Exploring Socialist Renewal

The recent Special Congress of the CPA came at the end of a two year party discussion on "Prospects for Socialist Growth in Australia". This topic, of course, has implications beyond the CPA, and the Congress recognised that many more socialists need to be involved in discussions and joint action to realise both theoretical and practical potentials for socialist growth.

While the calling of the Special Congress eight months ahead of the next scheduled Congress resulted from the resignations of some 40 leading and other members in Victoria and Queensland earlier in the year, the main purpose was to draw some conclusions from the debate that has been going on in the party and reach agreement on some of the implications arising from it. There was unanimous agreement among the 107 delegates on a number of major questions, and on others there will be ongoing discussion and debate. While those who had resigned were not condemned for doing so, there was no support for their idea that a viable socialist party, to the left of the Labor Party, was not necessary or possible in the Australian political climate.

The immediate perspective agreed unanimously by Congress, which opens up very positive possibilities for future work, was to begin a process of discussions and forums with others on the left. The purpose of this will be twofold: firstly, to meet together as equals with "all those left activists who are genuinely concerned to develop a more effective socialist alternative ... to discuss more effective joint activities and initiatives around current issues"; and secondly, to search for "the most effective forms of organisation and activity which will best serve the goals of the socialist movement", including "the potential for a re-formed socialist party".

Congress stated, "In the first instance, we propose that a series of socialist forums and discussions be held in as many centres as possible ... These would be held at grass roots levels and in all areas of political work and interests, as well as between representatives of organisations and trends of socialist opinion." In the process of these discussions CPA members "will base their contributions on the CPA Program and policy statements", but the party indicates its open-mindedness about policies, strategies, methods of work, and organisational forms and asks others to be similarly open-minded.

Congress reaffirmed without opposition that in the long term "a democratic socialist society will require a revolutionary and democratic transformation of the state, and of economic, social and personal life". While recognising that various progressive mass movements contribute their own ideas, forms of action and organisation to the process of social change, Congress agreed that an independent socialist party is essential in fighting for mass support for radical social change.

Socialist advances can only be democratically achieved if there is widespread popular support for socialist alternatives, and today the ALP (even with its shift to the right) enjoys much of this support; but on its own the ALP is unable to develop socialist consciousness, Congress said. One reason for this is that there is a large constituency in the ALP who are not socialists and in seeking to change this situation, the left inside the party risk retaliation from rightwing and conservative forces in and out of the party. Therefore, in the absence of developed mass support for their position, they risk electoral disaster for their party.

"This makes the development of extra-parliamentary mass movements the key to creating new possibilities for change and to developing mass support for more far-reaching changes."

For these and other reasons only an independent socialist party can begin to build support for socialist alternatives which can ensure that attempts by the left in the Labor Party to influence policy don't threaten the electoral viability of the ALP with a return to the reactionary climate engendered by conservative governments.

"We need," Congress decided, "a party which provides a focus for socialists to develop a strategy to build this support in every sphere of social and political life." The historic failure of the Labor Party to tackle fundamental problems and issues and the rightward shift of the Hawke government in more recent times makes the task of building such a socialist movement and party more urgent. The many dedicated and sincere socialists who are members of the ALP are regarded as comrades in this struggle for socialism.

It was not suggested that a significantly larger socialist party could challenge the ALP electorally in the immediate future, but such a party would participate in electoral activity while placing its main emphasis on building extra-parliamentary mass work and movements.

The continuing social and economic crisis of capitalism, including mass unemployment, the threat of global
In the immediate period a number of specific issues were nominated as being ones which could create more favourable circumstances for united work and build bridges between mass movements with diverse priorities. These include the ALP/ACTU Accord, tax reform, social welfare, equal pay, nuclear disarmament and anti-uranium, racism and land rights, unemployment, environment, and resource management.

It is beyond the scope of this report to traverse all these issues, but if we take, say, the Accord, it is possible to see that it holds both big potential for the development of political activity and consciousness, as well as many difficulties. Implementation and extension of the Accord has already been given wide support within the labor movement, but not without some opposition, and there are still unresolved problems about how to make it the property of the majority of even the militant workers. However, the Accord has helped to partially maintain wages, particularly for the lower paid, and has acted as an impetus for some unions to intervene in economic planning at a national level. Yet the relationship between advances for some of the paid workforce and continuing unemployment and escalating profits pose real problems for the left and for full implementation of the Accord.

Continued pressure for implementation and extension of the Accord is nevertheless seen as the most viable immediate strategy. This means building up pressure around some of the issues so far neglected, such as full maintenance of living standards; effective price control, effective job creation, tax reform to redistribute wealth (including through the social wage), and renegotiation of the centralised wage-fixing guidelines so that claims for equal pay for women can be dealt with. While an Accord predicated on a Hawke-style consensus also poses problems for the left and labor movement, the building of campaigns and struggles which defend and extend this agreement seems an essential part of creating any mass-based alternative to this “consensus”.

The main areas of political debate at Congress centred on attempts to define the relationship between class struggle and other contradictions such as race and sex, and the nature of Marxism and its relationship to other theories of oppression.

The main Congress document attempted to pose these issues as critical ones for the socialist movement without pronouncing on areas still open to theoretical debate. Concern was expressed, however, that this meant giving away the working class, class struggle and Marxism.

The Congress draft, however, (which was endorsed) speaks of “a strategy which promotes intervention by popular forces in all the issues of the day, with the aim of expanding the control of working people over their lives in the workplace, community and home, and in national political affairs. Democratic control of production, services and the economy is crucial, and will depend on the extent to which workers’ organisation has developed the confidence and experience to challenge the rights of capital” (that is to engage in class struggle). Similar references appear elsewhere in the document.

What Congress resisted were attempts to describe class struggle “as the prime antagonism in contemporary society” preferring to see the exact relationship between class and other contradictions as problematic.

The further development of theoretical and political understanding of the relationship between class and other social contradictions is an urgent problem for all socialists.

Congress took a similar position on debates over the relationship between Marxism and other theories suggesting that a socialist party “must be based on a scientific approach to socialist theory, drawing on an open Marxist analysis expanded by feminist, anti-racist, environmentalist and other theories”. The party also draws on the analyses, views and concerns developed by the labor movement, the feminist, disarmament and other progressive and people’s movements.

There are many important aspects of this and other debates that are beyond the scope of this article. However, it was a very good omen for the future that at the end of a number of strong debates, Congress was unanimous in its agreement on proposals for exploring socialist renewal.