BROAD LEFT CONFERENCE

The statement issued by sponsors of the Broad Left Conference nominates two strategic issues for discussion. First, the emergence of a more extreme and ideologically confident right wing and, second, the challenge of winning reforms and farreaching changes in a period of Labor governments.

It is sometimes hard for politically committed people of the left to admit that their opponents are making gains, but this is what is happening now, despite Labor holding office in four states and federally.

Some on the left believe that the defeat of the Liberals in the recent South Australian and West Australian elections, and the lukewarm media response to John Howard are conclusive evidence that the New Right is of little consequence. Yet a close look at the WA elections shows the deeper processes at work which have given the right ascendency.

In WA, the issue of land rights is a touchstone for progressive and reactionary attitudes because the mining companies, business, and the Liberal Party have effectively mobilised latent racism into a powerful force, before which the Burke government has bowed.

This, while Labor won re-election, it has done so on the terms of the right, and this process is being replicated in all Labor governments. It's true that Labor should be careful if it has to make policy against the drift of public opinion, although this is usually an excuse for inaction. But what is hardly ever discussed is the notion that Labor and the whole labour movement should play a continuous and active role in shaping public opinion. In this, the right has something to teach us.

Similar events concern the imposition in Queensland of some of the harshest anti-union laws Australia has seen in 40 years. In the campaign to roll back the BjelkePetersen government, neither the Accord, nor Labor's carefully nurtured relationship with business, nor even the strength of the ACTU, has been of much use.

Yet all three have been part of the chemistry of Labor's electoral success but, meanwhile, the labour movement and the idea of unionism itself have suffered major defeats.

Some on the left blame the Keatings, Burkes and Hawkes of the Labour movement for the rise of the New Right, and see "misleadership" of the unions, and the Accord, as the root of all evil. But this is absurd. The New Right stems from a crisis of conservatism which has its roots in the social crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, in the economic crisis of the mid-seventies, and further back in the ruling class' historic compromise during World War II. (See Summer '85 issue of ALR for an extended discussion of this.)

Nevertheless, the actions of the new style of Labor leadership skewed the political agenda towards conservatism in a way which assists the right to make its message all the more credible.

But if the right of the labour movement and the ALP do little to stop the drift to the right, what does the left offer?

Here, the calling of the Broad Left Conference may offer a "shot in the arm" if it results in a new confidence for the left and radical movements. But confidence which is not founded on the realisation that the left faces a long and hard battle to build mass support will be confidence which will crumble. Mass support means support for campaigns, not only within the safe confines of the labour movement or the social movements, but within the wider society.

Mass support emerges not just when the left sets its slogans and policy documents correctly, but when it taps deep feelings within society at large and when it begins to set the political agenda. This has been so in the case of the nuclear disarmament movement and, significantly, this is one of the few issues on which Hawke has been rolled (the MX testing).

Another defeat for Labor's drift to the right occurred at the tax summit when the unions and the social movements in the welfare sector stopped the indirect tax plan.

In the long term, this kind of alliance is crucial and of historic importance. This is so, not simply because "unity is strength" but because, in advanced capitalist societies, the contradiction between labour and capital is intersected, overlain and mediated by other contradictions such as those concerning patriarchy and the environment.

The meaning of socialism in the West has itself been revitalised and altered by the emergence of these movements (as well as by the experience of "actually existing socialism"). It's no accident that those dogmatists who denigrate "middle class" issues have a shrivelled up authoritarian and colourless vision of socialism.

To talk about such an alliance, and nod in its direction, is easy. Much harder is to develop an attitude among the left that instinctively responds to day-to-day issues in a way which uses the insights of the social movements as well as the experiences of the labour movement.

This approach is needed because the alternative is the enshrinement of the differences between the different movements rather than seeing their intersection. To discuss what to do about unemployment now means looking at options about the nature and place of paid work in our lives, its relationship to unpaid, domestic work and child-rearing, leisure, consumerism, education, culture, technological change and the environment. In these fields, traditional socialist theory can be useful, but on its own it is inadequate.

Finally, there are problems to be faced by the left about its own strength, its beliefs and practices.

The left in Australia is now weaker and more fragmented than it has been for fifty years. The working class itself is also more divided, and even the term "working class" as denoting certain characteristics is less and less useful as the differences between sub-sections of the working class grow. Still less can the political and social attitudes be deduced from someone's status as a worker.

The New Right has probed a number of weak points of the left, for example, the "statist" version of...
SUPERANNUATION

Superannuation is now a major industrial and political issue. The Accord between the ACTU and the ALP government has made it possible for the union movement to push successfully for an extension and improvement of superannuation benefits available to workers.

Traditional superannuation arrangements have been highly inequitable. The interests of employers have ruled rather than the objective of securing genuine retirement benefits for employees. Currently, only around 40 percent of the workforce is in receipt of superannuation.

While most low-paid workers have received no superannuation benefits whatsoever, they have been contributing to the tax subsidies of the superannuation schemes of high-income earners. Women in particular have been disadvantaged. Vast differentials between social groups in terms of wealth and income have been further reinforced by the patchy, unjust and inefficient system of superannuation. As highlighted in a headline in The Age: “Super campaign should have begun years ago” (16.12.85).

In the longer term, one national superannuation system for all workers must be the objective of the labour movement. Against the background of a union movement divided by craft and sectional interest, this is hardly attainable in the foreseeable future. However, industry-based superannuation, providing a measure of real economic security in old age for all workers, is now within reach.

The employers are divided in their response to the ACTU campaign. The overwhelming strength of the arguments favours reform, coupled with the unity between the ACTU and the government on this issue, have led some employer groups to accept these changes as inevitable. From other employer quarters, as well as from rightwing forces, including The Australian, superannuation is depicted as a grab for economic power by unions.

The sums accumulated in superannuation funds within a few years become very significant, making up a major source of investment capital. In the guidelines issued by the federal government in December, it is made clear that industry funds should be under the joint control of employers and employees. Current economic practices are not to be upset or endangered. Various restrictions are to prevent a superannuation fund from becoming too influential in any one company. As such, unions are unlikely to gain a major influence on investment criteria or decisions in the short term.

Notwithstanding the pathetic quality of much of the rightwing rhetoric, there is a grain of truth in their accusation that union-influenced superannuation funds could affect relations of power in the economy. Through directing investment in and restructuring of the Australian economy, workers and unions could create a sound basis for employment and welfare. On the other hand, the parasitic “entrepreneurs” worshipped in the conservative media, engaged as they are in non-productive take-overs and speculation, have no such “objective” interest in the strengthening of the foundations of the Australian economy. A high level of employment, not to mention “full” employment, cannot be achieved with a reliance on private investors.

At a fairly high level of abstraction, it can be shown that union intervention in the form of influence on investment decisions is likely to have a favourable impact on the health of the economy. Unions would have to take a long-term view of investments, as distinct from private investors, who are more sensitive to temporary ups and downs in various markets. Private capital has no preference for productive investments; it goes to wherever the highest profits are, which leads to financial manipulations, real estate speculation and other forms of non-productive, wasteful use of social resources.

Investment/superannuation funds influenced or controlled by unions would have to guarantee a reasonable level of real return, but, once such a level of return has been attained, potentially other objectives than profitability could be taken into account. It may, for example, be in the interest of unions to accept a higher level of risk in some major investment decisions in order to bring about a restructuring of the economy in the interest of workers.

Reform of the superannuation system resulting in a degree of union influence on the use of investment capital does not have to form part of a radical project. In certain forms, and
in certain favourable circumstances, investment funds of one kind or another can be part of a strategy for economic democracy and social change, but this is not necessarily the case. In the current Australian context, the radical edge of superannuation reform is an extremely mild one. All sections of the labour and union movement, including the right wing, are able to support the ACTU campaign.

Superannuation funds, with an employee influence on their operations mean the addition to the capital market of another group of big shareholders, alongside such entities as insurance and investment companies. It has nothing to do with increased state planning or control. The market economy would not be weakened, it may even be invigorated. Other advanced capitalist countries have long ago embarked much further on the course of collective capital formation and union participation in economic policy and investment matters.

Nevertheless, the benefits to workers of superannuation reform are considerable. And it is not a matter of indifference to unions — and should not be to the left — in which direction the capitalist system is evolving. Relatively less power to the Bonds and Holmes a'Courts and relatively more power to the unions would be a good thing.

Rightwing forces always seek to detract from the public image of the union movement. The superannuation issue is one which may present unions in a more positive and constructive context than is commonly the case. The twin objectives of improving security in old age for all workers, and making the economy operate somewhat less irrationally, should make it possible to mobilise widespread popular support for the ACTU campaign.

Hans Lofgren.

REPORTING FROM MARVELLOUS MELBOURNE

In October 1985, ALR and Chain Reaction sponsored a discussion day on the ideas put forward by the Socialist Alternative Melbourne Collective in their draft program Make Melbourne Marvellous.

Workshops held on socialist industry, socialist metropolis and coalition for socialist change. The day was organised to get feedback on the document, and to explore further issues and problems.

Some of the issues discussed included the macroeconomic policies needed to ensure the success of the aims of the program, such as the creation and expansion of ecologically viable and socially desirable industries; the restructuring and democratisation and expansion of the public sector needed to implement progressive policy; the relationship between trade unions, public sector and community groups; the difficulty in mobilising the trade union movement around the issues of industry development and urban planning.

Socialist metropolis groups took as their underlying philosophy (which is also that of the draft program) that urban planners currently do not take enough account of social issues in physical planning exercises; they plan for the market and they plan for the car industry. It was argued that campaigns for the restructuring of urban development would sharpen the conflict between restructuring costs and the current economic system. However, in the long run the social and ecological benefits, and even economic benefits such as savings in energy production and distribution, would outweigh the initial costs.

With the discussion of the consequences of technological change, where greater productivity is accompanied by technological unemployment, the campaign for a social wage and the empowerment of non-wage labour was considered an important long-term goal. An alternative set of values and vision were needed to combat the increasingly popular arguments of the right.

Other short term problems discussed included the way neighbourhood centres and community co-ops tend not to perceive themselves fitting into an overall plan and, hence, are often ad hoc in challenging overall urban planning and industry development of the government. But these issues are especially relevant when public transport, location of services and industry policies directly affect the functions of neighbourhood centres.

The dominance of car-based transport, and urban planning reinforcing that dominance, along with the run down of public transport, has serious social and environmental consequences. The conference felt that there was room for campaigns linking ecologists, community workers, socialists and public transport workers around these issues and that Make Melbourne Marvellous provided a starting point for an alternative strategy to car-based urban planning.

The Socialist Alternative Melbourne collective's housing policy was heavily debated and the SAM Collective is in the process of redrafting the housing section of the program to avoid some of the problems and confusion in the original suggested strategy of shelter titles.

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The problems are, given the strong popularity of home ownership among the Australian working class, are: how does one ensure equality of occupancy, provide security of tenure for tenants and, at the same time, end the exchange value of housing and land dealing with the problem of inheritance, to provide the most democratic and equitable system for "ownership" of land and housing?

The themes that came out of the groups discussing coalitions for socialist change were the problems encountered in attempting to form coalitions in the context of both profound ideological differences between movements, yet with a shared radical culture and interaction creating a convergence of opinion. One of the key points of difference within and across movements was the varying approaches to the state in their strategies.

Alliances between movements, it was suggested, must inevitably form primarily out of pragmatic and sometimes even defensive political motivation. However, broad principles or values outlining an alternative vision were seen as essential in forging longer-term, more challenging political unity.

Three different forms of political struggle were discussed, most immediate being decentralised alliances of people around local issues, spontaneous and possibly transitory, based on direct experience of solidarity, which are normally defensive and crisis oriented. Secondly, the development of a more permanent, organised coalition of movements which would be able to challenge the centres of social power, in particular the state and transnationals. Thirdly, a more tightly integrated party which would participate in the parliamentary sphere. It was felt that the movements should be autonomous and independent of any party, allowing ongoing political interaction between the party and associated movements.

Problems were seen with the difficulty of linking macro-level political-economic analysis and strategy, with community concerns and actions, building links between community based movements and the labour movement, all seen as essential in both assisting and supporting each other.

It was felt that the movements had a lot to offer each other, and that it was desirable to draw more on the experiences and practices within key movements linking political, personal and cultural transformations such as with the women's and community control movements.

Rather than over-emphasising organisational forms it was suggested that ongoing communication was needed between the respective movements to explore common ground and develop a mutual understanding of concerns. This was considered a major priority, and that Make Melbourne Marvellous had been an enjoyable part of this process.

Derek Payne.

If you have any comments on Make Melbourne Marvellous, please send them to SAM Collective, c/- 12 Exploration Lane, Melbourne 3000. You can buy a copy by sending $5 ($3 unwaged), plus $1 postage, to the same address.

ALR is interested in articles on any of the issues raised, e.g. industry policy, coalitions for change, socialist cities, etc. Please contact the Sydney or Melbourne ALR collective if you are interested in writing on any of these.

WHICH WAY THE LEFT?
Debate at the Marxist Summer School

One of the final forums of the Ninth Marxist Summer School, entitled "Which Way the Left?", attempted to look at a range of questions together under the general headings of the crisis of the Left, the role of the forthcoming Broad Left Conference, and the possibility of a new broadly-based Left party. The speakers were Joyce Stevens, lately of the Communist Party's national office, and now with the Women's Employment Action Centre; Chris Warren, NSW president of the journalists' union and a member of the staff of Social Security Minister Brian Howe, and ALP member; and Claudio Crollini, from the Associazione Progressista Repubblicana and FILEF, the Italian workers' group.

Joyce Stevens began by noting that the crisis of the left was both a social and an organisational crisis. The basic challenge lay in the "range of new movements that have developed in the last twenty years, which have both created new areas of political concern, and are redefining old areas of political concern". Among other things, this suggested that the Left and progressive movements required new organisational forms, she said. "It also raises the question of whether the Left, as a whole, can renew its program, its politics, its theory, and take account of the questions these new movements have raised and are pursuing."

In this light, the Broad Left Conference could play a germinal role. In fact, the basic function of the conference — to establish some sort of programmatic unity for the immediate future — was not, in itself, a very fundamental or far-reaching one, although it was a necessary first step on the road to renewal. It was impossible to establish common sets of priorities "unless we engage in debate as to why people choose particular sets of political priorities. In engaging in that sort of theoretical debate, we will change one another's attitudes to what our immediate priorities or immediate program should be."

Such a conference would not have been possible ten years ago, she added. "Certainly, very few women would have gone to it, and those women who went to it would have had very little feminist analysis. It would have been totally dominated by the traditional left, by the labour
movement, and by ideas which did not incorporate many of women's concerns. Indeed, it is that very struggle of women which has made it possible for a different sort of Left conference to take place in Australia today."

At the same time, while there was a new openness around specific programmatic questions, there had been no corresponding growth in ideas in most parties of the Left about the nature of political parties and political formations, or about "what sort of political parties or organisations best serve the interests of the Left". Here the field was still wide open. There had been valuable discussion among feminists on the question of organisation, but "that debate has virtually run its course, and I do not think it has arrived at a point that suggests overall solutions to the problem".

She believed there was a necessity for a new form of political organisation which she called a party, "not because I'm wedded to all the notions of what a party might be, but because I think you need something more than loosely connected groups of people". Not only would such a party have to acknowledge the range of different perspectives present in the Left today, but it would also have to accept that "no single party can encompass the whole of the Left in Australia today". And, at the centre of this new conception of Left politics would have to be the recognition that "there are more than class oppressions in this society. There are also race and sex oppressions, and very great contradictions between technological development and the environment".

Such a party could not hope to take the place of mass movements, "but it has to build strong links with these mass movements, and it has to try to learn how to integrate their various and often contradictory interests". It would be an attempt to bring together all the various strands of the Left in a new way, with a sense of common activity and united purpose. Without such an organisation today it was not possible "even to begin to formulate strategies which take account of all the forms of oppression, all of the obstacles there are to building a radically different sort of society". The goal was "a party of a new kind", taking up the best in socialist and feminist theory; providing links with past traditions, but also recognising the radically new political situation. "And I believe that enough of us are convinced that such a party is necessary that we have the building blocks," she concluded.

For Chris Warren, the crisis of the Left stemmed from a quite different basis in which the cornerstone was the failure of the Left to develop a clear understanding of the centrality of Labor governments to any idea of constructing a socialist hegemony. This was not to suggest, he stressed, that "you have to give up any idea of struggle, and concentrate on being a cheer-squad for the Labor governments". But it required the recognition for the need for a fundamentally different strategy for the Left in a period of Labor governments to that of a period of conservative rule.

Historically, he argued, Labor governments had been "among the most radical social-democratic governments in the world". The Chifley government had used a basis of full employment to try to move a social-democratic consensus towards more radical solutions, building upon "an implicit accord between the ALP and the ACTU. By contrast, the Whitlam government had not been very successful in its aims. "There was no attempt to work out a set of political priorities, and there was no attempt to set political priorities within a strategy for change". Nor had there been a working accord between the ALP and the ACTU: the ALP had launched the 25 percent tariff cut without any consultation, while the ACTU under Hawke had refused to play a role in shoring up the beleaguered government.

In his opinion, the Hawke government was much more a social-democratic government in the Chifley mould. In fact, in comparison with social-democratic governments around the world — from the Wilson and Callaghan governments in Britain to the present Mitterand government in France — it was important to remember "just how radical it is. And the reason I say it’s more radical is that it has a sense of itself as a party and its base, and an understanding of the need for unity — as reflected in the Accord. At the same time, one of the chief reasons for the marked philosophical conservatism of the Hawke government was the Left’s inability to "think through a strategy which would enable them to work through a Labor government". This had become obvious in the 1970s, when the Left had failed to face up to a new historic situation — a failure which had allowed the right, both inside and outside the labour movement, to come back on the offensive.

The Left had the potential to have "a profound influence" upon the political direction of the Hawke government, as the tax summit had shown. What was needed, he argued, was the ability to turn the social-democratic consensus — "notwithstanding the New Right, which I believe has run its race and is on the way out" — into a strategy for socialist hegemony. And a central part of this was the need for the "constituency for change", which included forces far broader than the labour movement, to have "a sense of its own identity" that it did not currently possess.

On the whole, though, he was not pessimistic about the future. Historically, the Left and Labor governments had had their ups and downs. And the existence of a federal, and four state, Labor governments gave the Left an "unequalled chance to move to a socialist consensus".

Claudio Crollini was not so sanguine about the Left’s position. It was, he suggested, useful to view the contemporary Left as three distinct schools of thought. The first was the Left which believed that "there is the
need for a new political instrument which is capable of transforming Australia into a democratic progressive republic and which is capable of leading Australia into the twenty-first century”.

His own organisation, along with others, belonged to that Left, he said. Then there was the Left which — like Chris Warren — believed that the way forward lay in “a new, reformed Labor Party”. Finally, there was the quite heterogeneous Left which believed that “their particular organisation is the organisation which will be capable of leading the Australian working people to the final victory”. When he talked about the future of the Left, it was of the first of these three Lefts that he was thinking, he said.

He saw several fundamental tasks facing the Left today: a program of immediate unity was one; the building of a new party, a further, more profound one. His organisation saw the key to this first objective being the development of elements of programmatic unity. The question here, as Joyce Stevens had noted, was not the immediate formation of a new group or party, but rather “how to begin the political process necessary for working together, which will eventually blossom into a new party”. The initial stage of this process was to meet the need for the development of common programs on key issues — an economic program, a program for foreign policy issues, and so on. This would require long and open discussions and public meetings — and also joint meetings and joint seminars embracing different parts of the organised and non-organised Left.

The ultimate aim was the creation of a political instrument sufficient to the task of displacing the hegemony of the ruling block. What was needed was a “modern, mass, progressive party” — “modern” and “mass” because Australia was, despite its limitations, an open and democratic society. “We do not believe,” he concluded, that a vanguard party can operate successfully in these conditions. It is an open society; the party must be open and public”. It also had to be a mass, activist party — something the ALP demonstrably was not.

The debate, and the discussion which followed, was open and self-critical. It augured well for the success of the Broad Left Conference in Sydney over Easter weekend, where the same issues are sure to be of paramount importance.

David Burchett.