a particular example, of course, but it's only one), where a relatively small body of people changed the situation.

And if we see a role for socialists, whether they are organised in this way or that, the point to discuss is: in these circumstances in which we find ourselves, where socialism is somewhat down compared with previous periods, where socialists are flying apart rather than coming together, and don't feel themselves on the up, on the offensive, what is it that socialist should do in order to overcome this when, in other respects, with the capitalist crisis, the circumstances are favourable?