Unions are in poor organisational shape to meet the challenges of the 1990s. And, if they’re to respond effectively to the appeal of the New Right, they need to pay more than lip service to grassroots democracy.

The questions concerning Australian unionism raised in recent issues of ALR (most notably in the contributions by Guille and McKnight, and the roundtable on women and unions, in ALR 100) should encourage further debate about the trends and developments that will ultimately radically restructure that movement and potentially alter its role and character. The question really isn’t whether these changes will occur, but whether they will take positive or negative directions, and what sort of role unions can and will play in their wake.

There are two main aspects to the radically changing character and role of the unions — structural and cultural. The former is rapidly evolving now, and the latter, as an important part of Australian working-class history and tradition, is under its severest threat yet.

The agenda for structural change has already been set. It has been set by the advent of radical and accelerating technology in the production process — a development which has highlighted as never before the limitations of vertical trade union structures based on craft or classification. With something like 3½ million members organised in 326 separate unions, 155 of them with less than 1000 members, the capacity of the unions to meet organisationally the challenges of today is severely curtailed.

There has been, too, a decisive shift in the composition of the workforce — a trend which, judging by overseas experience, is likely to continue. In the United States, for instance, it is estimated that only 10% of the workforce today is engaged in classical blue-collar occupations. There is no reason to believe that this trend will not be repeated here. On the one hand, this has led to a big growth in unionised white-collar workers, mainly recruited from the public sector; while at the same time there has been a decline of unionised white-collar workers in the private sector. Figures produced at the recent ACTU Congress indicated that in 1976, 42% of employees in finance, property and business services were union members — by 1986, the figure had fallen to 34%. The proportion of unionised employees in the areas of recreation, personal and other services has fallen from 41% in 1976 to 29% in 1987.

Presently standing at 55% of the workforce, the proportion of unionised workers in Australia has remained fairly stable over the past three decades — although more recent figures reveal a tendency to decline. Among blue-collar workers, however, the proportion of unionised workers to the whole has declined considerably. While this can be attributed in part to declining employment in the traditional manufacturing sector, we should heed the timely warning from John Halfpenny at the ACTU Congress that the union movement is failing to attract younger workers. With the ageing of that part of the union membership which has the greatest appreciation of the traditions of solidarity and union principles, the younger parts of the workforce are more inclined to reject unionism as part of their culture — and unfortunately the union movement is doing too little, either practically or ideologically, to combat their perceptions. This is even more true of the army of unemployed, predominantly young, whose sole experience of unions is often that of onlookers watching, as they see it, unions concerned only with winning higher wages for those in employment.

Another factor exerting pressure for change is the debilitating competition between unions, and particularly craft unions, as they seek to maintain their traditional coverage of areas where boundaries have already been blurred or distorted by new technology. Many unions which forty years ago had large memberships and a strategic place in the
economy have lost members and leverage through the processes of technological change.

Tardiness in response to these changes has not been altogether the fault of the unions. Legislation enacted in 1972 has made it extremely difficult and complicated to rationalise union organisation— even given the will to do so. But it must be said that, even allowing for legal restrictions, the union movement has been slow in defining its strategy for change. Here it is not only a question of structures, necessary as they are in enhancing the unions' effectiveness, but of an overall strategy which defines the objectives and role of the union movement in contemporary economic and social conditions. But more on that later.

It is in this confused and somewhat weakened organisational state that the unions, and indeed the very concept of unionism, are being forced to meet the present ideological and organisational offensive from the New Right. This is a worldwide phenomenon, but in the Australian context such an offensive means:

- the abandonment of the system of centralised wage-fixing, and determination of wage levels by direct bargaining at plant or industry level.
- the encouragement of non-unionism by the negotiating of contracts of employment with groups of workers at plant or industry level with or without union involvement.
- encouragement of workers not to join unions, by the enshrining of so-called 'freedom of choice' in law.
- the reduction of the role of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in wage fixing, while strengthening its penal powers.
- full use of both industrial and civil laws to penalise and even bankrupt unions.

The Confederation of Australian Industry has produced a publication for its members which outlines 'the legal remedies available to employers faced with a strike, a picket, a secondary boycott or some other form of industrial action', through the Conciliation and Arbitration Act, the Trade Practices Act, the Crimes Act, and Common Law. The Business Council of Australia, representing Australia's top eighty corporations, and which boycotted the Hancock enquiry into industrial relations, has earmarked $1 1/2 million for conducting its own investigation into Australian industrial relations — and its terms of reference also include all of the legal avenues outlined above.

There just may be some on the left who, looking at these developments,
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say 'So what? The labour movement has always been subject to repressive legislation and has succeeded in defeating these attacks in the past'.

Some of us recall, however, that it took two decades and the jailing of Clarrie O'Shea to trigger a national strike which shelved the use of, but did not remove, the iniquitous penal powers of the Arbitration Act. We should not forget, either, and perhaps need to analyse more deeply, more recent experiences such as the serious defeats inflicted on unionism in the SEQEB, Dollar Sweets and Mudginberri disputes.

The issues and tactics employed in these disputes aside, why wasn't it possible to decisively defeat these attacks? Certainly the Robe River dispute, part of the same rightwing offensive, was handled very differently, and in consequence unionism did not receive the same setback inflicted in the other disputes mentioned above. In the Robe River dispute the workers and unions came across as the reasonable and rational party—the company as the villain.

It seems to me that basically what we should be most concerned about is the climate in which this sustained New Right offensive proceeds, and the part the offensive itself plays in creating this negative atmosphere. We have to accept, I think, that the populist rhetoric of the New Right, expressed in phrases such as 'freedom of choice', 'the individual's right to decide', 'the unions have too much power', and so on, has penetrated and holds sway in the minds of a good slice of the community, and even among unionists themselves. Little matter that their slogans and accusations are falsehoods. The questions we have to address in this battle of ideas are rather how to combat the charges and the image of unionism they create; whether the unions (and we who are active in them) do act in ways such as to lend credence to these allegations; and, if we do, what is required to reform our practices.

Such is the success of this vilification of unions and their activity that it is not uncommon, in my experience, to find good, active unionists voicing criticism of other unionists' industrial action because of its secondary effects on them personally. A petrol or train strike, for instance, can bring the most selfish and backward attitudes to the fore. And if this is the reaction among active unionists, imagine how much more pronounced it is among the general community. A strike or other industrial action, from the point of view of the workers directly involved, can be completely legitimate, but can be undermined by failing to explain to or demonstrate our concern for others affected by the action. Explanations and demonstrations of this sort are most usually left to the anti-union forces, who readily offer their own purported concern and sympathy. I have perhaps exaggerated this trend to make a point. There are, of course, contrary examples, such as exemptions for essential services, processing of pensioners' cheques during postal strikes, or the massive financial support exhibited in the

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SEQEB and other disputes. But these examples of solidarity, which are limited in scope even then, occur only when the issues involved are communicated and clearly explained, and the identity of interests which often exists between striking unionists and other people are understood. Unfortunately, this rarely happens except when a section of the movement is under serious threat, with their backs to the wall. I, for one, find little comfort in the shouts of 'reformist sellout' when we fail to achieve the necessary mass and community support and solidarity. While 'sellouts' have always been a factor, the slogan remains a simplistic explanation for what is a far more complex problem involving our credibility and social image.

It does not help the image of the union movement for it to be seen, on the one hand, fighting for a shorter working week, and then, in some circumstances, endorsing the working of massive quantities of overtime and a six-day week—a practice that reinforces the idea that all the effects of the social and economic crisis can be solved by the increases we get in our pay envelopes.

Feather bedding and other work practices whose origins generally lay in workers' understandable efforts to establish a measure of job security, but which become distorted over time, further contribute to this unfavourable image.

Improving the image of the union movement demands that the unions be seen to care not only for their own members, but also for the community at large. This will not be achieved by unions confining their role to the defence of their members' living standards (important though this is), but rather by raising workers' consciousness through involvement in decision making at all levels—plant, office, institution, industry and government. This is easier said than done, for tradition and practice has it that unions should confine their activities to wages and conditions. Unions, so the logic goes, should not be 'political'. The difficulties are even more pronounced in the case of taking on government policies, when the remoteness of events from the workplace increases the sense of powerlessness which workers already feel in the face of government policy—let alone determining it.

Instead of seeing union organisation, whether at the industry or workplace level, as merely a broker for the amount of value to be returned to workers in wages, it is essential to develop an alternative image of the union movement's role—one in which unions, like other democratic social institutions, are just one area (albeit an important one because of their potential clout) for the acquisition and development of democratic skills and values, the benefits of which flow beyond the movement and workplace to impact and influence society as a whole.

The advent of the Prices and Incomes Accord (Marks I and II)
was criticised in total by parts of the left as merely a device for containing wages and thus reducing living standards. That it has restrained wages is indicated by the fact that real wages have fallen by about 7% since 1983. Yet the Accord framework, to which the union movement as a whole gave its commitment, did provide a lever for union involvement in wider political and social issues. The failure of the Hawke government to deliver on other aspects of the Accord — such as taxation, investment and social services — is more a criticism of the ACTU leadership and its failure to explain and win commitment from the rank and file on these issues in the first place, so as to be able to mobilise workers around all aspects of the Accord.

The fact that commitment to all aspects of the Accord came only from the union side, and not from the employers, does not invalidate the strategy of involving the unions in economic and social planning. The question remains, however, how to involve the rank and file. I have some reservations about Australia Reconstructed, the main document adopted at the ACTU Congress (for instance, while a lot of attention is necessarily devoted to consensus and co-operation, insufficient recognition is accorded to the conflict endemic in whatever system of industrial relations we end up with). Nevertheless, it is clearly heading in the right direction.

Together with a proposal to reduce the inordinate number of trade unions, Australia Reconstructed seeks to project a strategy for the movement which can, if taken into the workshops, institutions and offices, begin a process of extending the democratic involvement and participation of unionists in economic, social and political life. But the concepts involved, not to mention the practice, will come to nought unless there is a thorough debate sponsored among the rank and file. Indeed, given that large and powerful sections of employers will strenuously resist any change in industrial relations in the direction indicated by the ACTU, the strategy will require a mass demand supported by the rank and file that union and employee rights be embodied in federal legislation as part of a new industrial relations system.

Democracy and participation in decision-making are limited concepts in our institutions and in society as a whole. They are, however, always capable of expansion — which is the real essence of that rather hackneyed phrase, 'raising the political consciousness of the working class'. Such a consciousness does not rely solely on experience — still less on experience confined to strikes over wages. However, democracy and participation in decision-making implies a challenge to existing power relations. And the challenge to authoritarian prerogatives in decision-making is something which is not only strenuously resisted by employers: more importantly, such concepts are not presently the dominant features of workers' culture, either.

This is a state of affairs which, if my analysis is valid, demands a radical expansion of the concept of the rights of workers. A new conception is needed which can replace the preoccupation with only using unions' organisational strength to defend gains and advance unionists' economic interests with a dominant conviction in their right to become part of the decision-making process.

The starting point in this process is the unions themselves, and particularly at the workplace level. It is a fact of life that many unions give lip service to 'democracy' but do not act in a democratic manner. Power is centralised and consultation proceeds in a formal way at management committees, monthly meetings or stopwork meetings. Even given the will, most union structures correspond to an era long since past, when they in most cases did allow for greater participation by the rank and file. Centralised meetings, given the demography of industry and union membership nowadays, as well as the far wider range of diversions, (TV, social clubs and so on), are no longer conducive to rank and file participation. In this regard union rules and constitutions need to be altered to allow for decentralisation of power within the union.

I want to complete this contribution with an outline of my own experiences on the job. With some four hundred employees covered by no less than thirteen separate unions, the workplace up until five years ago had no co-ordinated organisation on the job — each union did its own thing. Early attempts to initiate shop committee organisation for (firstly) the nine blue-collar maintenance unions were received with scepticism and suspicion. Ultimately, an acceptable constitution was drafted, in which not only was care paid to its democratic character (i.e. the complete autonomy of each affiliated union, procedures for rule changes, and so on), but an undertaking was made (on the insistence of one section of workers) not to impose any levies — an undertaking which ensured unanimous support.

Involving the other unions was even more difficult. This was particularly true of the largest union covering the production workers,
where the right wing officials had a policy of instructing their members not to become involved with the shop committee, and to act only through their own organisation. This policy of acting individually was often a source of friction and contention, with the maintenance workers visiting the sins of the officials on the production workers. The maintenance workers gave vent to their frustration with abuse and even racism directed towards the production workers.

The first step was to stop the abuse: to this end a process of education in behaviour was undertaken with the theme that we were all workers, and that it was only an historical accident to which union we belonged. Very few workers are able to choose their union, it was stressed; and in any case, whether it be good or bad, workers don't often take kindly to criticism from outside of the only organisation they see as capable of defending their interests.

Not only did we succeed in stopping the abuse, but we also succeeded in initiating a process of consultation with the production workers. Although prohibited by their union from affiliating to the shop committee, the production workers' delegates were invited to every meeting with unfettered right to participate in the discussions and decisions. We adopted a procedure whereby all decisions taken by the shop committee, whether for action or not, would be communicated to all workers, and all were invited to and allowed to speak at mass stopwork meetings. We adopted the principle that resolutions for mass meetings should always be circulated well before the meeting, in order to allow time for serious consideration. Similarly, we resolved that any issue, affecting any section of workers, whether their union was affiliated or not, would be taken up by the shop committee on their behalf. The result was the affiliation to the shop committee of, firstly, the Clerks Union, followed by the Professional Scientists Association and the Association of Technical Workers. Then, three years after the shop committee's formation, the members of the main production workers' union decided at a mass meeting of their members to defy the edict of their officials and affiliate too. Since this was by far the largest single affiliated union, the shop committee's constitution was amended to provided that, in the event of none of its members being elected to the first three of the four-person executive, the fourth position was reserved for a representative from the union.

We believe that the job organisation of this plant is somewhat unique. At a time when there is a paucity of factory-floor organisation, our shop committee has united every union and worker, both blue and white collar, on the job. This has been achieved first because democracy is assiduously maintained. Each union retains its independence and autonomy in deciding matters affecting its members, the only proviso being that before action is taken the matter is brought to the shop committee for communication, effective advice and support. Secondly, a united job organisation, as can be seen in practice, corresponds to a felt need which cuts across the artificial divisions created by union demarcations.

Some interesting spin-offs deserve to be mentioned. In the early days, when the shop committee comprised only the maintenance workers, we approached the management to advise them of its existence. They replied that they only recognised delegates representing individual unions, union officials or the Labor Council. We responded that what mattered was the recognition of the mass of employees, and we had that.

In fact, we are now fully recognised by management, and by all but one of the unions. Fortnightly 'project' meetings require management to table information regarding capital expenditure, and the ability or otherwise of the workforce to carry out the volume of work assigned to it — if not, it is let out to private contractors. Sub committees of workers are involved in monitoring safety, canteen standards, and health and rehabilitation services. Some of those initially most opposed to levies it is often commented to levies are now the most assiduous raisers of finances.

While many weaknesses remain (for instance, unity is a fragile state requiring constant debate and discussion) the level of consciousness of the workers has been considerably advanced. The disciplined and judicious use of their power creates a confidence among workers in their own rights. Not only are our wages and conditions in advance of the rest of the industry, but we are in the forefront of the campaign for national rank and file industry organisation — a development which I regret to say is being frustrated by the narrow, insular attitude of sections of the official trade union movement.

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