

socialist
alliance



the disinherited of the earth - john tully - charter of workers rights- sigrid borke - the marxist tradition - tony dewberry - women and workers rights - gaylene seadon - sects - bill deller - united fronts - doug jordan - the labour movement - ken howard

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The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors alone.

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Since the middle of 1993, a group of Melbourne based activists began working together to produce a Charter of Working People's Rights. At the same time, there were discussions with comrades in other states around greater unity within the left, and for a greater coordination of left wing activities.

In Sydney a group calling itself the Rank and File Alliance was established which organised events around the ACTU Congress in September 1993. Melbourne activists joined in these activities.

In Western Australia a left caucus has been meeting, which is keen to get involved in any national discussion and planned activities.

On November 28, 1993 a conference was held in Melbourne, to see if a political alliance of individuals and political groups who worked together on the Charter of Working People's Rights could be established. An alliance was formed at this meeting based on non-sectarianism, where political differences are tolerated, and where open debate on political difference is encouraged.

The Socialist Alliance is a political organisation in which a number of independent socialists and socialist groups have formed a united front based on agreement with the Charter of Working People's Rights. The aim of the Socialist Alliance is to participate in the struggles of the working class, and to work towards the achievement of the basic rights of the working class as set out in the Charter.

In this magazine, the theoretical/historical journal of the Socialist Alliance, many of the papers presented at the November conference are reproduced. These papers reflect the concerns of Alliance members in initiating a new socialist grouping. Such concerns are real, we are aware this is not the first attempt to bring people from different political traditions together. But we are equally aware many of the divisions of the past are no longer useful, and that as socialists we must work together to overcome these differences and unite in struggle.

Over the past 18 months we have seen unprecedented activity and struggle at all levels among working people in Victoria, in the dying days of the Kirner government, and since the election of Kennett. As activists within these struggles, we share a frustration of being small and isolated.

The Socialist Alliance is in its early stages of development, but it is dynamic and growing. Since the first Charter of Working People's Rights meetings, we have worked together on many issues, most recently in the ongoing struggle for secondary coeducation in Richmond. By uniting in struggle, we achieve a clarity and common purpose in political direction.

The Socialist Alliance brings to it many unaligned socialists, activists politicised through the struggles of the past 18 months, rank and file workers, Charter participants, and several political groups committed to alliance building.

The Charter and Socialist Alliance constitution are available on request.

We encourage you to get involved.

Socialist Alliance Meetings

every second thursday at 6.30pm

124 Napier St, Fitzroy
(left hand side of the church)

next meeting thursday 27th january



And yet the technology exists to feed, house and clothe all of the world's population. The food is there already. It would cost less to achieve these goals permanently than the world spends each year on armaments. We should not forget, either, the obsecity of the periodic crises of over-production that are intrinsic to capitalism. There have been at least 21 of these since 1825 - one on average every 8 years. Millions are affected by famine whilst agro-business ensures that production is related solely to profit.

Net flow of capital from South to North

Looking at the world overall, the people of the South are subsidising the north. There is, in fact, a net flow of capital from the Third World to the "advanced" capitalist countries, partly due to the enormous debt owed by Third World countries to western banks. These countries have always been kept impoverished, but the scale today is perhaps greater than at any time in the past. Agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF are in the forefront of the impoverishment of these countries. Loans are dependent upon the development of market economies - that is uncontrolled penetration by imperialist interests and repression of the working class. The loans must be repaid in hard currency. Exports of cash crops such as coffee and beef are also demanded at the expense of indigenous agriculture and the environment. Thus ranchers are the number one direct cause of deforestation in the Amazon basin, and peasants in Brazil's northeast suffer a never-ending spiral of landlessness, humiliation, starvation and despair. This is the homeland of the so-called "Rat People" of northeastern Brazil. Decades of chronic malnutrition have resulted in a race of pygmies 35 cm shorter than the national average.

And there is no way out under capitalism. The so-called "miracle economies" of Asia are often held up as models, but the facts are that industrialisation in those countries has been socially disastrous and ecologically unsustainable. Moreover, industrialisation began some time ago in a different economic climate. Mexico, too, is supposed to have had an "economic miracle" in the last decade. Yet in that time wages have fallen 60 per cent, union organisers are killed; and there is uncontrolled destruction of the environment. Mexican farmers have also been bankrupted by the dumping of subsidised US produce under the secretive NAFTA.

Ecological catastrophes

The scale of the ecological crisis facing humanity is quite unprecedented in history. Such questions as industrial and nuclear pollution, greenhouse, the depletion of the ozone layer, desertification and deforestation affect us all. Moreover, they are linked to questions of social justice, national sovereignty and internationalism, the rights of indigenous peoples, and to workers' health and safety. I will deal with the ecology and socialism in a separate paper today.

No gradual, capitalist solution to crisis

There is, moreover, no gradual capitalist solution to the crisis facing humanity. As the 1990 Fourth International Manifesto put it:

"Those who believe in a gradual way out of the depression by means of growing patience and sacrifices by the exploited do not understand the intimate link between the catastrophes threatening us and the intrinsic logic of the generalised market economy, which is the very essence of capitalism: exacerbated competition with no regard for its effects on society

overall, the limitless pursuit of short-term profits and the accumulation of wealth, without taking any account of the human costs of this mad race and the irreparable damage that it inflicts on nature; the extension of competitive and aggressive behaviour in relationships between individuals, social groups and states; generalised egoism and corruption, the law of the jungle and the "weakest to the wall!" [Manifesto of the 4th International, 13th World Congress, 1990]

Socialism faces crisis of credibility

That, then, is the objective situation of the world under capitalism today, and it is a pretty gloomy picture. However, there is also the subjective factor of socialist leadership and ideas. I mentioned that I believe socialism faces a worldwide crisis of credibility. I find Tony Dewberry's paper very thought-provoking and perceptive, and don't intend to say much here. What Tony says is largely right, depressing though it all is. The most depressing thing of all is the paradox that despite all of the horrors of capitalism, the masses of working people do not see any alternative. They've had their fingers burnt so many times by Stalinism and social democracy that they will not make a leap of faith.

We really do have to rebuild the movement. We also have to demonstrate that our ideas are worthy of support. Anyone can run up a red flag and proclaim themselves the revolutionary be-all and end-all. I'll conclude with a few ideas I think we need to take on board.

Firstly, we have to link the two ideas of freedom and socialism indissolubly. Any form of socialism that seeks to rule over, or substitute itself for the masses simply isn't worth having. We need more not less freedom than under bourgeois democracy. We have to defend human rights unconditionally, everywhere. The kind of socialism we wish to build must be democratic and pluralist. Moreover, we must practice what we preach in our own ranks.

Secondly, we must give wholehearted support to the struggles against militarism, against environmental destruction, against racism, sexism and homophobia. We must be willing to learn, too, from these broad-based social movements. Lenin once remarked to Clara Zetkin that male communists ought to learn to see life through the eyes of women. Women are about 53 per cent of the population of the planet, yet they own very little of it, despite doing most of the work that is necessary for survival. The "feminisation" of the international labour movement must be our goal.

Thirdly, we must recognise that large sections of people are being permanently locked out of the productive process. You can call them an underclass if you wish. Already in many parts of the world, there are third generation unemployed. They have never been in the workforce. They have never known working class solidarity. They are potentially our allies; or they could be mobilised by demagogues against us. That leads me back to Marx's categorical imperative to defend the poor, the despised, the downtrodden. Linked to that is the task of educating people to see society not through the eyes of the well-off middle classes, nor through those of well-paid strata of workers, (a tiny minority of the population) but from the standpoint of the disinherited of the earth.

Source

Noam Chomsky (interviewed by David Barsamian), *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*, Odonian Press. Ernest Mandel, *Socialism or Neo-liberalism?* Bulletin in Defence of Marxism, Vol II, No 4, New York, April 1993. *Manifesto of 4th International*, 13th World Congress, 1990. *Socialism and the Future*, Labour College Review, 1993. Various editions of International Viewpoint, Paris.

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public meeting

at the YWCA
3rd Floor, Lounge room
489 Elizabeth St, Melbourne

Thursday February 24 at 7pm

Bill Deller and Sigrid Borke - Socialist Alliance
Speakers from the Koori community and Friends of
Richmond Secondary College.
Cost: \$3/\$1 or by donation.
Food and drinks available.

For more information contact Karen Taylor (754 5181), Paula Pope (387 2212), Robbie Ryan (480 0697).

The sect ends by abstaining on the day to day struggle of the working class

by Bill Deller

The reading of *Wild Swans* tells us amongst many things that sects can have more the 100 members. That they are not reserved for the political movement is also true, but we have been plagued by their existence for much of our political lives.

As I searched for an alternative to reformism in Western Australia in the 1970s I discovered Trotskyism through the Socialist Labour League and I helped to found the first branch in that state of a communist tendency other than the remnants of the Communist Party of Australia.

The various Communist Parties held little attraction because I had observed in practice within the trade union movement their refusal to fight capitalism.

I wanted to fight and for the next period of my life I believed I was a revolutionary communist. Life was both hard and easy, hard in the sense of the time and energy required, but easy in the sense that the political line was clear the tasks necessary and the objective conditions demanded the level of commitment.

When I finally left the Healyites (so called after their international leader of over 40 years) I thought that it was me who had failed the revolution. It was some years before I was again prepared to be involved in trade union, let alone, revolutionary politics.

I am confident that this personal reflection will, with slight variation, be true for many of us, and so let us examine the basis of the sect both the ones we have experienced and those we have observed.

The horrendous treatment of loyal communist cadre in both the Soviet and Chinese Communist parties is legendary and not denied except by the most hardened supporters of the regimes. Yet the same is true on a different scale for the Trotskyist movement.

At one level sects emerge when parties develop in isolation from the working class and when it is easy in hindsight to see the

inevitability of sects within the Trotskyist movement since the second world war.

Sects are also products of a misreading of the objective situation and an undue emphasis on the centralist aspect of democratic centralism.

Partly as a result of the isolation of the various groups from mainstream working class activity many have developed formulae based on some theoretical dogma and stand shouting 'correct' slogans at every gathering of the working class.

They also treat other tendencies who don't share the exact same interpretation of events as an enemy at least as bad as the capitalist class itself.

The isolation, the small numbers and holding revolutionary ideals throughout the prolonged boom of capitalism are contributing factors to the development of sectarian behaviour but they cannot continue to cover the appalling practice of these groups.



The sect ends by abstaining on the day to day struggle of the working class or shouts demands from near the movement and then abuses those who prevent the 'correct line' from being endorsed.

By contrast revolutionaries have an obligation to be involved in all of the struggles of the working class and to seek to lead, inspire and train as the struggles develop.

This is a period in which the democratic side of any democratic centralist dichotomy must prevail. In essence, united actions will come through consensus and not through any centrally issued edict. Similarly the authority to lead is not granted on the basis of correctness nor long years of sacrifice and dedication alone, but rather must be won continuously at each opportunity.

The confidence of the class in its current leadership is low but the mantle will not pass to others simply because the current lot are bankrupt and pathetic (as true as that is).

During the past period, Communist Intervention has deliberately erred on the opportunist side of the Sectarian Vs Opportunist coin. Our decision to stand for election in the State Public Services Federation was dictated to us by the policy of leading trade union

struggles on a day to day basis.

That some of us led sections of the union meant that we could not then abstain on leading the whole of the union. That we were originally successful was tribute to the confidence that members had in our ability and similarly the contempt with which they viewed our predecessors.

Leading the union drained CI of great energy and our subsequent defeat at the hands of 'left' Laborites has caused significant problems for us. We remain convinced that not only were we correct to try and win but we should do the same again at the first available opportunity. (For a full discussion of these lessons see the December issue of R&D or contact the editors of Socialist Alliance and we will arrange for a copy to be sent to you).

If Socialist Alliance is to succeed then it will need great patience it will have to learn to deal with differences and respect the living movement of the working class as the source of any opportunity that exists.

Differences can and should exist. They should be able to be dealt with both sharply and yet in a comradely fashion and should be seen within the context of a shared perspective for revolutionary socialism.



REBUILDING UNIONISM: THE FIGHT FOR SOLIDARITY & DEMOCRACY.

by Ken Howard

How can we characterise the state of the labour movement in 1994?

To see the movement as only composed by the organised sections of the trade union movement would be profoundly mistaken, but rather it is more relevant to see the labour movement as encompassing people involved in a diversity of ways and organisations in resistance to and struggle against the injustice, exploitation, oppression, alienation and humiliation of capitalist society.

With over a million people unemployed and as many excluded from the labour process, with only 39% of the workforce unionised and many people in part-time and casual jobs, while the organised trade union movement provides an important arena for struggle, it can only have relevance if such struggles are linked to broader involvements and issues.

What this entails is not only working within the existing structures but also working towards rebuilding unionism that is integrated into and linked with the broader struggles across the international labour and community movements.



why new unionism?

For many workers in 1994 their union is seen as irrelevant. They rarely see an organiser or other official, they learn more about what is going on from the pages of the Herald Sun than they do from the union, the avenues for involvement let alone decision-making have all but disappeared as amalgamated unions assume monstrous proportions. This slow death of unionism, has been brought about by the ascendancy of the right over the last ten years and the weakness, lack of will, and complicity in the corporatist unionist plans of the ACTU by the left or 'progressive' sections of the union movement

Delegate and other forms of members meetings have all but disappeared, replaced by union publications that are the slick products of professional public relations experts to advertise the new consumerist products of the new unionism. With all the changes brought about this new bureaucracy, - union amalgamations, award restructuring, structural efficiencies and now of course enterprise bargaining, the one consistent factor for the vast majority of unionists has been that they have been further and further excluded from a sense of belonging that characterised the unionism of earlier this century.

In many ways this has come about because of the retreat of political consciousness within the union movement as unions become less class organisations representing the class interests of members but rather under the leadership of the likes of Kelty of the ACTU embrace the notion of being 'partners' serving a 'national' (read employers') interest.

With the onset of Enterprise Bargaining the bureaucratized decision making of union leaderships has been further entrenched as such 'bargains' are signed sealed and delivered without any input from members.

solidarity & democracy

a new resurgence on the agenda

The tasks that lie ahead are to rebuild that sense of belonging, to rebuild solidarity, democracy, commitment and involvement, both within the organised union movement and amongst those who have been alienated and disaffected. As socialists we can and do put forward solutions to the major problems confronting the working class and the labour movement. We do have the politics and abilities to project an alternative vision of a future. A vision from which our diversity can grow our strength as we rebuild movement that recognises and respects differences of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual preference.

It is this vision of a radically different future that can sustain the diversity of our activity in the opposition that we put forward to the degeneration of our unions and the encroachment of the new conservative realism that is growing within them like a cancer.

It is this vision that enables us to counterpose radical solutions to the major problems of unemployment, discrimination, the growth of the dual society and the growing impoverishment of working class people and the rise of authoritarianism and restriction of democratic rights and freedoms.

Rather than accepting as *fait accompli* the 'realities' of Enterprise Bargaining, un- and underemployment and the death of democracy within our unions we must learn from our past mistakes and critically evaluate our experiences.

We can counterpose in real and meaningful ways alternative ways of organising and succeed, as has occurred in the past, in putting socialist ideas into the union election arenas, without becoming consumed by rank and file electoralism.

We can counterpose a shorter working week without loss of pay as a solution to crippling unemployment and under employment as opposed to the dead end proposals such as jobs levies as put forward by the union leaders.

And we can counterpose collective actions to the sell outs of Enterprise Bargaining and lack of democracy within the unions.

As has been shown internationally, conditions exist for a new resurgence. In Asia with the growth of new unions that are both community and industry based, in Europe with the massive strikes and actions against austerity in the United States with events such as the rank and file conference that attracted over 1100 participants, and in New Zealand with the formation of the Alliance and new union body the evidence is there that while considerable disintegration has taken place, the working class has not been defeated.

What is required is to build now on international solidarity strategies that broaden the focus of workers organising around an alternative union culture. A culture that clearly positions solidarity and democracy as central to the rebuilding of unionism in the 1990's.



Workers' Parties and Women

by Gaylene Seadon

If we are seriously talking about building a Socialist Alliance, or a broad left movement, we need to ask "How do we create an environment whereby women can fully participate?"

Many of our experiences as women working in a broad range of left groups have not at all been positive experiences. We have had to continually fight against our double oppression - and this has often led to anger and frustration when the so-called "left men" are dominating discussion/debate; often dismissing women's contributions and at times using sexist language - yet sprout out their socialist rhetoric.

We must remember it has been women who have had less time and less access to resources. The sexual division of labour is not limited to strictly economic tasks, like paid work, but includes other forms of labour such as housework, child-care and emotional labour in sexual relationships. It is also important to understand that the sexual division of labour has changed in content throughout history although its form of male dominance and female subordination often remains the same. It has been suggested that women's oppression is a left-over from past times and will soon be outmoded. But this ignores the specific reproduction of the sexual division of labour in each historical period, and stops us looking at the mechanisms for the maintenance of women's oppression in contemporary society.

As a woman involved on the left as well as being a mother, a large percentage of my time has been taken up by paid employment and family responsibilities. It's often been impossible to sit uninterrupted and read writings on theoretical questions, although I recognise more and more the importance of this learning process and that we all have a responsibility in taking on this work. However my historical understanding may be limited, but I do consider myself a socialist and that my views, opinions and experiences are of value.

As women and rank-and-file members of our unions we have too often been excluded from participating in the leadership of our unions. One only has to peek into Trades Hall Council meetings to see the limited numbers of female faces. In terms of holding industrial muscle, it has been the unions whose members are predominantly men. Yet the number of women in the paid workforce is increasing year by year. The great leaders of the union movement obviously believe that the issues facing women in the workforce are secondary to that of men. It is mainly women who are covered by awards that offer little in improvements of wages and working conditions. We are seeing the extreme push on employers and members in paying superannuation which is to replace pensions in our older age - yet it is women who either receive no superannuation, or very little, yet we live longer and are often left caring for the aged.

I recently read an article in Rank And File News: "No Death in Brunswick - Victory in Education", written by Pauline Pope, whereby the two women she interviewed made it very clear that it is largely women who have come forward to lead activities in the struggle to defend state education. When the network organised against the public auction of a closed school site in West Brunswick, over 50 parents, teachers and students - the majority of whom were women, turned up to protest. They made so much noise that they were able to force the auctioneers to adjourn to the office of a small businessman to try to finalise the auction. We can see this range of activity by women occurring throughout the state. Women have been actively involved in struggles throughout history - yet they often go unnoticed.

Several years ago, along with several friends I decided to join the SWP. At this point in my life it was important to join a large political party whereby I could develop politically. My commitment and enthusiasm made this decision "an easy one". I thought that the work of the SWP showed that they were serious about building a working class party and had a strong commitment to expose capitalism and to educate members to be able to accomplish joint work in all sectors of society. I also believed that they were truly democratic and that members were encouraged to participate in discussion and debate, and that as a parent I would be fully supported in this process. At the time, several friends who had been in the party in the past cautioned me, stating that the party was dominated by a "small few" and they had become totally sectarian and opportunist and that I would find that all I was looking for no longer existed in the bureaucratic structure of the party. However, I needed to experience and discover this for myself.

It didn't take long to see that the warnings by friends were true. At the time of the long tram dispute in Melbourne, we had argued and won the right to set up local branches whereby we became involved in local issues as well as politically promoting the party. The Northern branch, which I belonged to, had around 10-12 party members, many who were very experienced and committed party members. It was an exciting time and the branch was extremely healthy. We made important contacts with the Preston Depot at the time of the tram dispute and successfully were able to engage in joint work. For many people, our work convinced them to see the SWP in a different light, and that some became supporters at that time, of the SWP.

However, without any political discussion, the branches were dismantled by the leadership of the SWP. Before we knew it, all major work was to be controlled again by the central office. At the time, I was extremely angry and couldn't understand why a party wanted to wipe out a structure that was proving to be so successful. This was the beginning of the end for me in the SWP.

I started to realise that I was again spending more and more time in fund-raising events. Whilst I understand that it's vital that a political party or left group need to raise money, I don't think it should dominate one's participatory role. The political forums seem to disappear and when they were taking place I, and many others, found it difficult to participate due to lack of child-care. When one struggle was occurring over the party changing its name, I and several other party members, were fighting for the debate to continue so that all party members were well-informed before making their vote. In organising the next meeting, we raised the right to have child-care provided so we could fully participate. We were shot down by one of the leadership, who had sat in silence all afternoon, stating that the party had no responsibility in providing child-care; that we had no right to impose that on other socialists; we had made the decision to become parents, and we were responsible for care of our children.

This brought shock-waves through the room. Those words finally convinced me that the party leadership were not interested in allowing democratic rights to party members. What was also extremely disappointing was to find that those comrades within the party who would spurt out their discontent of party lines in the pub environment, would remain in silence within the party setting. However, there were party members who I did and still do hold a large amount of respect for. It was these comrades who argued against the increasingly rigid and sectarian structure being imposed on party members by the SWP leadership. They were sincere and honest in their political contributions, but

it was these comrades who were forced out of party life, although a few remain.

Whilst I don't regret joining the party, I feel slightly cheated in how I was used and conned into thinking the party would change my life, and that it had me believing for a time that they were truly a revolutionary party. At this point in my life I will not join a political party, although I am currently a member of Solidarity. To me this is not a "party" but a group of committed Trotskyists who meet regularly and hold serious political debate over international and local questions. For me this is political development.

The Socialist Alliance also gives me the opportunity to work with a wide range of comrades who are very sincere and committed to building a broad left movement. As a woman, I feel respected and that my contributions are listened to and seen of value.

As the document *Programmatic Manifesto of the Fourth International* (p.13) states:

"The essential task for revolutionary socialists is not only to participate in this radicalisation, to stimulate and help organize it, but also to overcome its fragmentation and its still occasional character, to generalise it, and to help the workers fight back, rediscover the road to and the values of generalised solidarity, to deepen it by prioritising the defence of the most vulnerable sectors (the class: women, immigrant workers, oppressed nationalities, youth, unemployed, old-age pensioners, the sick and disabled). The necessity of posing of reorganising permanent structures and new networks of struggle."

To me, this is what Socialist Alliance is built on.



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Recent Attempts to form a United Front

by Doug Jordan

For the past few years many groups and individuals have been talking of the need for unity in the face of the increasing attacks on working people.

Yet whilst some progress has been made in reducing sectarian divisions, we still have to make the final step in creating a unified socialist alliance - uniting parties and individuals across previous political divisions.

It is instructive to look at some of the examples over the past few years where it has been possible to unify across political divisions.

Defend the Unions Committee

One of the first examples was the formation of the Defend the BLF Committee in the early 1980s. It came at a time when both the Federal and State governments and the bosses made joint attempts to smash the Victorian Builders Labourers Federation (BLF). The supposed reason for these attacks was the alleged corruption of the BLF, but the real reason of course was the record of the BLF as a militant union in defending its members' interests.

The Committee united the leadership of the union with many of those who had been critics of some of the actions and policies of the BLF leadership. Many on the Committee would have been critical of the Gallagher leadership's role in removing the Munday leadership in New South Wales in the 1970s for instance.

When the Committee was formed, there was no need or

desire to discuss these previous differences. No-one was asked to change their minds. It was past history and the real issue was the defence of the union against the combined government-boss offensive.

The Committee was active in supporting the BLF and its members. Hundreds of leaflets were produced and distributed throughout the labour movement. It was important to demonstrate that the BLF had wide support beyond its own ranks. This was the most effective way of helping to defeat these attacks.

On building sites, the Committee mobilised supporters to demonstrate their support of the BLF. When the Labor government sent the cops to raid the BLF offices an immediate demonstration was organised. This on-going activity over a number of years was unable to stop the attacks, but it did help the BLF survive.

During this early period, the Committee evolved into the Defend the Unions Committee. It acted as a support group for workers in dispute. Over a number of years workers in a series of disputes were helped. These included the nurses, Williamstown dockyard, CSR workers and the Hoyts workers.

Much of the Committee's work centred around fundraising and publicity - often key points in winning disputes, particularly when union leaderships were slow to respond to the real needs of workers in struggle.

For these years, the DUC acted as a central support centre for workers in dispute. Workers could come to the Committee, explain their issues and get support. Many workers were drawn into union and political activity for the first time, and came into contact with seasoned activists.

The DUC was able to establish working relationships with a number of union leaderships, although this differed from union to union and dispute to dispute. It won wide respect for its support of workers in dispute, without attempting to impose conditions on this support.

A number of DUC activists were delegates to Trades Hall and were able to raise disputes there. The support given by DUC members to the workers in the 417 St Kilda Rd dispute was a prime example, although this happened after the DUC had folded.

The key to the success of the DUC was its weekly meetings where policy was determined. The DUC's members determined its policy, not a leadership that made decisions and passed them on. The organisation was open to all who agreed with supporting workers on strike, irrespective of differences on other issues.

The DUC was succeeded by the Union Support Committee (USC). In the end the Committee folded simply because, as the Accord took hold and the number of disputes declined, the basis of its existence disappeared.

The Fightback Movement

The Fightback movement was another attempt to unify the left. It was an attempt to gather all the forces who were opposed to the Accord and the attempt to shackle the union movement.

It had a number of positive and negative features.

It's most positive feature was an understanding that in order to defeat the Accord we had to unite all the forces opposed to it, irrespective of past differences or differences on other questions.

An impressive conference was held in Melbourne, which attracted many hundreds of left-wing activists. The Fightback Conference showed that there was a common view of the need to defeat the Accord.

It was a start that could have led to the building of a class-struggle left-wing in the labour movement to challenge the right-wing policies of the Labor leadership. This did not happen!!

The Fightback movement remained under the control of the main left parties. There was no on-going organised structure for other groups and individuals to discuss the policy and actions of Fightback and to play a real role in it.

At the conference, a caucus was formed in order to put different proposals to the main Conference resolution. These proposals were not accepted by the Conference however.

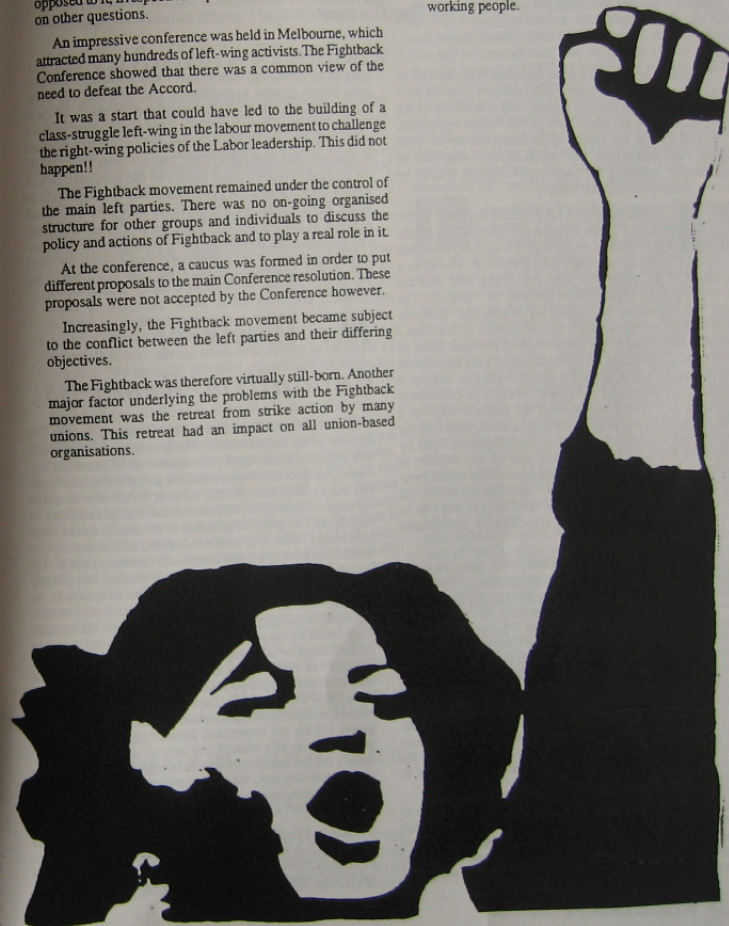
Increasingly, the Fightback movement became subject to the conflict between the left parties and their differing objectives.

The Fightback was therefore virtually still-born. Another major factor underlying the problems with the Fightback movement was the retreat from strike action by many unions. This retreat had an impact on all union-based organisations.

Lessons

What can we learn from these two examples?

- 1) Unity is possible and needed and can be achieved.
- 2) Any organisation that is formed must be rank-and-file controlled.
- 3) What is required is an organisation based on activity, not a discussion circle.
- 4) An organisation must be based not on just one area of struggle, but must take up all the political issues affecting working people.



The Marxist tradition

by Tony Dewberry

Socialism today faces a crisis that cannot be reduced to the crisis of Stalinism. Economic stagnation, grinding poverty in the underdeveloped nations and destruction of the environment are the basic facts of life within capitalism. Yet with all this the appeal of socialism has never been lower. New movements for social change seem bent on ignoring or belittling the tradition of struggle created by over a century of socialist activity.

It is definitely time for a critical appraisal of the problems of the socialist movement. This article was written as an attempt to clarify my ideas but it raises a lot more questions than it answers. I write as a socialist of the generation that was drawn into political activity through opposition to the war in Vietnam. The anti war movement broadened my intellectual horizons and brought me into contact with socialists. At that time I became convinced of the correctness of the basic ideas of Marxism, a conviction I retain to this day. I see no solution for the major social problems facing humanity without a socialist revolution. By revolution I mean a process where the mass of working people enter the political stage on a day to day basis and establish their rule through democratic institutions that sweep away the capitalist state. And by socialism I mean the use of that rule of the workers to replace private property and competition with social ownership and planned production to meet human needs. All that may be stating the obvious but I do not want to be misunderstood as I make my criticisms of the socialist movement.

The radicalisation of 1968-1980 has long since ebbed. Among its high points were: France '68, Czechoslovakia '68, the Portuguese Revolution '74, the massive union struggles in Italy '69 onwards, the defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam '75, the overthrow of the Shah of Iran '79, the Sandinista Revolution '79 and the rise of Solidarnosc '80. The defeats and low points must include: The 1973 military coup in Chile, the failure of the Spanish working class to impose its own rule in the wake of the collapse of Francoism, the rise of counter revolutionary clericalism in Iran, the isolation of the revolutionary nationalist governments in Angola and Mozambique, the successful invasion of Grenada, the slow strangulation of the Sandinista Revolution, the imposition of martial law in Poland '81.

The crisis of socialism is not merely based on this ebb of the revolutionary wave. The failure of the revolutionary left to establish even a modest social base in the working class during that upsurge is the main cause of our marginalisation today. On another level our crisis reflects profound prob-

lems of the labour movement as a whole, as modern economies move to new technologies and methods of work. Basic unionism has not been established in many of these high tech or service sector jobs. The more sophisticated international division of labour, made possible by advances in transport and communication, has not been matched by the creation of international unions by the working class. A weaker union movement has emboldened the boss class to attack gains established in previous struggles. The weak response to these attacks creates a spiral of demoralisation. Our problems are compounded by the apparently non socialist aspirations of the masses of the former Soviet Bloc as they destroy the bureaucratic tyrannies that ruled in the name of socialism.

The Crisis of Capitalism Remains

However the crisis of capitalism will not go away. The inability of the system to meet the most basic human needs will engender fresh mass radicalisations. Without the humanist, secular and internationalist perspective of socialism these radicalisations may take on irrational nationalist or religious forms. The choice remains that of socialism or barbarism. No great imagination is necessary to envisage barbarism. There is a whole sub genre of science fiction devoted to portraying the many and varied dystopias that the future may hold. That future is here today. We already see a world of high tech wizardry where illiteracy is increasing and culture debased through the cult of violence; the world is choking on the poisons created by the system; food riots in the imperialist centres while millions starve in Africa; masses of refugees and impoverished migrant workers are shuttled back and forth across the globe; while bourgeois public opinion lauds the example of a handful of "economic miracles" like Korea and Taiwan, the gap between the imperialist nations and the underdeveloped world grows; from the imperialist fortress the military of the North periodically attacks the masses of the South. To simply list the morbid symptoms of capitalist development is an all too easy task, the challenge for the imagination is to envisage and present an alternative way of life for the future, that will inspire and sustain struggle.

The struggle for a better world is of course far older than Marxism. It goes back beyond Spartacus and comes down to us today through a series of movements for emancipation expressed through a variety of ideologies. Marx consid-

ered his contribution that he put that struggle on a scientific basis by identifying the modern industrial working class as the agent of revolutionary social change and by explaining the basic tendencies of capitalism that lead to struggle, crisis, and revolutionary confrontations. To the extent that he succeeded in these tasks he took the fight for a better world beyond the utopian yearnings of the past. But the struggle itself remains a subjective process; men and women must think, act and organise. They must be intellectually convinced of the possibility of a better world. In that respect we are still in league with the utopians and the struggle for socialism remains a battle of ideas.

No Infallible Prophets

In that battle of ideas nobody is right all the time; socialism has no infallible prophets. Several generations of socialists have taken part in vigorous polemics around the problems of building the movement. Defining the organisational forms of the struggle remains the big question for socialists. We have proceeded as if these problems were solved long ago and are codified in the Leninist theory of the party. But now we should pause to think. If we were so right why did we not make lasting gains in the momentous class struggles in the decade after 1968? Our goal in that period was to build mass revolutionary parties and an international. There is virtually nothing to show for twenty years of work and many of the surviving groups have adapted to a sectarian existence without ever examining how far short of their original goals they have fallen. As materialists we should reconsider theory in the light of practice. We must be prepared to critically examine the whole Marxist tradition.

That tradition is embodied in the experiences of organisation and struggle and the theoretical debates of the first three international organisations of the working class and their constituent national parties. This tradition was continued, in an enfeebled form, by the post war Trotskyist movement and some of the various splits from Stalinism and social democracy. An arbitrary, but significant, starting point for modern socialism is the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848; there Marx predicted the international spread of the capitalist system and the class struggle between capital and organised labour. Given the undeveloped nature of capitalism and its class structure at the time this was an impressive insight. Marx was not making Nostradamus style prophecies but generalising from existing, if still minor, trends in social development. Those generalisations were the product of a theory of historical development based on Marx's philosophical studies and work. The Communist Manifesto may have been written as the programme of the most revolutionary tendency in the revolutions of 1848 but it was a theoretical work.

Socialism and the Labour Movement

From its inception socialism has not been identical with the labour movement. It is a school of thought, an ideological tendency, trying to influence the development of the working class movement with a scientific analysis of soci-

ety as a whole. The relationship between the philosophy of Marxism and the political programme of socialism is far from clear.

Marx and Engels put the study of society on a materialist basis and defined the parameters within which socialist thought developed. They pointed to the necessary relationship between economic activity and social consciousness. In *Capital* and other economic works Marx established the categories which socialist analysis of the capitalist system utilises: the labour theory of value, commodity fetishism, alienation, the tendency of the rate of profit to decline, etc. Most importantly Marx and Engels identified the social nature of modern production and its contradiction with the private appropriation of socially created wealth. They saw that as the contradiction which would lead capitalism to become a "fetter" on production and provoke the crisis that allowed the possibility of a revolutionary socialist resolution of that crisis. It should go without saying that none of the theoretical contributions of Marx and Engels were unproblematical, all contain ambiguities, and contradictions (both profound dialectical and mundane logical contradictions).

Of course the advantage of a materialist approach to history did not put the socialist movement itself above history; it was always under pressure from the wider society around it. The need to defend the most basic needs of the working class within the capitalist system pushed the socialist parties towards reformism while despair led to spontaneous revolts and anarchism. The attempt to chart a course between these extremes was the basis of the rich intellectual life of the socialist movement as it engaged in the struggles that shaped the modern world: the struggles to build unions, assure democratic rights within the capitalist democracy, women's rights, the struggle against militarism etc. All of those struggles have had significance for the movement for socialism and all have challenged existing theory and provoked polemical debate within the movement. The tradition of struggle is an essential legacy of the revolutionary movement; general theoretical principles have emerged from that source which we cannot abandon and remain socialist. But, the whole body of socialist history and socialist thought must be approached critically. As long as we see ourselves as partisans of one "revolutionary" and correct strand within that movement we will never get out of our present impasse. Most importantly revolutionaries must move beyond seeing everything through the prism of the Russian Revolution.

The Russian Revolution remains the high point of the struggle for socialism because through it the working class established, if only briefly, a state structure based on its own organisations. We can learn a lot from that revolution, but we have to establish our true relationship to it. It is an historic event seven and a half decades in the past and our links with it are very tenuous. Our understanding of it is mediated through a movement that was sectarian in the extreme and theoretically weakened by its social marginalisation. The Russian Revolution is so distant from our own life experiences that we must approach it with the intellectual rigour of an historian rather than as the partisan of one faction within that revolution. The revolutionary movement has codified and simplified the "lessons" of the Russian revolution and the entire revolutionary wave of that period. It has in fact over-

simplified the lessons of October and distorted history in the process. We have blinded ourselves to some of the serious errors of the Leninist government that contributed to the passivity of the masses, for instance the establishment of the Cheka as an unaccountable organ of terror, the banning of the Mensheviks etc.

Socialist Mythology

The problems of the Bolsheviks and their errors are not the main issue here but our glossing over those problems to the extent that we create a mythology is. No doubt most of the Trotskyist groups had a similar curriculum for their internal education process and a similar range of important texts. Part of our "education" was to uncritically assimilate a world view and to take political positions on historical questions. We were expected to adopt these positions on the basis of a core of writings and the say so of the leaders of our organisations. How many times have we heard or said something like, "the one party state only took shape as the other parties one by one took up arms against the soviet republic..."? I know I used that explanation any number of times but it is plainly untrue. The Mensheviks did not, as a party, take up arms against the Bolshevik government and the Menshevik Internationalists, around Martov, actually supported Red Army recruiting drives at the height of the civil war. The final suppression of the Mensheviks came at the end of the civil war, this at a time when Menshevik support in the working class was growing and repression of the Mensheviks had to entail repression of sections of the working class. Another point we gloss over is the nature of repression used by the Bolsheviks. From its inception the Cheka was a negation of the libertarian image of workers' rule portrayed in Lenin's "State and Revolution". It was never accountable to the soviets and it acted as judge, jury and executioner. How could such an organisation not have contributed to the passivity of the masses on which the revolution fundered?

Sometimes, for historical materialists, we are very ahistorical. For example we constantly portray the Left Oppositionist as Trotskyist. But the fight against Stalin was broader than Trotsky, and many of the Left Opposition's leading cadre had quite strong differences with Trotsky on important issues. It was prominent oppositionists like Joffe and Sneevliet who encouraged the Chinese Communist Party to enter the Kuomintang. Others, like Radek and Preobrazhenski never accepted the idea of Permanent Revolution being applicable to the Chinese Revolution. All I am trying to say here is that the reality was much more complex than the version of events put forward by the revolutionary organisations. We cannot build mass parties that force members to take political positions on complex historical questions. Why is it correct to support the Left Opposition's fight against bureaucracy and not the Workers' Opposition? Does a revolutionary of the late twentieth century have to support the suppression of the Kronstadt mutiny? Was Trotsky right to oppose any alliance with the Bukharinists against Stalin but support Stalin against Bukharin? I for one cannot answer these questions. A mass socialist party must be built around a political programme, not a manufactured consensus on twentieth century history.

Unless we can do that all we can build will be a sectarian caricature of a revolutionary movement. Consider this famous statement by Marx and its parallels with our own

situation:

"Men make history, but not of their own free will. ... The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language. Luther put on the mask of the apostle Paul; the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire; and the revolution of 1848 knew no better than to parody at some points 1789 and others the revolutionary traditions of 1793-5".

Organisation

That is what we do when we over-generalise from the Russian Revolution; we borrow the names, slogans and costumes of Bolshevism. Between the revolutionaries of 1848, who Marx criticised, and the highpoint of the French Revolution stood 60 years. Between us and the Russian Revolution stand 75 years, and what years they have been. To just take organisational forms as an example; we do not need Lenin to tell us that the problem for the revolutionary party (indeed the labour movement as a whole) is to combine democracy in debate with unity in action. Democratic Centralism explains nothing it merely formulates the problem. The structural forms of democratic centralism handed down to us via the Comintern seem never to have worked to empower the memberships of the communist parties, or of the revolutionary groups that adapted them for the Fourth International. It is a sad fact that many revolutionary groups have been far less democratic than the various institutions of bourgeois society around them. It was often easier to work in a bureaucratic trade union than in our own groups, and in many instances you could get a fairer shake in the local magistrates court than from a control commission of comrades.

Lenin's model of a vanguard party took the concept of party beyond the vagaries of Marx and beyond the all inclusive model of the Second International. But if it is admitted that the party is voluntary association of politically committed cadre we are immediately faced with the problem of its relationship with the class as a whole. Except at the height of revolution or the height of sectarian folly the socialist minority has had to form united fronts with the non revolutionary masses around immediate demands. Time and again the problem of the relationship of reform and revolution has confronted the movement. Every generation has had to confront this problem in a new context. The question will not be solved for us by objective forces. We can no longer imagine that the depth of the social crisis will send the masses to us when the shortcomings of reformism become clear. Our recent past is full of examples of huge social struggles where revolutionaries were given virtually no hearing. We can list Iran '79, Manila '85 and Eastern Europe '89. In all these struggles huge numbers of people were mobilised without them

creating organisations of power. A socialist programme never got the support of more than a tiny minority.

Socialism and the Masses

How will a programme of struggle be formulated that will be relevant for the working class of the late twentieth century? Our first step is a realistic appraisal of the era. To use Lenin's definition of an "era of wars and revolutions" is no longer sufficient. It leaves out the subjective element. A minority cannot introduce socialism and the mass of working people at the moment do not aspire to it. The masses of eastern Europe hate the very word, the North American workers have not even established reformist workers parties, Islam is resurgent in the Middle East and the traditional workers parties of western Europe are in crisis. On top of this the Stalinist CPs of Asia continue to associate socialism with the bureaucratic tyranny necessary to maintenance of their rule. I see no reason for a more optimistic solution to the crisis of Stalinism in China than in the former Soviet Union. The process there may be more drawn out if the government's plans for capitalist market reforms without political liberalisation succeeds. But if the government is eventually overthrown by an enriched peasantry and the centrifugal forces created by the world market, the results will be similar to the break up of the USSR.

The point about the former Stalinist states is that no matter how we categorise them (state capitalist, deformed workers state, bureaucratic collectivist, Asian mode of production, or whatever) we have to admit that the social crisis in those states has been resolved in favour of Western imperialism and that these states will be reabsorbed into the world market. Wherever elections have been held in these states the masses have voted in their millions for bourgeois nationalist parties promising the restoration of the market and the privatisation of the economy. Socialists are now as marginalised in the East as in the West.

The New Situation

World politics have undergone a sea change which we must take into account if we are to begin building again. No doubt many will argue that this is a passing phase and that the situation can change rapidly. I hope so but I doubt it. The revolutionary crises of this century and the next can only be resolved by a conscious majority fighting for socialism. That presupposes a political movement, and that movement is not yet present. Once again over generalising from the Russian revolution can only be harmful. We do not need to hear, yet again, that the Bolsheviks were a tiny handful in February and the government in October. That argument leaves out the historical context (extreme social breakdown caused by the war, actual links between the Bolsheviks and the workers movement built up over many years through trade union work, anti-pogrom campaigns, electoral campaigns, electoral boycotts, publishing Pravda etc). This is also, unfortunately, no time to hark back to 1968. The hopes for a socialist breakthrough of that time were based on the existence of large combative layers of workers organised in the main by the Stalinist parties of

Western Europe (in the French and Italian CPs, the underground Spanish and Portuguese CPs and the clandestine unions and workers commissions that they organised) If the revolutionaries could have won them over at that time, many things would have been possible but that chance has long passed. Today those Stalinist parties are shadow of their former selves as are the unions they led. I know many socialists think that this can only be seen as a plus and that the decks have been cleared of one of the main obstacles to socialism. But the manner in which the Stalinists have been removed is important. As with the Stalinist states these parties are crumbling due to pressure from imperialism on a rotten structure. This is completely different to their destruction by a mass movement for socialism. The gap left by the Euro-communists is being filled by bourgeois forces, sometimes even fascist groups. As well the social democratic parties have retreated from even a verbal commitment to socialism.

The Objective Needs of the Masses

Soberly accepting this unfavourable international situation, our next step in the fight for socialism is to create a political programme. But of course this is easier said than done. Our starting point must be the objective needs of the masses but the articulation of those needs is a subjective process. It requires thought, research and debate, not merely an academic debate but one between activists who are in some kind of day to day contact with the struggles against capitalism. For this kind of debate to become possible we must lose our fears of a minimum programme. Socialists must become activists in partial struggles because that is where the people are who have to will to oppose the particular evils of capitalism. Only people struggling against specific aspects of capitalist oppression will give a bearing to a generalised criticism of it. The other reason that partial struggles for immediate demands are important is that we need some victories, even small ones, to create a climate where the overthrow of capitalism is even an item of discussion again.



Ideological Struggle *Class Analysis*

As I said earlier the crisis of socialism is not reducible to the fall of the Stalinist states. Along with victories in the class struggle the boss class has scored victories in the ideological arena. At the height of the radicalisation bourgeois thinkers began rallying to defend capitalism ideologically, in academia and in think tanks, right wing journals etc. Those ideas were at first ridiculed, then labelled "new right" but eventually they became the mainstream of acceptable public opinion. Now is the time for socialists to begin a similar process. In the absence of socialist parties we must devise suitable forums to begin a generalised defence of socialist premises through concrete analysis of the problems facing humanity. We must begin talking to each other across our differences. We have to re-establish Marxism as an outward looking philosophy that is critical of all existing conditions (even the condition of our own movement). We must overcome our lack of resources for research by a critical use of bourgeois sources, as Marx did. He was quite prepared to use Parliamentary reports as material for Capital. We should be just as ready to use reports of groups like the UN, government or academic sources to chart our course. For instance, if we wish to argue against ecologists who claim over population is a major cause of the world's problems we should not tell them one more time how Marx disproved Malthus in the last century (soon to be the century before last). We must go to relevant UN and scientific sources and debate honestly. That is just an example. What I am trying to say is that we must stop using the records of our own movement as if they were sacred texts. We are trying to understand, and change, today's world.



The Wreck of Empire—The Arm to Save.

The socialist ideas we are trying to defend are the most basic ones. For a start, class analysis itself must be defended and not just against reactionaries. The admission that capitalism is capable of creating many levels of oppression should not threaten us. Asserting the reality of class exploitation should not lead to a denial of the oppression of women for instance. But it is a fact that some socialist groups do this. They reduce the oppression of women to their oppression as workers and so implicitly deny the oppression of non working class women (ie of women as women). And this holds true for other non class forms of oppression and exploitation. We will not win people over to ideas of class struggle by denying non class forms of oppression. It will take an intellectual engagement with the contemporary reality to prove that class remains a valid category, that it provides a useful description of reality. The specific forms of class exploitation in the modern world must be understood and the idea of the working class as an international class once again popularised.

The World Today

Economic rationalism is at last meeting some criticism within bourgeois public opinion, but our task is to bring the whole capitalist system into question, not this or that manner of administering it. At the moment that may seem very difficult. We are deep in a world recession, witnessing an awful war in the Balkans, with continuing possibility of a renewal of the war against Iraq and yet politics continues to move in the ruts of bourgeois "democracy". That is how it will remain until working people form movements and organisations capable of taking the masses over the limits of the acceptable.

We take from the socialist tradition an open ended materialist criticism of all existing conditions. Marxism, unencumbered by sectarianism, is a much more dynamic approach to reality than capitalist ideology. It is true that the socialist movement has in the past succumbed to crude reductionism and a clumsy determinism but that is not its essence.

It is bourgeois thought that is by its nature determinist, especially modern economics which gives all power to the market and denies any scope to human agencies. And in seeking to understand reality through a dialectical comprehension of material interests and human thought

Marxism is more rational than its main bourgeois competitor, nationalism, the plague of the last two centuries and a harbinger of war and hatred. No matter how small our voice may be, we speak the truth when we point to class exploitation as the foundation of this system of violence and oppression and the truth remains revolutionary.

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