

# **Building the Revolutionary Party**

**Selected Writings 1980-87**

**Jim Percy**

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# Contents

<b>Introduction by Dave Holmes</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Turn to industry — 6 ● Break with US SWP — 6 ● Opposition to Labor’s Accord — 7 ● Rethinking our line on the ALP — 8 ● Break with Trotskyism — 9 ● Later developments — 10 ● <i>Green Left Weekly</i> — 11	
<b>Four Features of Our Revolutionary Party</b> .....	<b>13</b>
An inclusive team — 16 ● Independence — 19 ● Leninist organisation — 22 ● An ambitious party — 25 ● Cadre school — 29	
<b>Further Steps in Proletarianising the Party</b> .....	<b>32</b>
The end of the turn — 32 ● Organisational effects of the turn — 33 ● No absolute form of organisation — 36 ● Formal democracy in our political life — 38 ● Level of activity of our cadre — 41 ● Day-to-day organisation of our work — 43 ● Frequency of branch meetings — 46 ● Organising our supporters — 49 ● Party education — 52 ● Role of <i>Direct Action</i> — 53 ● What sort of party — 55	
<b>Preparing the Party to Meet the Crisis</b> .....	<b>57</b>
Success of the turn — 58 ● New steps — 60 ● Boldness & initiative — 63 ● Polarisation — 65 ● Opening the party — 67 ● Democratic centralism — 69 ● A healthier party — 71 ● Flexible approach — 75 ● Renewing leadership — 81 ● Test of tendencies — 81	
<b>Recent Experiences in Party-Building</b> .....	<b>86</b>
Settling accounts with the turn to industry — 87 ● A new political situation — 88 ● An organisational correction — 90 ● An initial balance sheet — 92 ● Youth & renewal — 93 ● The long haul — 94 ● Organisational principles — 95 ● Party discussion — 96 ● Provisions for factional struggle — 97 ● The 1984 split — 98 ● The National Committee — 98 ● Renewal of the national leadership — 100 ● Local leadership — 101 ● A propaganda group — 101	
<b>Towards a New Party</b> .....	<b>105</b>
Alternation tactic — 106 ● Need for a political counter offensive — 107 ● Obstacles to struggle — 108 ● Two-party con game — 108 ● Economic debate — 109 ● Restructuring dream — 110 ● The new right — 112 ● The Rockdale factor — 113 ● In the unions — 113 ● Difficult climate — 114 ● Labor pays the price — 116 ● What sort of political alternative? — 117 ● The new social movements — 117 ● The party	

question — 119 ● Present opportunities — 120 ● An all-embracing project — 121 ● The Accord — 122 ● The potential exists — 123 ● ALP left — 125 ● Limits of the left — 125 ● Election tactics — 128 ● Organisational questions — 128 ● Rejecting sectarianism — 130 ● Can we succeed? — 131

## **What Politics for a New Party? ..... 134**

### **1. The Prospects ..... 134**

New elements — 135 ● Crisis of the left — 136 ● Historical perspective — 136 ● Marxism — 138 ● False ideas— 139

### **2. The Discussion ..... 141**

New projects — 143 ● Greens & Reds — 145 ● The Communist Party — 148 ● The Socialist Workers Party — 149 ● The Fightback alliance — 150

### **3. The Program ..... 152**

Ultraleftism — 152 ● Opportunism — 155 ● Reforms — 156 ● Interventionism — 157 ● Socialist answers — 160 ● A democratic program — 161 ● Who will be in a new party? — 162

## **Building the Revolutionary Party:**

### **Some Recent Experiences ..... 164**

#### **1. The Old Party & the New Party ..... 164**

The past two years — 165 ● Crisis of working class politics — 165 ● Organisational adjustments — 166 ● Our immediate needs — 166 ● Recomposing the left — 168 ● Continuity with our past — 169

#### **2. The Communist Party & the New Party ..... 171**

Evolution of the CPA — 171 ● The 1986 rectification — 172 ● Eurocommunism & the CPA — 173

#### **3. The New Party & the New Social Movements ..... 176**

Movement & party — 177 ● The problem of cooption — 177 ● New movements, old errors — 179 ● Leninism & sectarianism — 180 ● The party principle — 181

#### **4. Autonomy & Leninism ..... 184**

In the trade unions — 184 ● Myths about Leninism — 185 ● The ALP style — 186

#### **5. Our Role in the New Party ..... 190**

SWP draft program — 190 ● Program for a new party — 191 ● Theoretical discussion — 192

#### **6. Some Immediate Tasks of the SWP ..... 193**

Some present problems — 193 ● Monthly branch meetings — 195 ● The role of *Direct Action* — 196 ● Some financial tasks — 198

#### **7. Preparing for the Future ..... 200**

Pressures on the party — 200 ● Our political method — 201 ● Psychological bullets — 202 ● Dedication & commitment — 203

## **Appendix: Jim Percy (1948-92) ..... 206**

## **Notes ..... 211**

# Introduction

*By Dave Holmes*

This is the second volume of writings and speeches by Jim Percy, one of the founders of the Democratic Socialist Perspective and its longtime central leader until his death in 1992.\* These seven items — reports given by Jim to conferences and leadership gatherings of the DSP (or Socialist Workers Party as it was known in this period) — span the years 1980 to 1987.

This was a period of considerable ferment in Australian and world politics. In 1978 and 1979 there occurred a number of anti-imperialist revolutions — in Afghanistan, Iran, Grenada and Nicaragua. At home, the March 1983 federal elections resulted in the ouster of the Fraser government and the beginning of more than a decade of ALP rule under Hawke and Keating. Labour's general neoliberal orientation and the experience of the ALP-ACTU's wage-restraining Accord produced significant disillusionment.

Right through the 1980s the SWP remained a small cadre organisation of several hundred members. But it was extremely active and reacted with considerable dynamism to the political openings that presented themselves while holding fast to its basic Marxist-Leninist ideas.

During the 1980s the DSP engaged in some significant rethinking on a number of key questions — on Trotskyism and the Fourth International, our international connections, the Labor Party and how to build a mass socialist party — without which

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*Dave Holmes* was a member of the National Executive of the Democratic Socialist Party. At the time of writing the DSP had become the Democratic Socialist Perspective, an internal current in the Socialist Alliance.

\* From the point of view of the period it covers, the present volume is actually the first. However, the initial collection published was *The Democratic Socialist Party: Traditions, Lessons and Socialist Perspectives* (New Course Publications: Chippendale, 1994). It contains four talks from 1990-92, a period marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and considerable questioning about the future of the socialist movement.

we would not have been able to respond adequately to the challenges of the period.

To enable the reader to place these reports in a more fruitful context, this introduction will briefly sketch some of the background. To make things clearer, the key issues are treated separately but it should be remembered that a lot of this overlaps.

## Turn to industry

In 1979 the SWP took the decision to attempt to implant the great bulk of its cadre in industrial jobs in order to link up with working-class militants in what it hoped would be a labour fight-back accompanying the late 1970s economic downturn.

A large part of the SWP's then membership were students or ex-students who had obtained white-collar jobs following university. The party's base in the industrial working class was very weak. The "turn to industry" as it was known, was a wrenching experience for the party. Its success demonstrated a tremendous commitment on the part of the membership to reorient their lives; the SWP's composition changed significantly; and the party gained valuable workplace and trade union experience and a big boost in its self-confidence.

But the fundamental political premise of the turn was mistaken — the anticipated fightback was only a hope and it did not eventuate. The sharp all-out turn based on an incorrect schema needlessly lost a lot of members. Jim's report to the January 1986 party conference ("Recent Experiences in Party Building") makes a sober assessment of the whole experience.

## Break with US SWP

Through the 1970s we had a very close relationship with the US SWP. Founded by James P. Cannon in 1928 and collaborating closely with Leon Trotsky in the 1930s, it had a tremendous and inspiring history. We learned a lot from it. We organised Australian tours of SWP leaders such as George Novack and Evelyn Reed. In the debates in the the Fourth International — the world Trotskyist organisation to which we both belonged — we were closely aligned with the US party.

But towards the end of the decade and into the 1980s, strains began to emerge in this relationship. Cannon had always stressed that revolutionary parties had to stand on their own feet and make their own decisions. Parties that aren't really independent, he said — that don't develop their own authentic leadership teams — aren't going to get anywhere. But as our party developed the Americans seemed reluctant to treat us as equals. Differences emerged over Cuba, Afghanistan and the nature of the turn to industry as well as several other questions.

It became apparent that the US party was developing into a cult around the SWP

national secretary, Jack Barnes. Our relations with the US SWP came to a head at their August 1983 National Committee meeting. There they launched an unprecedented, unheralded, all-out attack on our party, accusing us of all manner of things and saying our leadership was “finished”. When we heard of this we broke off all relations with them and any of their international co-thinkers who endorsed this outrageous attack.

Our attitude was that comradely discussion and debate between revolutionaries is one thing but this is impossible with people who think you are “finished”. We also ended up expelling five comrades who had become a secret faction loyal to Barnes.

The US SWP’s degeneration under Jack Barnes marked a sharp break with the traditions of the party. Today the US SWP is a bizarre pro-Cuba sect. An analysis of the reasons for this degeneration can be found in Doug Lorimer’s article “Cannonism versus Barnesism” in our book, *Building the Revolutionary Party: An Introduction to James P. Cannon* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 1997)

## Opposition to Labor’s Accord

In the first years of the 1980s the SWP experienced significant growth, both numerically and in the impact of the party.

In the March 1983 federal elections we ran an ambitious campaign — easily the most significant socialist electoral effort by any left-wing group for a long while — standing 48 candidates for the House of Representatives and the Senate. Half a million campaign leaflets and 80,000 posters were produced.

We campaigned on a radical program, especially against the ALP-ACTU social contract — the notorious Accord which was the hallmark of the incoming Hawke ALP government.

While our vote was modest — we received 41,000 votes in the 38 seats where we stood, an average of 1.5% — the whole exercise was a great success in reaching thousands of people with a militant message.

That Easter in Melbourne we held a very well-attended Karl Marx Centenary Conference. Guest speakers included Fourth International leader Ernest Mandel and US socialist Peter Camejo.

The increased profile of the SWP was noticed by many on the left. Not long afterwards the Trotskyist SWP began discussions with the decidedly pro-Moscow Socialist Party of Australia (today the Communist Party of Australia — the old Eurocommunist CPA wound itself up in the early 1990s). While it surprised many, the twin bases of this new collaboration were both principled and timely — opposition to the Accord and defence of the Soviet Union against imperialism.

With the SPA we were able to launch the Social Rights Campaign which sought to

rally support to fight the Accord. In Easter 1984 a very successful Social Rights Conference was held in Melbourne — the first nationally-organised action against the Hawke-Keating wage-freeze. It was attended by almost 700 people from across the left (but not, of course, from the Communist Party, which was solidly behind the Accord and which had been instrumental in selling the project in the union movement).

## Rethinking our line on the ALP

The hated Fraser Coalition was no longer in office but the new Hawke ALP government was a big shock to many Labor supporters. This came to a head at the party's July 1984 federal conference where the commitment to no uranium mining was ditched in favour of a three mines policy.

Along with the anti-worker Accord, the big switch on uranium mining spurred a big rethink of our line towards the ALP. Hitherto the SWP shared the general Trotskyist attitude that the ALP was a workers' party with a procapitalist leadership — a so-called two-class party — and the struggle was to replace this leadership with a genuine left one. Studying more closely Lenin, Trotsky and Cannon we realised that this analysis was dead wrong and would shut us off from real opportunities to move forward.

At the SWP's September 1984 National Committee meeting Jim gave a report — "The ALP, the Nuclear Disarmament Party and the 1984 elections" — which argued that the correct Marxist view of the ALP was that it was a bourgeois party — albeit with a significant working-class electoral base. We could give it critical support at election times against the traditional bosses' parties in order to gain a hearing from the workers who followed it. We could also apply this critical support tactic to any other capitalist or middle-class formation whose followers we were trying to influence. Our pamphlet *Labor and the Fight for Socialism* (New Course Publications; Chippendale, 1988) contains Jim's 1984 report along with a 1986 SWP resolution on the Labor Party.

Equipped with our new line we were able to plunge into the ferment around the Nuclear Disarmament Party and the December 1984 federal elections. The NDP had been formed in June 1984 on the three planks of closing all US bases in Australia, no nuclear weapons or visits of nuclear-powered ships to Australia and no uranium mining. With the sellout at the ALP conference, the fledgling NDP got a tremendous impetus. Branches formed around the country; Midnight Oil singer Peter Garrett joined the party and campaigned to be its lead NSW senate candidate — a campaign the SWP actively endorsed. In its enthusiastic support for, and participation in, the NDP the SWP was alone on the left.

In the event, the NDP gained over 600,000 primary votes, marking a watershed in Australian politics. The idea that no serious left-wing political formation could exist

outside the ALP had been decisively disproved.

However, after its great debut, rather than looking outwards and reaching out to the masses who had voted for the party, the NDP leadership around Garrett turned inward, intent on entrenching their own dominance by undemocratic means, driving out the left wing forces (especially the SWP) and taking the party to the right. Defeated at the April 1985 national conference, this clique walked out, shouting loudly to the media about the SWP's supposed stacking of the gathering. The NDP continued for many years but the split had irreparably damaged its prospects.

## Break with Trotskyism

From its inception our current had seen itself as part of the world Trotskyist movement. At the 1972 founding conference of the Socialist Workers League (as we were then called) we applied to join the Fourth International. During the 1970s we invested considerable financial and cadre resources in the international organisation, with Jim Percy and other leading comrades doing solid stints overseas working on leadership bodies of the FI in Europe and the FI-sponsored magazine *Intercontinental Press* in New York.

We learned a lot during our time in the Fourth International but our involvement also brought with it significant problems as debates spilled over into our own organisation. Six months after our founding congress we suffered a damaging split, not over questions of the class struggle in Australia, but because of the differences in the Fourth International. (The split was only healed some six years later.)

An accumulation of things — a re-thinking on the Cuban Revolution, the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, the 1983 break with the US SWP — caused us to question whether Trotskyism was an adequate framework for us. We looked at Lenin with fresh eyes and discovered that his theory of two-stage revolution far more correctly described the general dynamics of revolution in the semicolonial countries than did the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution.

We wrote a document — *The Struggle for Socialism in the Imperialist Epoch* — and put it forward for a vote at the 1985 congress of the Fourth International. This document represents our settling of accounts with Trotskyism.

In August 1985, the SWP National Committee voted to end our affiliation with the Fourth International, a decision ratified by the party's 11th Congress held in January 1986. Of course, this decision did not mean ending collaboration with the FI or those sections playing positive roles in their own countries. Since this decision our international contacts and connections have expanded dramatically.

The reader is referred to our pamphlet, *The Democratic Socialist Party and the*

*Fourth International* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 2001), which contains reports by Jim Percy and Doug Lorimer on the question of Trotskyism and the Fourth International.

## Later developments

It's worth mentioning several later developments, even though they fall outside the scope of this book. But they further illustrate the tremendous drive of the SWP/DSP to forsake sectarianism and seek out new openings and new possibilities of collaboration — even with forces with which we had long been locked in combat.

In 1986 the Communist Party moved away from its previous slavish adherence to the Accord. Noting this important development, we sought to enter into discussions with it. This led to our involvement in 1986-87 in the New Left Party project that the CPA had initiated with some of its allies. Despite some encouraging signs at first and the very positive attitude of a section of the CPA membership, in the end the whole thing blew up because of the sectarianism of the dominant leadership of the party and its refusal to break with Laborism.

As the New Left Party episode ended we began fresh talks with the leadership of the Socialist Party of Australia. It must be remembered that this was the period of the Gorbachev-led Perestroika process in the Soviet Union and the SPA was feeling the ground shifting beneath it. Both parties were very pro-Soviet — we in our way and the SPA in its — and we had both opposed the Accord from the start. In addition, a section of their membership warmly welcomed the thought of unity with the more youthful and energetic SWP.

However, just as we had embarked on trying to draft a joint program, events in China intervened. On June 4, 1989, the Stalinist Chinese regime carried out a massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. The SPA supported this action whereas we vehemently condemned it. The unity process was finished. We renamed ourselves the Democratic Socialist Party — perhaps not the most exciting name in the world but we wanted to make a clear political point about our conception of socialism and put ourselves in the best position to withstand the anti-socialist propaganda barrage.

In 1990-91 the DSP participated in various Green Alliances around the country. We considered ourselves the left wing of the green movement, with far more right to call ourselves green than many of the right-wing elements that rallied to the new banner. But as things crystallised out, the dominant forces in what went on to become the Greens of today sought to proscribe socialist forces and we were frozen out of the new formation.

## Green Left Weekly

Since it first appeared in September 1970, *Direct Action* had been our flagship, the main public face of our tendency. We had very much built ourselves around it. But in 1990 we explored the possibility of launching a new independent, broad left paper and sought to involve other forces in the project.

There was a lot of interest in the idea and it was publicly launched at an extremely successful Socialist Scholars Conference held in Sydney in late September-early October and attended by some 1100 people. At the end of the year we suspended *Direct Action* and threw our resources behind *Green Left Weekly*, the first issue of which appeared early in 1991, in the midst of the ferment around the first Gulf War.

Jim was not only the inspirer of the whole project but was also responsible for the wonderful name. As things have turned out, while the DSP and Resistance still carry the heavy burden of the actual production, distribution and fundraising, *Green Left Weekly* has proved to be an excellent vehicle for spreading the socialist message far and wide and reaching out to new forces. And while still very much a shoestring enterprise, the paper has attracted a significant number of devoted readers and supporters.

The period sketched above was a momentous one for our movement. We cleared away a lot of debris from our past and demonstrated a tremendous energy and flexibility in trying to find a way forward and engage with broader forces.

Jim was very much the architect of this process. But life took an unexpected turn and he was cut down by cancer in October 1992 — he was only 43 years old. We have included as an appendix the obituary article which appeared in *Green Left Weekly*. It helps to round out the picture of Jim as an extremely gifted and committed leader who made an enormous contribution to the struggle to build the revolutionary socialist movement in Australia and abroad.

*March 2008*



*Jim Percy (1948-92)*

# Four Features of Our Revolutionary Party

Comrades, this is the 10th anniversary month of *Direct Action*. The publication of *Direct Action* was the most important step for the real beginning of our movement. It was when we started to systematically formulate our political ideas, using the vehicle of a revolutionary newspaper with the aim of building a revolutionary organisation. Those 10 years of formulating our ideas systematically through that vehicle have transformed us and allowed us to build a strong party nucleus.

What were those first editors of *Direct Action* like? Where had we come from? What marked us and gave us our strengths and our weaknesses and therefore shaped the formation of our party? There were two big factors. One, we were products of the youth radicalisation of the '60s. Secondly, we were products of the lack of a Trotskyist tradition, because the old [Fourth International] section in this country had collapsed in 1965.

As products of the youth radicalisation, we had the strengths and the weaknesses of the youth radicalisation. But I think we had more of the strengths. We managed to avoid most of the weaknesses of many of the other student radicals of that day. Even in the old Resistance\*, the leaders waged an ongoing fight against spontaneism and counterculturalism. We waged an ongoing fight for Trotskyism, as we understood it. Perhaps we didn't understand it so well, but we were getting there.

We had other strengths. We were leaders of the mass antiwar movement. We were activists: doers, not talkers. That contrasted with a lot of other student radicals, whom we nicknamed lounge lizards. There are a lot of people like that still around,

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Report given to the National Committee of the Socialist Workers Party, September 22, 1980.

\* The "old Resistance" was formed in 1967 as an organisation of youth who took as their heroes figures like Trotsky and Guevara. It lacked a clearly defined program and leadership until August 1970, when it held a national conference that also changed the organisation's name to the Socialist Youth Alliance. In 1980, the SYA changed its name back to Resistance.

perhaps even more of them. Because we were activists, there was no let up in the pace; it was a hectic pace in the '60s. This allowed us to establish a certain tradition that helped us avoid a lot of pitfalls and keep out of bad company.

We weren't strong on recruiting dilettantes; they didn't last long in our movement.

We were anti-Stalinist. We rejected Maoism. That was clear from the start. On the other hand, we liked Cuba. We liked Guevara. We liked Castro.

We were among the very first to respond to the new rise of the women's liberation movement. That's a very positive thing. We were open to such developments.

And we attempted to build organisations. The old Resistance, terrible as it was in a number of ways, was far better organised than the Students for a Democratic Society or the Maoist formations. It was far more serious in the organisational questions than they were.

But the decisive problem for us in the '60s was that there was no real party. We didn't understand the role of the press, the role of leadership, democratic centralism, educating the cadre of our movement around our revolutionary program. These failings were not our fault entirely, or even largely. The old section had collapsed. And the leaders of it who had continued to support the Fourth International had not continued the process of building a party, but tended to drift off into their own activities.

What were the features of the old section that had moulded these people? Of course, it had gone through a difficult period in the '50s, a period of isolation during the Cold War. But in fact it had grown during the late '50s and early '60s. It had grown around the Cuban Revolution, for instance. Its leaders were products of that period and were attracted to the Cuban Revolution.

No, the problem in the old section was a good deal deeper than simply the difficulties of coming out of the Cold War. The old section was a party that never had a team, that didn't understand the questions of partybuilding as we've learned them from Lenin via Cannon. They never had a professional party; they weren't serious on that level. Their leadership was essentially the leadership of a star. And there was a small clique around him. The talented individuals who joined the party in the '50s and '60s tended to emulate that idea of what a leader should be. They competed with each other; they showed a total inability to work together. This was what marked the movement we joined in the mid-sixties, if you can call it a movement, if you can say there was a process of joining.

Of course, you can't leave aside the political errors that the section had made and which were more or less continued by some of their successors. In particular there were errors on the Labor Party question. There were also strengths about the Labor Party position that we were able to build on — a non-sectarian attitude towards the

Labor Party, an understanding of the need to work in it. But they made errors; they tended to adapt.

Together, the political errors and the failure to build a team meant downplaying the indispensable role of a Leninist party in the socialist revolution. In the end we had to fight them all. We had to make a complete break with the old tradition, the old section.

One way of measuring our progress to date is to compare our party today with the old section at its height. On that basis we're doing quite well. Trotskyism in Australia is on a higher plane, is stronger than it's ever been. Nevertheless, this lack of tradition is a real weakness. It's reminiscent of the way in which Cannon described the first generation of US SWP leaders. He said: "They were thrust into positions of leadership and overwhelmed with responsibilities without having previously acquired the necessary theoretical training and political experience to lead the party properly." That was the situation we were faced with.

But in the formation of our party and the early fights, we got a lot of experience in party building, a lot of political experience. To a certain extent we turned that weakness into a strength, in terms of our resilience, independence, and self confidence. We had to go through a number of fights to achieve that.

These were political fights. We had to fight on the question of Leninism: whether we were going to build a party and whether it was going to be a Leninist party. In that process, we began to settle the question of what the leadership of a revolutionary party is. We came out of a bad tradition, because the initial leadership of the Trotskyist organisation in the late '60s was essentially a clique. And of course, as cliques do, we fell out on a personal level over and over again, but we never split on a personal level, and that was a big strength. We split on political grounds. After that time, we had a different political trajectory. We took a different road towards building a party and building a leadership team.

With a second group we also had a political fight. We fought on the question of the Labor Party. Were the perspectives of our party going to be to bury ourselves in the Labor Party and assure a safe seat somewhere along the line? We said, no. We said, that's not right. There are opportunities for building an independent party now. They are greater than the opportunities for building inside the Labor Party. So in that fight we took a further step in developing a Leninist nucleus.

Then we had, not exactly a fight, but a difference with another comrade on the nature and the internal regime of a Leninist party. He put forward a strange idea of what the internal regime of the Leninist party should be. He said, what's wrong with what we're doing is that we have a pyramidal structure and he drew a pyramid. What

we really need is a circular structure in which every little circle is joined up with every other little circle, and everyone in each circle knows someone from the other circle, who knows someone from another circle. I don't know where he got that idea, though I have my suspicions. It was a perfect description of a party built of cliques, a series of interlocking cliques.

These three fights settled political accounts. They allowed us to go beyond them and set out firmly on the road of building the revolutionary party. Since that time, there have been four key features that have marked our party, four things I want to talk about that have laid the basis for where we are today.

### **An inclusive team**

Firstly, we're an inclusive party, a party that has a broad leadership team. We're always trying to absorb new leaders and expand the base of that team. This is not something new; it's always been our approach. With the leader of the old Resistance we made a break on political questions, not personalities; we were attempting to build a common organisation on a political level. We tried to pull in the comrades who disagreed on the Labor Party. In fact, after the first break we went to them and said, we've got a lot of youth here we don't know what to do with, why don't you lead them for us and lead us too. We tried to build with them, even though they hadn't done very much politically for several years. With the comrade who liked circles and some others who were not similar politically but who left at the same time we tried a similar process. We tried with the group which became the Communist League, and later with the group that split off from the Communist League.\* We had two tries to do it with the leader of that group, and we'll try a third time if he surfaces, because that's our method.

So far I've enumerated a list of failures. We failed because we didn't have a team when we began those processes. We had no authority as a team, no experience of what we were doing; we were politically pretty raw. Of course, those people didn't try very much to work with us, but perhaps we could have overcome this if we'd been stronger already. The main thing is that we made the attempt. It was a sincere attempt. And that laid the ground for future success. It allowed us to do better in the future and in immediate terms.

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\* In 1972 the Socialist Workers Party (then called Socialist Workers League) and a group of Trotskyists based in Brisbane briefly formed a united organisation. However, a split occurred in 1972, leading to the setting up of the Communist League. In 1976, a group split from the CL and fused with the SWP. After a period of discussion and joint activities, the SWP and the CL fused at the beginning of 1978.

It allowed us to build a team — not a closed team, but a team that was a pole of attraction and a framework for new and developing leaders. On our National Committee today there are only three comrades who were founders of Resistance. There are more such comrades in the party, but on the NC there are only three. In the following year, leading into the founding conference of the Socialist Workers League, there were six more comrades recruited who today are still on the National Committee of the party. Particularly in Melbourne we made a decisive breakthrough; five of those six were recruited in Melbourne in that period at the end of 1970 and 1971.

So we expanded and broadened our team with the comrades who joined then, and it's been an ongoing process ever since. Today there are comrades coming from Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, and I'm sure it won't be long before other and newer cities also add comrades into the leadership. Apart from that, we've been able to assimilate into the team comrades who came from different experiences, who didn't join as comparatively raw youth.

All this prepared for the Communist League fusion to be so successful. It allowed us to take that giant step, a decisive step in terms of developing the leadership and broadening the team that we've gone through in the last couple of years. What we'd done before prepared the basis of that fusion. We couldn't have done so well if we hadn't already come so far, if we hadn't learned the lessons of the previous failures.

We use the term inclusive party because that's what it's been, that's what it is, and I think that's what it always will be. That's been central to what we have been doing in building the leadership of the party.

We should note some of the features of the leadership in our party. We seek to build a party of collectivists — not in the CP sense, we're not building a bunch of collectives. What I mean is that we're not interested in building a party of individualists. We are building a party of people who get satisfaction from the performance of the whole team, of the whole party. We're building a party of leaders who want to help other people become leaders. We don't want to shine at the expense of other people looking bad. We've not built up a bunch of friends. All comrades are eligible; we never overlook talent. Our leadership is broader than the National Committee meeting, much broader than that. We recognise that all comrades are leaders of the working class, and that all comrades can play a leading role in some way in the party.

We've made substantial progress in the development of women leaders, more real progress than any other organisation in Australia. That's not a small achievement. We still have a long way to go for sure and we won't become complacent. It's always going to be a problem, but I think with the turn to industry we'll move further in solving this program for our party. Comrades should go and reread the section of

Mary-Alice Waters' report on the leadership of the US SWP, in which she talks about developing women leaders; it's very relevant to us.

We're an organisation that doesn't have a hierarchy, that doesn't have the idea of promotion. You don't work your way up to the top job and then that's where you are. We fight against bureaucratism.

So we've got a lot of the necessary team-building qualities. We can learn more and try to improve; we shouldn't at all be satisfied. But nevertheless I think those are some decisive features that have marked the development of our team to date and allowed us to survive and expand.

In addition, we have a number of other qualities that have given it strength and endurance, as the ads say. First of all, we're politically homogeneous. We fought for that, we struggled for it. It's a relative thing, and we want it to be only a relative thing. But it's based on the attitude of comrades towards the party, a responsible way in which they raise differences and the way comrades, especially the leading comrades, have decided to operate in the framework of the party. That's one aspect of it. The other aspect is that we have had an ability to correct our mistakes. If we've made a mistake and we're convinced of that, we're very quick to rectify it. So we're politically homogeneous, relatively politically homogeneous.

Secondly, we're a structured team. We've been able to develop a division of labour in the Political Committee and in the National Committee. It's not a permanent division of labour, but it will work until a new one is formed. We've been able to produce a weekly *DA* on a shoestring because of that, because of the confidence the different comrades of the Political Committee have in each other; so we've been able to assign comrades to the paper who do a good job, and there's no acrimony when an error needs to be corrected. There's that level of confidence in each other. We have comrades leading a youth organisation with very little party control and direction, and there have been generation after generation who have done that. And the same with the branches that have been built around the country they have a high degree of autonomy and opportunity for organisers and executives to carry out the work of the party.

We've been able to settle the question of party officers without a fight or any tensions. At the moment we have only one party officer, the national secretary. Comrade Jack Barnes, when he was discussing the role of national secretary at a recent plenum of the US SWP, said that the role of the national secretary is initiating the political leadership and organisation of the national leadership of the party. Perhaps that description fits here. Within that framework, I've been able to carry out different assignments, including international work at one point. Of course, we haven't been

able to specialise enough, so often being national secretary or acting national secretary, as John Percy was for two years, has just meant that you're the comrade responsible for personnel for the branches and for meeting every problem that anyone wants to bring along. So perhaps we sometimes spend too little time on the other task of initiating the political leadership of the party. But we've been moving to a situation in which the task of political leadership is given more weight. That's going to be an important gain for our party.

In fact, developing political leadership of the party is central to the aim of this report. No doubt there are a good many other features of our team and our leadership that are rather specific. The nature of the situation we face in Australia, our origins, the problem of a lack of tradition — from these things we've built up our tradition. That probably means that in the final analysis it was right for us. It was what we had to do if we were going to survive. Balancing seriousness and dedication to the party with an ability to laugh at our foibles, the sort of language we use — all this is part of establishing a new tradition, our own tradition. By now we've got enough continuity to understand that we have a strong tradition that has its own character and, I would argue, necessity.

So we've been able to structure and build our own unique and inclusive team. We were able to do this because we understood the first set of questions, the questions of what leadership is. We've been able to develop a strong team discipline, just as in the party as a whole, because we've been so inclusive and have been seen to be inclusive. It's hard to be a leader outside our team and, ultimately, rather fruitless. This is the real strength of our party. If we look around at the world today we see parties which at best are made up of several teams and at worst of several gangs. That's allowed us to be authoritative as a leadership team, knowing that we can speak for the whole party. Nothing could be worse than a team that lacks the confidence to lead, that doesn't have the confidence to be able to say that it speaks for the whole party, for the ranks of the party and for the leadership of the party. We don't lack that confidence, and that's been a source of immense strength for the whole party. We're going to guard that precious acquisition while continuing to build on it.

## Independence

The second feature I want to talk about is that we're building an independent party. Perhaps I could just quote from Cannon's *Speeches to the Party*, where he talks about the experience with B.J. Field after Field was expelled from the New York branch of the Communist League of America and Trotsky started collaborating with him. This was a real turning point for Cannon and the other SWP leaders. Cannon said they wanted "a party of our own that would have its own leaders"; that was what they were

seeking to build.<sup>1</sup>

When we set out along the road more than 10 years ago, we didn't know that this was what we wanted until we started to have our own leaders in fact; now we'll settle for nothing less. Comrades know this story; we've gone over it at different times. Our lack of tradition meant we were seeking a tradition, we did need to have roots, we did need to think through, in collaboration with others, what building a party meant. So we set ourselves the task of building a *Cannonist* party, a Leninist party — we think they're the same thing. We set ourselves that task *outside* the United States, which is a difficult undertaking because of that lack of tradition; we could perhaps say it hasn't been done successfully to date.

We tried to attach ourselves to that tradition, and correctly so. I remember the early feverish reading of *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* during the first fight for Leninism, and how we listened to [Farrell] Dobbs' tapes on the revolutionary party, and the ideas that came across in that. Among all the ideas of our party leadership, those are the ones most strongly held, the best understood. But we didn't fully understand them then because we made some initial calls for advice from the US SWP. What to do, how to fight, aren't we right, are we wrong? Well, they didn't exactly reject giving us advice; they just didn't do it. We'd write a letter and they'd write back saying your letter is interesting, send us another. The effect of that was to force us to become leaders ourselves. Later on we understood. It told us something about the Socialist Workers Party, what Cannon learned about Trotsky — that we could live with them and learn a lot from them. We could live with them over a long period, because they operated towards us in that way.

This question of building an independent party was driven home to us very strongly in our international work and in the course of the faction struggle in the [Fourth] International. It was driven home to us so strongly that we wrote it into our organisational principles.

In the process of the international work that our party has engaged in quite vigorously in the last few years, we've tested where our party has come to in the framework of the Fourth International. It's been a tremendous experience, and we've learned a number of things from it. We've learned that in the final analysis you're on your own. You're on your own in the International.

Because there are political differences, cultural differences, geographic differences — limitations of that sort that are very difficult to overcome. The crisis of leadership of the working class is reflected in the Fourth International. Setting up an international, calling it the Fourth International, doesn't solve the crisis of leadership. It doesn't mean that a strong, authoritative international leadership has developed which seeks

to overcome this problem of building an international team. What we learned in this last period is that you either have your own party and team or you operate in a void. So whenever our comrades go overseas, they operate as part of our team. That's the only way to achieve anything. Of course, individuals can do useful work for the International. It can even develop somewhat. But the real question for us if we want to be part of the International, is building our own party, developing it politically, strengthening it, and having its institutions sink roots in the working class here. As we do that we'll be able to play a stronger role and make a bigger contribution to the International.

This doesn't mean we're anti-internationalists; that charge was thrown at Cannon as well. It doesn't mean that we don't want close relations with other parties, or that we're scared of being dominated and simply want to retreat. It doesn't mean anything like that. Above all, it doesn't mean that we won't learn or that we don't want to learn from other parties, especially from the US SWP, which is furthest along the road of building a Leninist party in the Fourth International.\* We wouldn't exist without the SWP and without the Fourth International, and we wouldn't exist much longer without the SWP and the Fourth International and our attempts to build and strengthen an international revolutionary party. But we can learn fully only if our direction of march continues to be towards building an independent party here.

The very lack of tradition from which we began places a tremendous importance on the development of our own institutions. Only our own party is capable of understanding how important this is for us — for us to develop our own leadership, our own party, our own confidence. It's very hard to see that from outside. The development of our party and its leadership must take place fundamentally in our own framework. We can't be a satellite, we can't be hostage to other needs and other views. Within that framework, with that understood, we'll go as far as anyone in building an international and collaborating and taking (and sometimes giving) all the advice we can get.

We're willing to learn; we're very approachable. In general, for us to learn, it's just necessary to write a resolution and we pick it up if it's good. We're not shy about that at all, as comrades can see from our political resolution. It's taken all that's good, that's been produced right up to the last minute. It's also not difficult for our party to collaborate because it does have a strong leadership. It can deal with the whole matter of international collaboration frankly and directly. Of course, we always have to be

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\* Because of reactionary legislation, the US SWP could not affiliate to the Fourth International, but it remained in political solidarity with it.

convinced of an idea before we'll carry it out. So for us collaboration means good, friendly party to party relations. That's the key to international work, and that's what will allow for a real party of our own with its own leaders.

## Leninist organisation

The third feature I want to deal with is that we're a party built on Leninist organisational principles. This was a decisive question at our formation. I think we understand it pretty well now. I'm not going to go over that; it's in our organisational principles document. But one thing that is posed is to incorporate the report to our last conference into the organisational principles document and present a new draft which can be discussed at the next National Committee meeting. In this way we can integrate the different discussions and ideas over the last couple of years and take a step forward in the elaboration of our organisational principles. The incoming Political Committee can take responsibility for carrying that out, with the adoption of this report.

So we understand that pretty well. Nevertheless, it's useful to ask, have we been too soft or too hard in applying these organisational principles? Have we had too many gut reactions, have we parted ways with too many people?

We're marked by our origins. We're marked by where we wanted to go. We did want to get where we are today. Every political fight was also a question of establishing leadership authority and party loyalty. That's why they were so explosive. When we told the leader of the minority on the Labor Party question, the conference has voted, we now have a line, he said: I don't care what the conference has voted, I'm going to do my own thing; I hope we can come to an accommodation we'll leave you alone, you can go ahead and do your own thing, as long as we can do our own thing too. We said, that's not acceptable, not acceptable at all. So when we took action against the comrades of the clique who carried that out, the rest of them walked out. That pattern has been repeated a number of times.

It was partly the product of the composition we had, the petty bourgeois origins of many comrades who joined the party. They weren't necessarily serious about being part of a working class party. We've got to understand that.

Perhaps our splits have taken more of an organisational form than in some other sections that had splits on the political level. But I don't think it's been exaggerated here compared to some other places. Of course, there are other sections that just left everyone in and in a big soup. That's another way of doing it, but it only postpones the problem.

There's something else that has marked us through most of the last 10 years. This has had a really profound effect that we haven't overcome; we must understand that.

I'm referring to the IMT/LTF faction fight and the split here in 1972.\* We've overcome the split, that's decisively overcome; it's not even worth thinking about. But we haven't overcome certain patterns of thinking about political differences that came from that period. For both comrades who were in the CL and comrades who were in the SWP, the main political differences were always set in the framework of separate organisations. In general, the big questions were always posed as us and them — and not us and them in different tendencies, or even in different factions inside the same party, but in different parties. So people tended to be a little jumpy about political differences, which were seen as being factional by their very nature, as possibly leading to different parties or leading people to leave the movement. That's something we have to be very conscious of and attempt to overcome.

The other question is the question of the turn. We made a sharp turn, and that's marked us for the last few years. No compromise was possible. If we wanted to do it, we couldn't compromise. I don't think we were bloodyminded in this turn. By and large the people who left were either those who were disloyal or those who didn't want to make the turn but didn't have bad feelings about it, in the sense that they were willing to become supporters. Of course, there was a layer of comrades who left because they weren't happy with the fusion. A lot of these people were simply critics for the sake of criticism, people essentially sceptical of the revolutionary potential of the working class.

Could we have saved more of them? Perhaps that's true. If we were stronger, better, smarter, if all our cadre were at a higher level, if all of us were more politically developed, we would have saved more; there's no doubt about that. But we did about the best we could, and took all the steps we had to take. Not to have acted decisively, to have compromised, would have jeopardised and demoralised the real cadre of the party as most of that cadre were going through decisive changes in their lives. We would have jeopardised the real cadre of the party.

We're now entering a new period, a post-turn period. We don't have all the political answers for what's coming down the line. All the comrades in the party today are serious about building a party. But we don't have all the answers in this room or

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\* From 1969 to 1976, there was a deepgoing debate within the Fourth International concerning the Marxist attitude to guerrilla warfare and the strategy of party building. Two international groupings took opposing sides in the debate: the International Majority Tendency and the Leninist Trotskyist Faction. In Australia, most members of the Communist League sided with the IMT and most members of the Socialist Workers Party with the LTF. The debate was resolved when leaders of the IMT changed their views on the guerrilla warfare question.

the Political Committee or the party as a whole on the big international questions, on the question of what to do next in the labour movement. We're opening up a genuine discussion at this plenum. We're going to enrich our understanding of the political resolution. It may look a good deal different in three months' time, after we've worked on it.

So we have to guard against some of the dangers and bear all these factors in mind. First, we must let things surface; let's thrash things out. We're confident of our ideas. We're confident of our program. We're confident of our party. And the more confident we are — and we are more confident today because of the turn — the easier it will be to convince the doubters or the easier it is for us to accept corrections if we're convinced of them. We need everyone to determine the course of the party today. We'd better let that happen.

Secondly, we shouldn't just rely on authority to win arguments. True, the leadership of the party has more and more authority. We could rely on that and use certain tricks, certain ways of asserting our authority. But what we must have is a real clash of ideas, because out of that we want the correct ideas to emerge.

Thirdly, we've got to be very careful about the tone of the discussion. We have to make a correction in the tone we would have used in the IMT/LTF faction fight or the tone we had when there were disloyal people saying they supported the turn when essentially all they really wanted was to get out of the party. Trotsky described this tone:

A patient, friendly, to a certain point pedagogical attitude on the part of the central committee and its members toward the rank and file, including the objectors and the discontented, because it is not a great merit to be satisfied "with anybody who is satisfied with me".

Further:

Methods of psychological "terrorism", including a haughty or sarcastic manner of answering or treating every objection, criticism or doubt — it is, namely, this journalistic or "intellectualistic" manner which is insufferable to workers and condemns them to silence.<sup>2</sup>

We should inscribe those things on our banner. They describe the sorts of discussion we want and the way we want to proceed in our party from here on in. Of course critics are not always right, so there will be vigorous debate. In fact, maybe critics are not often right, but you've got to allow for that time when they are going to be right. So there won't be any acrimony or jumping to conclusions in this new period. More than ever now the party needs to assimilate all the experience of the worker Bolshevik cadre through the formal channels of the party and through the most attentive informal

contact between the leadership and the ranks of the party.

We have both a general and a conjunctural need to carry out our discussion in this manner. If we condemn our worker Bolsheviks to silence, we have no future. We're going into a period of discussion, of thinking things out.

Finally, we should have inscribed on our banners Lenin's warning and understand that this should be the rule for all party comrades — that anyone who takes anyone else's word for it is a hopeless idiot. That should be our spirit of inquiry and endeavour when we approach political questions. No one will be right all the time. That's what we've learned in politics; that's the sort of spirit we want.

### **An ambitious party**

The fourth point I want to look at is that we're an ambitious party. Our ambition flows from the very nature of the task we have set ourselves, the overthrow of capitalism. We've always stretched ourselves to the limit, because there have always been more opportunities than we could take advantage of. This has had an important effect: It was a pre-turn protection of our composition. If we hadn't stretched ourselves like that, we would have had a much more difficult time making the turn and it would have proved much more costly.

We've always taken on the big tasks well ahead of where other people would have thought we were able to carry them through. For instance, we put out a weekly *Direct Action* ahead of just about anyone else in the International in terms of the size of our party at the time. Our contribution to building the International and international work was qualitatively ahead of any other party our size in the International. When we decided to run in elections, to build the weekly *Direct Action*, to project ourselves as a national political current, to undertake branch expansions, that was right on the edge of our ability to do it. It meant we were stretched pretty thin and had to run pretty hard; that's still the case today.

In general, whenever we've seen a pressing need to do something we've set out to do it. Has this brought us rewards in terms of our rate of growth? In terms of growth rate, we're doing okay, comparable to other sections of the International. But that's not the only criterion. What other sections have led on the turn? And I don't think that the political developments in this country have necessarily helped us. There's been no downturn; we can't claim that it's been a really difficult period like the '50s.

But except for 1971 and a bit of 1972, we missed the main thrust of the youth upsurge in terms of having a party and a youth organisation to benefit from it. (I remember the 1971 SYA conference, when we'd started to grow very rapidly and the projections were something like a thousand members by the end of the year. It was a

different period and we were going very well at that time.) Then we had the period of the Labor government, which was a difficult period because many people still had big illusions in the Labor government. From 1976 on there's been a change in the political and economic situation. We've been grappling with our response to it while carrying out the fusions and the necessary party building steps that we had to take.

In a sense, these last 10 years have always been against the stream. We've been positioning ourselves, getting into a situation where we can do much better. It's not been the easiest period; I think we're going into an easier one. On the other hand, it hasn't been the hardest either, so we've made some real progress.

A lot of comrades couldn't see this and they left. There are always political questions involved when comrades aren't inspired. They always think there's something wrong with the political analysis. Things are going to be stagnant for a long time. They look at the surface impressions, and say, well, it's true wages have been driven down, but workers aren't doing a lot about it, I don't think it's really there. In the final analysis, such comrades are responding to the crisis of leadership of the working class, to the fact that there's not already a finished vehicle for working-class leadership. Developing such a vehicle seems difficult; they shrink before the task. But it's political questions that are involved. We must always try to convince comrades to stay or to join and remain active on this political basis, not on the basis of guilt or anything like that. We have to continue to talk politics; that has to be our response to people who are finding the current of the stream a little strong.

As the class struggle develops, it will drive some of those comrades back towards us. If they remain conscious they'll come back towards us. Workers have no other choice. Of course, those who aren't workers will stay separated from us as the class struggle hots up down the line a bit.

But even if we're not as big as we'd hoped we would be in 1971, we're very solid. We had to build our party this way. And because we've been able to build our this way, it's made us a confident party. We have high "esprit de corps".

We understand this confidence in different senses. We're confident in the trajectory of our party, especially now. We're confident of our ability to meet all the tasks in front of us, to achieve. In a programmatic sense we're confident that we're the essential party nucleus that can grow and develop. We're 100% confident about this, about the organism that is the party and therefore about each other collectively. This 100% confidence is the basis of the loyalty comrades have to the party. It's a giant strength that is the product of 10 years of struggle.

We know we've still got a long way to go. But this confidence means that we don't need rebuilding from top to bottom, that there are no big fights posed in our party

today. Because the party that we built faced the test of the turn, the acid test. It proved we didn't need rebuilding. If we'd failed that test, we would have; big political struggles would have been involved. It was a turning point; now we can answer the question of how we're going to win a working-class base for the party. It was also a decisive correction of one of the ongoing weaknesses — our origins in the petty-bourgeois student milieu and all the things that flowed from that. As a result, we're already beginning to see political corrections. Some of them are apparent in the political resolution.

The turn poses new problems of cadre development. We're in a good period politically. But we're not in a pre-revolutionary period in this country. You need a very high level of political understanding and consciousness to survive as a member of a revolutionary party and a worker. It puts a lot of pressure on you to be both. It means you're going to be poorer and you're going to be tired. Of course there are a lot of compensations. You understand what's happening to you and to the world and you are in step with that; it's the decisive area of satisfaction. But the cycle of work and activism is very hard on all cadre in this period. It's very hard for cadre to see a break in that cycle.

Of course, there's a compounded problem for most of us. We've gone through a seven, eight, or 10-year period in which we've had bad habits of studying and reading. I won't go through the litany: I can't even get to read *IP* [*Intercontinental Press*]; "Gee, I didn't read much of *DA*." It's no different for any member of the party, in my opinion. Perhaps there are some comrades who are more disciplined or systematic, but it's a general problem. And this is at a time when there's more need to be totally fluent and confident in our Marxist ideas. As we go into the working class it's necessary to be more confident in order to express our ideas simply and clearly. We have to know more than we did in the past.

That's a big problem that all our cadre face. A crash education program offers no real solution; it's a palliative. Our present education program is not a bad one, but it doesn't go far enough and it doesn't meet the needs I'm talking about. Comrades are calling out for a solution.

And we've got a number of leadership problems which are a legacy of our origins as activists. We're not yet very productive as a leadership concerning some of the important political and economic questions in Australia. We get by, but we need to be more rounded. We need a more in-depth approach to the development of Australian society and economy. We need to write the book we always promised ourselves we'd write; actually there are several such books. We also have a problem in analysing world politics. We haven't had the time, we don't take the time to study and analyse

the big new political developments on a world scale. That was one of the reasons we made the initial error on the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea. Partly it was a real leadership error on the level of not taking world politics seriously enough to stop, sit, think, read, and then act. We'd have gotten a lot closer to the truth if we'd done that. So the error wasn't on the level of stupidity, except on the level of making it. There's nothing wrong with our intellectual power; we just made a stupid blunder. Our problem is also apparent in our ongoing international work. I tried to describe the limits of our intervention, and what we can do in the international arena. Our limitations also limit the input we have in the international discussions and debates. So these problems in our leadership, therefore, have become apparent in a number of different ways.

We've also got a problem in thinking through general theoretical questions. Collectively, I don't think we're too bad on that, because we've got a good strong team. But we've got by because someone has read and understands this or that important work. Again I want to read a description by Cannon in which he discussed this problem because I think it applies to us:

They made Marxist *politics* their study and did not do badly in this field, as results have shown. They developed the Leninist concepts of party organisation and of the role of the party ...

Marxian *economic theories*, in contrast, have not had their due, either in study or in application. And the *philosophic method* of Marxism was regarded with such indifference ...<sup>3</sup>

We haven't been bad journalists; we haven't been bad politicians. *Direct Action* and the situation of our party today show that. But we're not yet a thinking machine; we're still unread and ill prepared. And if we're right about the course of the class struggle that we outlined in the political resolution, we'll need to know a lot more to face the battles that are coming.

There's another question on the agenda which some comrades have mentioned already. That relates to the problem of deepening our understanding of Marxism. It means examining just what Trotskyism was, is, or has become. We learned Marxism through Cannon and Trotsky, and that's a problem. We didn't learn it direct from Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which is where Trotsky and Cannon learned it from. To deepen our understanding of Marxism we have to go direct to the source a little more than we have been doing. We should learn it from the same place that Castro's learning it, for example, so that we can engage in discussion with the Castroists.

Then there's the problem of Trotskyism that Dave Howard referred to: the semi-sectarian existence of the Trotskyist movement for so long, which developed into a defence of Trotskyism and of everything Trotsky said. There's the question of the

theory of permanent revolution, the idea that that's the foundation of Trotskyism. As I pointed out, Trotsky learned the theory of permanent revolution from the ideas that Marx developed 50 years earlier. There's the myth that Lenin was converted to "Trotskyism" on that question. Essentially Trotsky was the continuator of Leninism, and of Marx and Engels' idea. But there's been a real distortion perpetuated. I know the first books I read about Trotskyism had this distortion inherent in them: *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, *The Prophet Outcast*. The prophet cult. We want to get away from that idea of Trotsky as prophet.

The logical extension of that cult attitude is the dead end sectarianism of many of the Trotskyists, so-called. "Trotskyists, so-called" — the number of times we have to say that is an indication of what's happened. That "Trotskyism" has developed into dead-end sectarianism, a distortion of all politics, a dogmatic fight against "betrayals". These so-called Trotskyists sit on the sidelines of the class struggle and want to continue to sit there. The idea that the only revolutionaries are those with all the particular ideas developed by the First World Congress of the Fourth International makes revolutionary Marxism into a church. It mystifies Marxism instead of seeing it as the theory of proletarian revolution. This takes on organisational expression, a fetishism of forms — the idea that if we don't have our own section in Nicaragua, we must somehow be betraying our program.

Our general party framework I've described and these specific problems I've outlined — the problems of the turn, the problems of our leadership, and the political questions that we have to study collectively with the International mean — we need a new institution.

## Cadre school

We need our own party school. That can provide the political framework for the further development of our leadership, for the training of our cadre, and for the re-examination of all our ideas. It's the framework for a needed overhaul of our equipment. The four features of our party that I've outlined indicate that we can do it for ourselves. Moreover, if we're going to continue to strengthen our party along those lines, we *must* do it ourselves. If we're to continue to have an inclusive party with a strong leadership, we must do it for ourselves. If we're going to be an independent party, we must be self-sufficient. If we're to continue to be a Leninist party, we must develop our leaders and our ranks with a full understanding of Marxism so that we can have a genuine democratic discussion with Marxist ideas as the property of everyone. And to continue to be an ambitious and confident party, we must take this step because it will be the biggest step in developing the morale of the party since the weekly *Direct*

*Action.*

It's the next big party-building move. We must get the comrades behind it, motivate it, raise the money for it, so that it will become a cherished new party institution that everyone is proud of.

Of course the idea of a party school is not new. Our thinking was provoked by a comrade's attendance at the US school. That forced us to think through our own needs and how best to meet them. For a long time we've been familiar with Cannon's *Letters From Prison*, where he proposed just such a party school as we're now proposing. In the past we've looked at that and said, some day. Well, this is the day.

Who will go to the school? We can quote from Cannon on that:

The first condition for matriculation in the Trotsky School will be that the candidate is regarded by his co-workers as a worthy communist who has already distinguished himself in party work and is prepared without reservation to devote his life to the party as a professional revolutionist ... Formal educational deficiencies will not bar the talented and ambitious worker from eventual enrolment.<sup>4</sup>

That's the condition of matriculation. Whether comrades are sent to our school won't depend on how long they've been in the party, or any hierarchy, on how high up they are in leadership bodies. It's not a question of merit: Did you do pretty good last year or the year before? The party's needs have to be balanced. The people we send will be a balance between leaders of the party, young comrades who are leading Resistance, full-timers, and industrial workers above all, who need to take our ideas to the working class.

What's the spirit that's going to be abroad at this school? Again I'd like to quote Cannon:

While honouring and elevating Marxist learning, the party will wage an irreconcilable war against prigs, snobs, and smart alecks who regard acquired knowledge as a private monopoly and a means of personal advantage rather than as an instrument of the cooperative struggle to be taught also to others. The knowledge of each individual must be shared with others and thereby multiplied for the general benefit of the party.

The party leaders who have collectively acquired a large fund of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, by dint of long study and experience, must make it their aim to teach their younger colleagues *all they know*, and the latter in turn must become teachers of others, and so on in an endless chain system of uninterrupted educational work to add to the collective knowledge of the party.<sup>5</sup>

We mustn't mystify the process of learning and teaching Marxism. Everyone can learn it, and everyone is going to be able to teach it. Our leadership has the collective ability to do it, even though there are no individual geniuses among us. Moreover and above

all else, Marxism is learned and developed as part of the class struggle. So our party, as a result of the turn, is more and more qualified to learn Marxism. Marxism has developed as part of the class struggle because that's what Marxism is. Marx and Engels pointed out that it's wrong to imagine "that communism is a certain *doctrine* which proceeds from a definite theoretical principle as its *core* and draws further conclusions from that". No, they said, "communism is not a doctrine but a *movement*; it proceeds not from principles but from *facts*".<sup>6</sup> That's where the Marxist program comes from. The communists, revolutionary Marxists, are those who clearly understand the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate result of the proletarian movement.

To understand all this, communists analyse all politics from the viewpoint of the historic goals of the working class. That analysis makes up Marxism. It's the working-class perspective and strategy, so workers are uniquely qualified to understand it. As a party, we are just the most conscious and most resolute part of the working class, so today we're more and more able to learn Marxism.

What will be achieved at the school? First let's say what won't happen. The school won't make leaders. Going to the school is not an entry certificate to leadership; book learning never has been and never will be. We won't develop theoreticians. We're not, unfortunately, going to uncover any geniuses who were just waiting for the magic four-month study course.

But we *are* going to continue to develop revolutionary politicians who are better prepared to face the long haul of the class struggle as it unfolds. At the leadership level, it's going to force us to teach and learn. It's going to politicise us. It's going to push us towards the projects that we've put off for too long. Students will be inspired, guided, and aided to devote full time to study, thus preparing the habits of thought and discipline to help themselves become more rounded Marxists and leaders of the working class.

The first students that the Political Committee proposes as the first intake are a balanced and rounded group of comrades, including National Committee members, youth, comrades who are in industry and who will come out for the school. We tried for a certain geographical balance, but unfortunately there are some cities that don't have a representative in this first school; they'll certainly have one at the second school and so on.

It may be a backyard education machine, but I think it's going to be a great leap forward for our party. I think all comrades should stop and think about this project, then summon the will, and decide we're going to overcome all obstacles and *do* it. ■

# Further Steps in Proletarianising the Party

Comrades, I want to begin this report by citing a few statistics.

The percentage of comrades in industry, or who are looking for industrial jobs, or who are on full time is 81% of our full and provisional membership. Of course, we remain with a large number of comrades doing full-time work for the party or at the party school — some 23% of the overall membership. There is even one comrade working for the mass movement — that's a new category we haven't had before.

Of the elected national leadership of the party, that is, of the National Committee, at one time or another since we began the turn, just over 70% have been in industry or are in industry or are looking for industrial jobs. Forty-four per cent of the National Committee is currently in or looking at the moment.

I think those figures tell us something very important. They tell us that we have accomplished a goal set at our Seventh National Conference at the beginning of 1979, and a goal that was adopted by the whole of the Fourth International at the 1979 World Congress — the turn to get a majority of our members in industry. The turn *per se* is behind us.

## The end of the turn

Well, in what sense do I mean that? I think it would be useful to look at what was said by Comrade Jack Barnes of the Socialist Workers Party of the United States when he made the report to the World Congress on the turn. This is what he said:

The more successful we have been in drawing the lessons and implementing the resolution [that's the resolution on the turn and the world political situation — JP], the quicker the turn *per se* will be behind us. The turn is a radical *tactical* move necessitated by the historical development of our movement and the current stage of world politics.

It is an abnormal response to an abnormal situation — a situation in which the big majority of our members in every section have *not* been industrial workers. Once this historically necessary tactic has been carried out once the abnormal situation of our current social composition and arena of work has been changed — the turn will be behind us ... If it is carried out to the end, the tactic ceases.<sup>7</sup>

Well, I think in that sense, there is no doubt at all, that for our party the turn is behind us. Of course, if the percentage of industrial workers in our party declines because we recruit from other than the industrial working class or in some other way — if we suffer massive layoffs for example — we will go on a subsidiary campaign.

But the turn, the tactic conceived to change the sort of party we were, that came out of the youth radicalisation of the '60s and '70s, is behind us. That is, it is behind us as a specific tactic. Our historic proletarian orientation remains. The proletarianisation of our party remains an ongoing process. In a report to the US Socialist Workers Party, Comrade Barnes made the point in this way: “To accelerate the proletarianisation of the party by changing the jobs of the majority of the SWP members is, of course, a *tactical* question. It’s not the same thing as the historic proletarian orientation of the Socialist Workers Party, which has always existed and always will exist. But adopting this tactic of sending the majority of comrades into industry, and doing it today, is a historic decision in many ways. It affects everything we do.”<sup>8</sup>

That is the context in which we took the turn. We saw the proletarianisation of our party as an ongoing process. We made some initial steps, before the tactic of the turn. We even made a number of false starts in attempting to grapple with this problem of proletarianising our party, and finally we found the tactic of the turn.

We said at the time that this was going to affect us, change us. I don’t think that there is any doubt that it has. The sort of political discussions we are having in the International; the things we have learnt in the years since the beginning of the turn; the thinking out of how we apply our program; the study of the historical roots of our program — all this has been a by-product of the turn. We have been able to look at the revolutions taking place in the world from a different viewpoint, from the viewpoint of a party of industrial workers.

## Organisational effects of the turn

It is also going to change us and has already changed us organisationally. In a report to our National Committee meeting in September 1978, John Percy put it this way:

There will be many unforeseen difficulties also, of course. There will inevitably be a certain disruption and disorganisation of some of the party’s work. Part of this will be solved only as we gain further experience where we have branches where the majority

of members are industrial fraction members. Flowing from this will obviously be new organisational forms for our party, which we'll develop in the coming year as we undertake this task.<sup>9</sup>

That's almost four years ago. And surprisingly in many ways, there haven't been that many organisational changes made. Obviously there have been new institutions — the industrial fractions for example play a key role in the party. But perhaps we are only beginning to fully grapple with that question now.

Already at the 1979 World Congress there was a discussion on some of the organisational questions, because, of course, we had already begun to have some experience there by then. The US comrades and others had already begun to have some experience of what effect the turn would have in terms of the organisation of the party. Point two of Jack Barnes' report, a section of the report entitled "Some Organisational Conclusions", discussed the problem of party branches in this way:

... As we get more and more comrades into industry, it is crucial to pay close attention to maintaining the basic units of the party — branches, or whatever a section may call them — as *rounded political bodies*. They must be of sufficient size and organized politically so that the comrades in them obtain something there that they cannot get through the industrial fractions or in other ways. That is, these basic party units must provide the rounded political experience, leadership, Marxist education, and political discussion that comrades can only get from the party as a whole.

Failure to do this can even exacerbate the problem of how to combine what is often called trade union or factory work with more general socialist political activity.

Of course, this doesn't solve any of our tactical problems of how to link factory work, trade union work, with other party tasks and campaigns. Those will be solved concretely in each section and specific situation.

But the lesson that comrades in industry must also be active members of rounded political units of the party — in which they have regular and systematic political decision-making power and responsibilities — is a key one for avoiding unnecessary pitfalls.<sup>10</sup>

I think that is absolutely correct. That is something we ourselves have learnt. Nothing I'm saying in this report goes against that. The purpose of this report is to make those rounded political bodies — party branches — function more effectively; how to make them more rounded political bodies in effect; how to give the comrades that political life that is projected in that point in the World Congress report.

We have to discuss what our experience has been with our fractions in regard to the branches. We have to discuss the question of how we are recruiting and training industrial workers. What problems have arisen that we haven't been able to find a

solution to in regard to comrades' level of activity? Who should be a member and who shouldn't be a member of the Socialist Workers Party today and how do we organise our non-members? These are the sorts of questions that we have to look at once again.

None of this is in any sense a new discussion; we are always trying to improve our organisational forms. But completion of the turn makes it possible to experiment, and makes our discussion new in that we are dealing with a very changed party. So I want to look at some of these questions and pose some organisational moves.

This is not a discussion on the turn as such — how well we did, what we could have done better, and many, many other lessons about the turn that we think would be useful to pass on to other comrades in the International who still haven't completed the turn or are making very heavy weather of even getting the turn going in their sections. I think it would be useful to project such a discussion for the next National Committee meeting by looking back over the last four years of our party's life. I'm not trying or attempting to do that in this report today. This is something else. This is the question of what further steps we need to take to proletarianise the party.

The process of thinking about this question began for me thanks to another product of our turn — our party school. I got to read a good bit more of Lenin on the question of building the party.

As comrades who have been to the school will remember, we ended up that section of our course by reading the theses of the Third Congress of the Comintern on organising communist parties around the world. At the last session of the school I began to compare the theses of the Comintern with our own organisational procedures, holding them up for comparison. That seemed like a useful thing to do, since we are more and more the sort of proletarian party that the Comintern theses discuss, although of course we are far from being the mass parties that those theses are basically directed towards. The fact that we are not mass parties makes some of the things said in the theses not relevant to us for the moment. The fact that there is not a mass international led by the Bolshevik Party makes, for instance, the discussion on the international relations between parties somewhat different today than it was for the Comintern.

Of course, in the National Office, and for all of us around the country, there have been a whole lot of other stimuli as we thought about and looked at some of the problems created by the turn to industry in terms of the activity of our comrades. One of the discussions I remember we had last year was the problem of youth comrades, comrades active in Resistance who very rapidly develop a lot of energy in revolutionary politics and get onto a youth executive, become provisional members of the party, and therefore are asked to attend provisional members' classes. They find that with the

range of their activity, especially if they are industrial workers attending a fraction meeting as well, they don't have a night off, let alone a day off in the whole course of the week.

Last year in Melbourne, I know that that had become something of a problem in terms of trying to recruit very good young comrades who found the level of activity that would be demanded of them, if they joined the party, almost intolerable. I know that the Melbourne comrades to a very large extent had solved the problem of recruiting these comrades by the beginning of this year, but nevertheless it is an ongoing problem right around the country.

I remember I also had a discussion with Larry Douglas on how to try to involve more people in the politics of branch meetings. We were looking at Sydney branch meetings and thinking that while we had made steps forward on different levels, for instance, trying to have more systematic educationals — having two political reports, one educational and one political report — that nevertheless, we felt there was still much too limited a level of political involvement of comrades in the branch meetings.

These are the sorts of problems that have emerged, or that people think about, that we have been worried about for some time without being able to propose any solution. I remember on the youth problem, all we could say is, well they are young, they can take it, and hope for the best! The best of them did. There is no doubt about that, because they have joined the party and become provisional members. But nevertheless we knew that it was a problem.

When I was reading the Comintern's theses, there were three general areas where I thought they were rather useful for helping us to think out what we should be doing.

## **No absolute form of organisation**

The first area is taken up in the second thesis, and I am going to read the first part of it:

... There is no absolute form of organisation which is correct for all communist parties at all times. The conditions of the proletarian class struggle are constantly changing, and so the proletarian vanguard has always to be looking for effective forms of organisation. Equally, each party must develop its own special forms of organisation to meet the particular historically determined conditions within the country.<sup>11</sup>

That's a good way to begin because it allows us to approach the question of our organisational forms and norms in a flexible manner — not in a way that what was god-given in the past must always be right for the future. And we can say for sure that conditions have changed from the '60s and early '70s, when we first began to build our party. We are in a new period, so it is absolutely correct for us to think this question

out once again.

I think we could even set our thinking in the framework of a look at where we got the norms of our party or our party structures from. We've got to say at the outset of course, that these party structures have been very effective for us until now. We got them from Lenin via Cannon. I guess that is the best way of looking at it. We've refined them somewhat ourselves, of course. Just as Cannon refined the views of the Comintern and the organisational forms of the communist parties to make a party that would survive from 1928 right up until today.

Perhaps in more immediate terms, if we look at the periods when these norms were developed in the United States — the '50s and '60s — we can see how these periods affected our forms rather a lot. The period of the witch-hunt in the '50s meant that the party's life became rather turned in on itself, that the forms of organisation were very much ones necessary to hold a beleaguered cadre together. In the '60s youth radicalisation it seems the forms didn't change very much, but because of the nature of the youth radicalisation, the massive upsurge that it meant, the norms and forms of the '50s didn't restrict the growth of the party unduly, and the level of activity of the youth that were joining fitted in fully with the sorts of structures of the party at the time.

Of course, there was one other thing that these norms and structures did for us once we adopted them here that was rather a useful thing, and that was to act as a filter, if you like. They made sure the level of activity and the nature of the party did not become too distorted by the non-proletarian environment our party developed in.

But we are in a different period now. What happened in 1974-75 and what is happening again now shows that very clearly.

Secondly, we are a different party because where comrades work is very different, the sort of people we recruit is different, and our party is rather stable. I think we can say we are in a period again of relative upsurge in the mass movement. If we step back and compare the last couple of years to any year from '79 back through '73, we can say we are in the best period we have been in since 1972. The conditions are better for building our party now than in any period that I can remember in that time. It's shown by the number of contacts around us, the number of areas we can intervene in. Our problem at present is not fighting a rearguard action against people who won't turn with the party or people who are capitulating to imperialism, or any sort of alien pressure like that. Our party is in a very healthy state. So we can be confident about how we can maximise the gains we've made, how we can take maximum advantage of the situation that has opened up.

The membership figures I quoted earlier are an indication of the last six months or

18 months of work. We are inching ourselves ahead of the sects — the Healyites, the Spartacists, the IS. We're inching our way ahead, though nothing is yet decisive in this regard. As to the Communist Party, there isn't any doubt that they are in quite a profound crisis and we are going to increase their crisis over the next period. The Socialist Party, we know, is in the process of a faction fight. Neither the CPA nor the SPA seem to be growing significantly, even though, at least on paper, they are somewhat larger than us.

So we are in a good position to begin a discussion that will help us become a bigger, stronger, more proletarian party. I want to begin the discussion with another warning, though. And this is actually the second part of the thesis I read out before. It relates to the fact that there is no panacea, no short-cut or gimmick, nothing we haven't discovered before that will enable us to leap over the obstacles we have had all along in the years of building a party. There is nothing like that. We shouldn't be looking for some sort of touchstone that will solve all of our problems. The discussion is not designed to do that, it is designed to maximise our advantages, not to find a magic solution to all our ills and woes of being small. The second part of this thesis says in fact:

But there are definite limits to national variations. Proletarian class struggle varies from country to country and according to the stage of the revolution, but the similarity in the conditions of struggle is of decisive importance for the international communist movement. This similarity serves as a basis for the organisation of all communist parties.<sup>12</sup>

No, we are not throwing democratic centralism out the window, we are not throwing Leninism out of the window, there are limits to what variations we can experiment with. We will remain a Leninist party, that's our rock-solid foundation. Our problem is how to strengthen and increase both democracy and centralism in the party. The more there is of both, and they are completely dependent on each other, then the stronger the party will be.

## Formal democracy in our political life

That leads on to the second general area that I found useful in the theses — the sixth and seventh theses, which discuss the question of democratic centralism. I will quote them in full because I think it will aid in thinking out this question.

6. The democratic centralism of the communist party organisation should be a real synthesis, a fusion of centralism and proletarian democracy. This fusion can be achieved only when the party organisation *works* and *struggles* at all times together, as a united whole. Centralisation in the communist party does not mean formal, mechanical centralisation, but the *centralisation of communist activity*, i.e., the creation of a

leadership that is strong and effective and at the same time flexible.

Formal or mechanical centralisation would mean the centralisation of “power” in the hands of the party bureaucracy, allowing it to *dominate* the other members of the party or the revolutionary proletarian masses which are outside the party. Only enemies of communism can argue that the communist party wants to use its leadership of the proletarian class struggle and its centralisation of communist leadership to dominate the revolutionary proletariat. Such assertions are false. Equally incompatible with the principles of democratic centralism adopted by the Communist International are antagonisms or power struggles within the party.

The same divisions emerged in the old organisations of the non-revolutionary workers’ movement as had existed in the organisation of the bourgeois state: the division between the “bureaucracy” and the “people”. Under the paralysing influence of the bourgeois environment a separation of functions occurred; formal democracy replaced the active participation of working people, and the organisation was divided into the active functionaries and the passive masses. Even the revolutionary workers’ movement has not entirely escaped the influence of the bourgeois environment and the evils of this formalism and division.

The communist parties must overcome these contradictions once and for all by carrying out a systematic ongoing plan of political and organisational work and by making *many* improvements and changes.<sup>13</sup>

Then it goes on to talk about the transformation of the mass socialist parties into communist parties. This is obviously what the theses were aimed at but they contain many lessons for us.

7. The transformation of a mass socialist party into a communist party must be more than a transfer of authority to the CC which leaves the old order otherwise unchanged. Centralisation should not just be agreed in theory; it must be realised in practice. All party members must understand how centralisation *positively strengthens their work and their capacity to fight*. Otherwise the masses will see centralisation as bureaucratisation of the party and will oppose any attempts to introduce centralisation, leadership and firm discipline. Anarchism and bureaucratism are two sides of the same coin.

Formal democracy by itself cannot rid the workers’ movement of either bureaucratic or anarchistic tendencies because these in actual fact result from this type of democracy.

All attempts to achieve the centralisation of the organisation and a strong leadership will be unsuccessful so long as we practice formal democracy. We must develop and maintain an effective network of contacts and links both, on the one hand, within the party itself between the leading bodies and the rank and file of the membership and, on

the other hand, between the party and the proletarian masses outside the party.<sup>14</sup> Let's look at some of these points in more detail. It calls for "an effective network of contacts and links" in the party organs. Of course we are always striving to improve this, but in general, for a party our size, this hasn't been a big problem. There is a real contact between the leadership of the party and the ranks of the party. I think the very size of this National Committee meeting shows that. We have always gone for a big National Committee, big National Committee meetings, pulling in other comrades who aren't on the National Committee, so that we could consult and discuss with the whole party leadership as frequently as possible. Nevertheless it is something for us to always keep our eye on.

Now, on the question of centralisation: We have that to a good extent, and that's based on the democratic functioning of the party. But can we improve this? Is there a way in fact of eliminating some aspects of our formal democratic functioning, the *formalism* of our democratic functioning, and putting more *real content* into the democratic functioning of the party, and therefore allowing a greater centralisation, a greater efficiency of the party?

If we look at the branch meetings of the party, I think that at some times, in some branches, in some cases, in some meetings, without being specific — because it's not the key point to be specific, but to reflect on the problem in general — we can see aspects of *formal democracy*. We don't see enough active involvement of comrades in the branch meetings in the discussion in the branches. We see a certain passivity of the comrades, who come to the branch meetings out of duty but wait for them to be over.

Often the executive has in fact over-prepared the branch meeting, leached the life out of the branch meeting itself. Perhaps that is the most common aspect of formal democracy in the party today. We are not necessarily supplying the rounded political life that the branch bodies should have; not necessarily supplying the rounded political experience, the leadership, the Marxist education, the political discussion, those points that Jack Barnes in his report to the World Congress suggested should be the content of branch activity. We know that the week-to-week life of the party often fails to meet these goals adequately.

Now, compare a meeting of the Political Committee. It has a much more flexible procedure. I don't think we have ever had time limits in the Political Committee. So, in reality, the way the Political Committee functions is as the most democratic organ of the party, more democratic than the National Committee, because we are forced to have time limits at the National Committee meetings. Obviously the party would have a much, much bigger problem if the Political Committee was leached of political life than if one branch was, but it is a useful comparison.

We've been trying to deal with this problem of putting more politics into the branches for some time now. I know that Sydney branch thought, OK, let's have two political reports, an educational and a political report, and push for much more rigid time limits on other questions. When the agenda is adopted time limits are sometimes given: organiser's report, seven minutes, discussion, 15 minutes; sales report, seven minutes, discussion, seven minutes; finance report, seven minutes, discussion, seven minutes. And there is an attempt to get that stuff over with quick, because comrades feel that week by week it becomes a little bit of a dry bone to gnaw on; it doesn't have enough political content for them.

Nevertheless, those sorts of time limits hardly allow the possibility of a serious discussion, if such a discussion should be required, if the comrades want to have such a discussion. Of course, I give a model that has never been applied that strictly. We're not idiots. Branches have always acted sensibly. If anyone wanted a discussion all the time limits in the world would have gone out the window. What I'm talking about is a relative problem, not an absolute problem.

However, it does indicate the attempt to force into an artificial mould the life of the branch. The tasks and perspectives meetings, of course, are a lot different. We take a lot more time. We put aside four or five hours, sometimes more. The reports are major and important political reports. In general, although even here there can be exceptions, the discussion is much more thorough. There is more time for a discussion for a start. Comrades feel that this really is setting the perspectives for the branch for the next period, so that they should speak their minds on the questions. Perhaps the tasks and perspectives meetings tend to be a little over-long on some occasions. Perhaps there is a happy medium. That's what we have to think about.

## Level of activity of our cadre

The third section of the theses, under the title "The Communist Obligation to Work", also contains a description of how work ought to be organised in the communist parties. Before it gets onto that area of work, it begins with an important and elementary point for us. It says: "The most important requirement is that *all members should at all times participate in the day-to-day work of the party*". It emphasises that point. I'll quote the whole of thesis 10, where it takes up this point in more detail:

10. A communist party, in order to ensure that its members are really active, must demand that they give all their time and energy to party work. Then it will have a really active membership. Besides commitment to communist ideas, membership of the communist party obviously entails formal admission, preceded in some instances by a period of candidacy, regular payment of membership dues, subscription to the party

paper, etc. But the most important condition of membership is that members participate on a day-to-day basis in the work of the party.<sup>15</sup>

I don't think that there is any problem with our party on this score. We've always had a high level of activity. We've always demanded pretty well day-to-day work from comrades. In general it has been a very active membership. That's one of the reasons why the turn for us, all things considered, was comparatively easy. I think our biggest problem with the turn was industrial injuries. There was nothing else that really hurt us in making the turn.

Has this level of activity been a factor in the growth of our party? Yes. But of course, the small size of our party at the beginning of the turn and the small size of our party today, is mainly a product of the objective conditions that we faced: the fact that in 1965 the old Trotskyist movement collapsed and that we didn't have a party going into the youth radicalisation but had to rebuild one from scratch. Moreover, it's clear that revolutionary currents in advanced capitalist countries are isolated. It has been difficult conditions to build revolutionary parties. No one has succeeded in building a mass revolutionary party where we have not. So objective conditions are the main reason for our small size, but they are not the only reason. Our level of activity that we demand is another reason. Our level of activity is very high and our achievements are very high — person for person.

Because of this high level of our activity and the nature of our cadre the turn was a comparatively painless process. But once in industry, once in the industrial working class, there were some questions that we had to face. How were we going to recruit more industrial workers? What should our norms of activity be? How long does it take to win workers? How long does it take to train a cadre? Does it really take three months as a provisional member and then the job's done? Obviously not.

Consider the situation of workers on the job. They are very good militants; see our literature; see that that is the way forward; come to some ITS classes, then join the party as provisional members and look at the level of activity of our party members. They may think, well, I can't really hack that, I'm not up to that yet. I'm not up to being at one moment a hater of Fraser and union militant and at the next moment not having a moment to call my own. There are a lot of workers in that situation.

We've done pretty well recruiting young workers. There are a lot of young comrades who are attracted by the very milieu and activity of Resistance, who are held in much more strongly in that milieu, who make this jump, make this transition quite easily. They don't have a family. They don't have other interests in life. It's easier for them, and some of the best comrades we have recruited in the past period obviously fall into this category. They've fitted in fine with the norms of the party, straight away. But for

older workers, there can be some problems.

I was struck by one experience I heard at the IEC meeting in May. One of the leaders of the Mexican section who has led the turn there was working in a plant where they had recruited a good layer of workers. But he pointed out that recruitment is to a certain extent provisional, because some of these workers will attend some meetings, but not all the meetings. While they are the leaders of the working class in that factory — they are militants, revolutionaries — they are not yet carrying out the same norms of activity as many others in the party are who came from a different environment and who don't have family responsibilities or whatever. The point is, it's going to take quite a time to train those sorts of workers, and it may take other political conditions too, to finish the process. That's not to say they are inactive, that they should not be members at all. They *should* be members, but, in a sense, it is a provisional process.

Perhaps some of the current demands of our activity can be too extreme for workers like that. I leave aside the problem of non-workers, which is another discussion.

We have to think some things out here. The theses tell us that the main duty of the communist is to work, an obligation to work, to engage in day-to-day work. But, of course, the industrial workers we come into contact with do just that. They work eight hours a day or more, and that's a political arena for their main political work, and for our main political work. That's what we said when we began the turn and that's what we're doing more and more. Perhaps such a worker could attend some meetings and sell some papers. Obviously, if there is something that is happening in the workplace, if there is a strike or something like that they will be very active on the picket lines and so on. Perhaps that level of activity is what we can expect and hope for over a period while we educate and train such workers.

Now I know in some cases we have accepted that in fact. With workers we have recruited like that we know that it is a provisional process: Over a period we will win and convince, train and educate those workers into full participation in party life. As their political consciousness rises, they put the party first more and more. But that is not a process of three months, and not even of one year, but of several years of persistent work. But doesn't such a person fulfil our norms, the norms that are laid out in the Comintern theses?

I think with the perspectives we have in our industrial work, we can say more and more that that sort of person would fulfil our norms and should be a party member.

## Day-to-day organisation of our work

The theses then get more specific about how to organise the work, and I want to look at the second part of chapter three on this. Let's look at theses 11 and 12:

11. For the purpose of carrying out day-to-day work each party member should *belong to a smaller working group*: a committee, commission, board, group, fraction or cell. This is the only way party work can be correctly allocated, carried out and supervised.

It goes without saying that members should attend the general meetings of their local organisations; it is not wise for legal parties to try to substitute meetings of local representatives for these general meetings. *All* party members must attend these meetings regularly. But this is by no means all. The proper preparation of these meetings and intervention in workers' meetings, demonstrations and mass actions presupposes work by smaller groups or by individuals delegated for the purpose. The vast amount of work that has to be done can be examined carefully and organised properly only by smaller groups. Unless all members are divided among a large number of working groups and participate daily in the work of the party, even the most militant efforts of the working class to further the class struggle will lead nowhere and the requisite concentration of all revolutionary proletarian forces around a united and strong communist party will be impossible.

12. Communist *cells* must be formed to carry out the day-to-day work in the various spheres of party activity: house-to-house agitation, party schools, group newspaper reading, information services, liaison work, etc.

Communist cells are the basic units for carrying out the day-to-day communist work of the party in the factories, trade unions, workers' cooperatives, military detachments etc. — wherever there are a few or more party members or candidate members. When the number of party members in a factory, a union etc. is large, fractions are organised, whose work is supervised by the communist cell. Should it be necessary to organise a broadly based opposition fraction or to take part in the work of an already existing fraction, the aim of the communists must be to win a leading position through the work of their own separate cell.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously for the Comintern the "fraction" that they describe there is something different from what we mean by the word. It is something broader than the party. Our fractions tend to be only party members. The fractions that we have today would perhaps be more equivalent to a "cell". Of course for us, not being a mass party, our "cells" or our fractions are not often in one factory only.

There are some other day-to-day bodies that offer some obvious parallels for us: the sort of commission or committees that we organise for different aspects of our work, whether it be to organise in mass work with our fractions, or whether it's a finance committee or sales committee.

Now I want to make some general comments about our fractions. The level of participation of comrades in meetings of the industrial fractions is much higher than in

the party branches as a whole. Comrades who don't speak at party meetings will speak at industrial fractions. Probably this is true in other areas of our mass work too. The discussion of how to carry out the work in such bodies is often more intense and sometimes in that way more useful than, say, the discussion of the general approach that you would have in a branch meeting. This is also probably true in other areas of our work. At a meeting of the printshop staff, comrades will discuss how to do the work better, the problems that have arisen. The same with our editorial boards and so on in all the areas of our day-to-day work. They can have a richer life than the general meetings of the branches.

The question we have to ask is have we ever elevated these bodies enough in our thinking and in our overall practice. Partly we have with our industrial fractions. There is no doubt about that, but perhaps still not enough. Obviously when a fraction takes an initiative, wants to propose some measure, we encourage it. The more the individual comrades lead on the job, the more the fraction leads the work of the comrades on the job, the better off we are, the more likelihood of recruiting there is, the more successful will we be in carrying out the party tasks.

So in this period we should go for more and more centres of initiative and use these day-to-day bodies of the party for this purpose.

That's happened in Resistance. The more initiatives Resistance takes — the more experiments it carries out — the more chance we've got of building an organisation and recruiting young people to the party. A reaching out process is involved with these different bodies, which are often also the best way to train cadres and leaders. Of course this can't be in isolation from the branch, from the political work of the party as a whole, from the National Conference and all the other institutions of the party. But comrades get a good training in day-to-day politics from these bodies if they work properly, or if we make them work better than they do today.

We don't, however, need to elevate these bodies into a new formal structure, i.e., that everyone must be assigned to a cell — industrial, white collar, printshop, some form of cell system like that. That would make another structure in the party. That's not a good method for general party political discussions for a start. Moreover, it implies that we move towards bigger or more structured leaderships of these formations, something that would be artificial, that would defeat the purpose of these bodies as they are at the moment. I don't think we need to go to a cell system, and that's not at all what we are proposing. At the most, the leaderships of these bodies perhaps need a coordinator, a secretary, a fraction director, whatever you call it, it doesn't matter. But we don't need a new leadership level as such. We don't need a three-tier structure of cell, branch, national organisation. We don't want to make the

cells the basic units of the party. The basic units of the party should remain the branches. I think that is correct at present.

## Frequency of branch meetings

So we're not proposing any structural changes in that way, but rather an elevation of the political importance of branch meetings, making the political life more relevant in the branch meetings. That would increase the potential centralisation of the party, because in a way it would give the branch executive committee more authority, both formal and real.

The proposal the Political Committee is making is that party branches hold monthly general meetings instead of our present weekly meetings.

Obviously the idea behind this proposal is to try to make the party branch meeting something between a tasks and perspectives meeting and its current weekly meeting. There would have to be a much longer time for the branch meeting than we currently assign, perhaps several hours, with political reports on the questions that have come up in the intervening month and thorough reports on the activity of the branch in the coming month. Such branch meetings would need reports from the major fractions — if not at every branch meeting, then quite often. Setting aside more time and having less frequent meetings could mean much more participation, much more of a discussion, much more of a real political life in the branch itself.

If we did that, then of course there would also be more centralisation. The branch executive would be much more the decision-making body in the intervening weeks. Of course, this will only work if the industrial fractions themselves continue to take more initiatives in the day-to-day work and grow into the sort of bodies that we have been trying to make them into in the past period. Similarly in the other areas, the other fractions will obviously play more and more of a role between meetings, with the executive leading, directing, and deciding on the direction of work if necessary.

If we have meetings once a month, it would mean that a criterion of membership of the party would be regular attendance at those meetings. No more formal apologies. If comrades miss enough branch meetings, then they should be dropped from membership for inactivity. Such a procedure would help to guarantee that the party branch would be discussing altogether at least once a month.

Of course, this proposal is designed to alleviate the problems of industrial workers joining the party. At the moment when you tell them that it is a once-a-week branch meeting, and a once-a-week fraction meeting, then there are forums, and you add to the list a good bit on that, they begin to think that this is a little too high a level of activity in the period when those comrades are being integrated into the party.

Attendance at that monthly branch meeting should be the thing that they are always required to do plus as much involvement in fractions and other day-to-day work as we can get them to do, depending on their level of consciousness, physical abilities, and so on.

There will be some comrades who are involved mainly on the job — talking our politics on the job, distributing *Direct Action* on the job — and coming to the branch meetings. That may be the case for a number of workers we recruit — and let's hope there are a lot of workers like that that we can recruit — whose main activity will be limited to this. They can work into the level of activity that we have been used to a little more slowly.

This could also solve some of the sorts of problems that occurred in Melbourne branch last year or in Sydney branch this year, the problem of youth comrades who can't take that level of activity. Even to relieve them of one meeting a week, or let's say three meetings a month to be more precise, would help.

There are obviously a number of technical problems involved in implementing this proposal. First of all *Direct Action*. We've been used to organising a lot of the sales through the branch meeting. OK, all we can do is make an assertion: If party branches are still relying on branch meetings to organise the sales that is already inefficient, and that's one reason for low sales. The process of dropping off papers to comrades, while taking some work, is superior. (Whether it's only to comrades, or to supporters as well is another question to look at.) It gets the paper out quicker. It gets the paper in comrades' hands earlier and they can be selling it earlier than they otherwise would. Anyway, the process of not organising it through the branch meeting once a week won't affect the active sellers, who are self-motivated by and large. At this stage they come in as soon as the paper is out to go out and sell. Obviously, that's an area we are going to work on and make sure it functions. We cannot afford a drop in sales. We are hoping for an increase in *DA* sales from this procedure.

On finances. That's another problem. Some of these bodies — fractions or others — will have to be assigned to collect the money. Not to run the money. That will still be the responsibility of the branch executive. A system of envelopes will have to be worked out.

Then there are going to be the problems of how to assign comrades who are not in one of the industrial fractions, comrades who don't really have an area of work and therefore the only regular contact with such comrades will be once a month. Obviously, these are the sorts of problems each executive is going to have to look at and work out, so as to make sure that all comrades are assigned in some way to political work in the party.

There is one thing that we are going to have to discuss under the labour movement report anyway, and that's a more general industrial fraction, because of what's happening in the economy.

But if you add up sales committees, financial committees, fund-drive committees, you add up the printshop, you add up the editorial board, the different institutions in the party, you obviously have plenty of different ways of functioning, different meetings where you can be using someone to collect money and so on. In fact we have a whole series of contacts and links within the different levels of the party.

Let's look at the role of the industrial fractions in a little more detail. We have to elevate the role of the fractions, and this is something we have to discuss here today as well.

As I said, we don't think we want to elect a leadership body of the fractions in most cases. Wollongong is perhaps the one exception. I think they have had a steering committee of the fraction at one point. I would like the comrades in the steel fraction to express their opinion of that. It's something we are going to be discussing. But until we get something of that size in other fractions, to elect another layer of leadership is simply to have another meeting, is simply to over-organise the work.

Well, if they are not cells, if they are not the basic units of the party, we can be clear on some things. It's legitimate for the branch to affirm the decision of the executive to appoint the director — the secretary, or the coordinator, or the organiser — of the different fractions and units. Obviously the executive would be very unwise to appoint someone who didn't have the support or who couldn't win authority with the comrades in such an area of work. The usual way this happens is to carve up among the executive comrades the different areas of work. Maybe in this period we are going to look at how that happens, and be more cautious about it once the fractions have achieved a level of stability and clarity about who their leaders are. Anyway, it's those areas on which we are going to have to begin a discussion, and think out. We won't fully solve any of them today. We will solve them in practice as we get more experience and implement this report.

How are we going to implement these ideas? We need a lot of branches to try them out in order to get a feel for it. Initially, when we began to think about this we thought we'd take one branch as a guinea pig. At first it was going to be Sydney, which is the guinea pig for most new ideas. But that would have been too much of an artificial experiment because Sydney branch is peculiar. While less things can go wrong because of the stability which the national apparatus and the Political Committee bring to the Sydney branch, it would have been an artificial experiment. We want to see what it will be like in a small branch, what it will be like in a branch like Melbourne, with several

industrial fractions and so on. If it is going to help us quickly, then the sooner we get into it, the better. Nevertheless, there may be some branches which think that this is dead wrong for them and think they are doing fine just as they are. If a branch comes to that conclusion after discussing this report, then they should just go on as they were and wait until more experience is in. After all, we are proposing an idea that comes out of what we think is the reality of the last period, and where our party is at, but it has to be tested in practice to see whether it is useful or not.

If we implement this, it will also have some other ramifications which we can't figure out at the moment. It may in passing help us solve the problem of what sort of regional structure we have for Sydney, where we now have two branches, or maybe even what structure we have for the whole of New South Wales. One thing that prevented us from wanting another executive in Sydney, given our experience of the last time we set up regional structures, was not to have one more meeting. We can look at that question again soon.

## Organising our supporters

Related to these points, interlocking with them, is the question of supporters of the party. What do we mean by supporters? We mean the sort of people who dropped away from the party because the demands we placed on them in immediate terms were too great. We mean the sort of people who can't hack the norms of being a fully active communist, whatever the reasons.

This discussion is designed to help us involve these sorts of people, these sorts of supporters. Not only are we seeking to get more out of our cadre, but also to get more out of our supporters as well. We're trying to improve the performance of those who should not join or who won't join, but who sympathise with the party.

Since we are changing some things at one level, it is a good time to have a look at this problem. The last attempt to organise our supporters was tried at the rockbottom period of our party after we had undertaken the turn, lost the initial layer of comrades who went because they didn't like the way the fusion went and on top of that didn't like the turn. We were feeling the cold draught around our ankles and thought that we needed to organise some of the people around our party.

Things have changed since then. We got some wind in our sails. Resistance began to grow and then soon after that the party began to grow. We never solved in that period the problem of what level of activity to expect of a supporter, an organised supporter, someone who is a member of what we called supporters' clubs. All right, that was the problem we faced in the past. To a certain extent the problem remains. I think every branch organiser could think of anything between three and 30 people in

this category, i.e. people we would like to organise in a more systematic manner, who are basically loyal to the party. And the problem is going to grow in the future if we are right about the political period we are entering.

There's another thing that is worth us thinking about too. We're entering a period in which the labour movement is adopting a social contract. That's going to lead in the reasonably short term to a good deal of disillusion with the labour leaders. It's going to lead to a differentiation, a polarisation in the labour movement.

We can perhaps compare the period we are entering with the period from 1974 in Britain, in which the Labour government came in with a social contract and drove down workers' living conditions and wages in a vicious manner. We know there can be no other direction in this period for a Labor government.

We have a relatively good relationship of forces on the left, probably better than any of the forces that called themselves revolutionary in Britain had in 1974. But we've got to find ways to take advantage of the situation to the maximum. And the category of supporters may be one way. There will be others that we haven't thought of yet which we will come to as the situation ripens, as we see openings.

Comrades who are familiar with that period in Britain may know that it was a period when the International Socialists grew rapidly. That's something for us to think about and to think about the forms of organisation that can be used to take advantage of a similar opening here. We need to find a way to hold people while we educate and train them, while we familiarise them with our newspaper, and also prevent them from being organised by any other current where they might even call themselves a member. For instance, the sort of activity that is required to join the CPA would mean something like being a supporter of our party.

We have a number of immediate needs too, not just the ones that we can expect in the period we are going into. We quite often run into migrant workers who come from a political tradition that expects a membership card. It's a relatively easy thing to join a Communist Party if you identify with that party. The Socialist Party has done quite well out of joining up people from that tradition. But even when we begin to break some people from the Stalinists, the norms of our activity often make it hard for them to be integrated. It's not so difficult to integrate their kids, but it's much more difficult to integrate them. But organising some of them as supporters would be a useful thing for us to do.

Then there is the problem of some of our ex-members who we tried to organise last time in the supporters' clubs. We've had further experiences with some of these types since that time, so some of the chaff has been winnowed out. But there are some genuinely good ex-members. Everybody can think of someone in this category.

Then there are the sort of people who come close to our organisation and drift into the CPA because our norms of activity are too high. Steve Painter told me about a couple of people who came to ITS classes last year and we saw them at the opening of the CPA congress here. No good reason, but when we finally got to the point and said this is what membership entails, and there wasn't anything else, it seemed a bit too much. And then there are some people that we run across in the Labor Party, people who read our paper and tend to consciously identify with us and support the party.

If we were able to organise some or a lot of these sorts of people, that would more realistically reflect our membership if we compared ourselves with the Communist Party or the Socialist Party. Moreover, it's very good to have these sorts of people organised. The more they are organised, the more strongly they identify with us and the more they take in our politics. Even if they get some things wrong, there is not a great deal of harm in that for us.

Nevertheless, we are *not* like the CPA. So these people *would not be members*. We've got to be clear, we are not the CPA. So there is no exact word to fit the category of what we would call these people. Perhaps *organised supporters* is the way we should pigeonhole it in our minds. We can start using another word, sympathiser, for those who aren't organised supporters and start clearing up our language usage again.

These comrades would only be *supporters* and would not have the *rights* of members. It would be a mistake for us to change the norms to the extent where they could be members. If we did that then we would kill the democracy in the party. That is why the CPA is fundamentally undemocratic, the Labor Party is fundamentally undemocratic. There should be no rights without duties, and the duties are to be an active communist. We don't want anything but that.

Our priority still remains our provisional members. That is the priority for the party right now in terms of recruitment and membership. We want to keep the category of provisional members. This in no way does away with the category of provisional members. Because they are the ones that have the chance in the most immediate sense of coming all the way and becoming party members. Perhaps up until now we have had a slight tendency to push provisional members through a little too fast. Branches differ a little on this, but partly because there is a recognition of how difficult it is to make a new member, the attitude emerges that the sooner they are a full member, the sooner we do it, the bigger chance there is of holding them. Okay, that's the correct attitude in general, the correct approach to try to win someone while they are very interested in our politics early on. But these new proposals may make it easier to recruit and hold people. Therefore we should here and now reaffirm once

again just what provisional membership is from our point of view.

Provisional membership from our point of view is *candidate* membership. Should this person be a member of the party? Are they going to make a good communist? That's what we have got to emphasise. That's what we have to find out. All these moves will be a mistake if we change on this, if we are not joining up good communists, good worker Bolsheviks — whatever word we want to use. We want real members of the party. We don't want to get our membership up and congratulate ourselves. It's much better to have a bigger supporters layer than to have fake members. Unless we are in a different period, unless it is 1905 just around the corner and we have to throw open the doors. Already we have been rather flexible — branches have just extended the period indefinitely if they wanted to — and I think we should accept that and allow for quite an extended period of provisional membership.

## Party education

There is one general area that we haven't solved and it's one that we don't have proposals on right now and that is the question of party education. We put a lot of work and resources into the party school. That was the direction our party education program took. At the time we set that up we said this will have useful spin-offs. We will be able to prepare better educationals, the branches will be able to prepare better classes. If you look around the country today every branch, with the exception of Wollongong, has members who have been to the party school. In most cases more than one comrade. And I am sure that has had a very useful effect on branch life, on the ability of the party as a whole to give educationals, to lead on different political questions. Another year and a half and that will be a much stronger effect.

Nevertheless we haven't been able to put aside enough person hours in the national office and in the school to redesign our provisional members' classes, our ITS classes, to use lots more of the things we have learned in the last period. We haven't and we need to. The branches are crying out for that. The comrades often talk about a gap. After the provisional members' classes and the school what is in between? Well, we have tried the Fundamentals of Marxism classes. It was more or less successful if comrades did the reading, which they didn't always. We have had the educationals in the party branch meetings — sometimes not so successful because often comrades were just learning to give an educational or it's on a topic that's not known enough, no one does any reading. It's more or less a talk you listen to and then you go home. It is not a very deep educational process.

It is to plug that gap short of going to the school and after the provisional members' classes that we have to concentrate some work on as well as redesigning our provisional

classes. How they will be held, when and where, whether they would be a special meeting or whatever; that is something that is the next phase of the discussion. With the degree of preparation we have right now, we are going to have to say to the branches to cope the best that you can for the next period and hopefully by the next NC we will have developed this area of work. The national office will try for it but that is all we can say at the moment. It was correct for us to put the resources into the school and put the emphasis on that. It has had the spin-off of comrades in the branches being able to talk politics and give more educationals but it has meant that on the other level we haven't moved ahead as much as we would have liked.

### **Role of *Direct Action***

Another big question is the role of *Direct Action*. I have left this till last because in many ways it caps off everything. We should return to it and understand the importance of this question. It is a key point. If we are having *monthly* branch meetings the role of the *weekly Direct Action* as an organiser, director, and informer of our membership becomes much greater. This becomes much more the scaffolding of the party than it has been to date. It will be very much the key contact for comrades from week to week with party ideas. It is actually that already. Obviously *Direct Action* has a much richer content in any one issue than any single branch meeting does, so it already is that if comrades read it and study it. But it becomes even more vital if we are on a monthly branch schedule. So comrades should really think of *Direct Action* as something they will study. The first category of people *Direct Action* is written for is the membership of the party. That is who it must be written for first.

Of course, we are always experimenting with *Direct Action* and trying to improve it and make it a more useful weapon. The theses also have something to say on that which is important. First of all they say that the first priority for every communist party is to have a good and wherever possible daily central paper. That is a mass party and it is not possible for us to do it, but the idea of a big central weekly organ is the correct use of our resources in this country now. It has an overhead. It means that we have a big printshop, it means that we have a big *Direct Action* staff, it means that there is only one organiser in Adelaide instead of two or whatever it might be. That has an overhead — putting that degree of resources into the central apparatus, into the party paper. It has an overhead for the party as a whole but I think it makes us, as a national political tendency, far more effective than we would otherwise be. Here is what the theses say:

36. Constant effort must be made to develop and improve the communist press.

No paper can be recognised as a communist organ unless it is subject to *party*

*control*. This principle must be applied, within reason, to all party publications, i.e., journals, papers, pamphlets etc., but control has to be exercised without affecting adversely their academic, propagandistic or other content. The party must be concerned more with the quality than with the quantity of papers. The first priority for every communist party is to have a good and, wherever possible, daily *central paper*.

37. A communist paper must never be run as a capitalist business in the way bourgeois papers and often the so-called “socialist” papers are. Our papers must be *independent* of the capitalist credit institutions. Skilful use of advertising can substantially assist a paper’s finances — provided the party is a legal mass party — but it must not lead to a paper becoming dependent on the large firms that place advertisements. Our papers will establish their authority by the uncompromising position they take on all proletarian social questions. Our papers must not try to satisfy the “public’s” desire for sensation or light entertainment. They must not heed the criticisms of the petty-bourgeois authors and virtuosos of journalism or seek an *entrée* to these literary circles.

38. The communist paper must concern itself first and foremost with the interests of the exploited and militant workers. It must be our best propagandist and agitator, the leading advocate of the proletarian revolution.<sup>17</sup>

This gets to the heart of a lot of what we have always said. Ours is a combination paper. It must be both propagandist and agitator. It has got to develop our line. It has got to beat out the line on the social contract. Beat it out and beat it out again. On the other hand, it has got to agitate around problems of everyday life of the working class. In fact, the section goes on to look at this in detail. Comrades should read the rest of theses 38 and 39 about making the paper very much a paper used by the ranks of the party and a paper that takes up the life of the working class. Everyday incidents should be reflected in the paper. Those aspects must come more and more into the life of the party and the life of the party paper. That means that every one of our bodies or “cells” have to consider themselves as being organised by *Direct Action* and therefore consider what should be put in *Direct Action* this week. How do we reflect what we have learned from some incident or other? How do we present that in *Direct Action*? That must be the outlook of the fractions and the different units of the party if we are not to suffer from this changeover.

Emphasising the role of the press also can help us from being over-organised. One thing that a lot of this discussion is about is to try to avoid having meetings about meetings. If there is one thing that has been a curse on our movement, it is that. It is still a curse in the world movement today. I am sure of it. We have got our share of it, and we are still going to have our share of it because we are so small. We are always going to be over-organised while we are so small. We have got a massive apparatus

for our size. It means that we can get our propaganda out and intervene in the class struggle very effectively. But this apparatus could already service a much bigger party.

So we are always going to be a bit over-organised while we are small. But if we can develop the initiatives of the comrades at the level of the different day-to-day organisations of the party and develop more *real* democracy in the functioning of the basic units of the party as the branches become more and more the political units we want, then we can also streamline the work of the party. We can make it more efficient. We can stop being so over-organised. We can stop having so many meetings about meetings.

### What sort of party

We are opening ourselves up and I am sure that there will be other steps that will emerge out of this process. I hope they do, because then it will mean we are right about the political period we are going into. That is a good period for us and one in which we are going to grow. It is not an accident that we are bigger today than we have ever been.

Finally, I want to go back to where I began, because I think a useful thought was quoted by John Percy in his report on the political resolution that we adopted that formally kicked off the turn in the party. He quoted James P. Cannon, from his speech “It Is Time for a Bolder Policy in the Unions”, something that is very relevant for us here as we consider what sort of party we aim to build.

We don’t want an “excess of Bolshevisation”, Cannon said, so that “every time we bring one person into the party we drive two others out by our impractical and unrealistic demands upon them ... We’ve got to grow up to the level of political people who are able to make use of members who want to belong to the party. Lenin was a great master at utilising material that wasn’t 100% perfect and he even succeeded in making a revolution with this defective material. One of the best stories I have ever heard was the remark made by Serge Evrikoff, a leader of the Left Opposition and secretary in the party under Lenin, when he was in this country. He remarked to some American comrades, ‘You will never begin to understand the genius of Lenin or to appreciate him in his full stature. You know that he made a revolution, but you don’t know the material he made it out of.’”<sup>18</sup>

The point is that we are not some exclusive club. We are not some elitist organisation. We are seeking to become a party of the working class. That means a bigger party than we are right now. Our party has to adjust to that perspective. From being the intellectual vanguard that we have been to being more and more a proletarian party. The theses end up with a similar exhortation to the organisers of communist

parties. They must not waste anyone in the historic struggle of the revolutionary party we are seeking to build:

58. The communist organiser must from the outset think about *the future historic role* that *each* member of the party will play as a soldier of our militant organisation at the time of the revolution. Thus the organiser will place workers in *that party section and give them that work* which best corresponds to their future position and role in the struggle. The work must be useful in itself and essential to today's battle, not merely an exercise which the activist does not understand. It must prepare the workers for the major tasks that will face them in tomorrow's final struggle.<sup>19</sup> ■

# Preparing the Party to Meet the Crisis

At the last plenum, we projected making an assessment of the party's turn to industry. But when we got closer to this plenum and started to think out what should be involved in that, we began to feel that it couldn't really be adequately done: It would be false to think that we could at present give a rounded assessment of the party's turn.

On the one hand, we are always assessing the proletarianisation of the party; that is an ongoing thing which we keep thinking about and which means we keep looking for new steps to take to further the development of the party as a proletarian party.

On the other hand, as for the specific tactic of the turn that we began some four years ago, to a large extent we will have to leave a rounded assessment of that to history.

At the last plenum and even two years ago, we said the turn was already behind us. We had succeeded with the initial goals of the turn by getting a big majority of our comrades into basic industry.

We can all have our personal opinions about the turn: Did we do it too late, should we have done it a couple of years earlier or four years earlier, and so on? When we look at that whole period in retrospect, the lull in the political situation in the mid-'70s, we can start to wonder about questions like that. When we look at the massive transformation it has meant for our party, the leap in self-confidence in the party as a whole, we can begin to wonder whether we shouldn't have done all this a little earlier.

But that is not the important thing. What is important is the continuing discussion about what to do next. The past is dead. Trotsky said at one point: "The party cannot live solely upon past reserves. It suffices that the past has prepared the present." And it certainly did that. We were able to make the turn. Trotsky went on: "But the present must be ideologically and practically up to the level of the past in order to prepare the

future.”<sup>20</sup> I think we can say that it is. Or rather, the present will be found to be up to the level of the past in the discussions and the decisions of our coming conference, which will look at existing reality in this country and around the world and develop the approach to further the building of our revolutionary proletarian party.

What is the main way in which we will further the proletarianisation of our party? The main new advance will come with the winning of more workers to our ranks. To a certain extent we are already succeeding in doing that, but stepping this up will be the main new advance that we can make in the next months and years.

There is not a lot more that the existing cadre of the party can do. There is no way they can be much more proletarian themselves. There is very little way they could work harder. We don't have any theory that if you go down the mines it would be better than working in steel and we will therefore be more of a proletarian party that way. (That is not to say that we don't want a miners' fraction.) It's not a question of taking on dirtier or harder jobs.

Of course we still have a very great deal to learn and we are all going to get a lot more experience in many different ways and jobs. But there is no turn within the turn: We can't spin faster and faster on the cadre that we have today.

Rather we will win more workers today by steeping ourselves more in the life, concerns, and struggles of our class. And we have come a long way and taken some big new steps already this year, judging by the discussion at this plenum.

## Success of the turn

Two years ago at another plenum of the National Committee I gave another report which said that the turn had already transformed us. I think the plenum and the conference following it reflected that. It's when we started “getting good”, we thought. There was a big leap in our understanding. We got a majority of our comrades into the industrial working class. That was very good for our morale. We knew that we could do it. We could say we were going to do something and then do it. We could start with a very low level of implantation, some 15% or less — and we liquidated some of that, because some of that was in the postal union and those comrades moved to another arena. Furthermore, when we initially voted for the turn at our plenum there were only about 40% of the comrades who said they were willing to get industrial jobs, and a good number of them were comrades on full time for the party. We could go from that situation to the situation today, or even two years ago, and thoroughly transform things.

Now, we had a lucky break. Our turn coincided with the extension of the Cuban Revolution in 1979. That was a tremendous political thing for us to orient to. Our

discussion around those questions helped us politically to understand where we were going, to understand the period we were entering, and to be confident we were on the right course. Those two things together — the industrial turn and the extension of the Cuban Revolution — are the things that make this period such a good one for us.

Two of the four main things that I took up in that report were the question of an independent party and the question of an ambitious party. We characterised our party with those words. We looked at how many things can go wrong with building a revolutionary party, especially when starting as a small group struggling against the stream. We thought that one of the ways we had protected ourselves from many of the mistakes was by adopting a very high level of activity, by being a very ambitious party, by always biting off more than we could chew, by running as hard as we could, by trying to exhaust ourselves. Well, we haven't changed that main feature of our life, that is clear. But we decided that another thing we needed was to concentrate more on the education of the party, developing our theoretical understanding of Marxism. So we set up our cadre school. We thought that was going to be an important feature. Today the school is a natural, well-oiled part of our party. We took that step in our stride. We are still paying for the buildings and so on, but we did it. Since the beginning of 1981, 24 comrades who are in this room have been through, or are presently at, the cadre school. That is not such a bad start, after two years. Of course, that is not the proportion in the organisation as a whole. We have put more of our leading comrades through than the ranks of the party, but nevertheless it indicates something.

What a massive impact that has when we have a discussion in this room! How much more confident we are about our political ideas — our ability to discuss with each other, where we came from, what we think — simply thanks to that one measure. In two years, look what we have been able to do with the comrades who are meeting in this room.

We made a number of other important changes in 1981 as well. We concentrated a lot of our resources on the development of our youth work. Resistance began to grow. We adjusted our work around Central America, stepping up that activity. We were prepared for the offensive in El Salvador by our conference, which discussed that. I think we were the only current on the left — because of the decisions we had taken in regard to Nicaragua — that understood what was happening in El Salvador and what was likely to emerge. So the general offensive didn't take us by surprise, and we were able to throw ourselves into the struggle to defend the Salvadoran revolutionaries.

Somewhere towards the end of 1980 and the beginning of 1981, we started to grow again. That was a very, very good feeling because the turn to a certain extent was a

hard period in our party's life and we lost a number of comrades. So it was good to see the growth of the party beginning again. This was due also to the political environment that was developing.

## New steps

But this year, in 1982, we really started to get some of our ideas together — again helped once more by the economic situation, the political situation, the economy going from boom to bust. We have made a number of very important steps this year which reflect important new political understandings. We developed our ideas on the organisation of the party, and on our trade union orientation. We have had four National Committee meetings, which is a record for us in one year. That is an achievement and an indication of our needs and the way the party is functioning today.

Let me go over some of those decisions that we have taken this year. I want to begin with the question of organisation. There are a couple of aspects we addressed ourselves to at the last plenum in regard to this.

First, how do we organise the party? How can we organise the party better in this period? And secondly, how do we organise our periphery, our supporters, our sympathisers? They were the two key themes we were addressing ourselves to.

The new branch structure of monthly meetings, trying to make them better and more political, has obviously been a success. That is my initial estimate. We haven't had a discussion on the Political Committee, but from talk around I think everyone is fairly happy about the meetings. They have been better, they have been more political. I can think of the Sydney meetings as one example that I have seen. It certainly has helped us on that level. It has achieved some of the purposes that we set out to achieve.

There are obviously a lot of problems, a lot of loose ends, that we have to tie up. We can discuss that out, partly in this meeting, partly in the discussion bulletins in the pre-conference period. We have to work on our fractions, how they are operating, how we organise some of the financial and sales aspects of our work. It is things like that that risk falling down in this period and that we haven't entirely got on top of. I am sure that the organisers know other problems created by this move that they haven't got on top of yet. They are things we will discuss and sort out. But basically, as an initial balance sheet, I would suggest it was a good move.

As for our supporters, I think we have to say that we haven't made as much of a start here as we hoped to have done by the time of this plenum. We want to organise our supporters not for the sake of it, but because we want to get more out of our supporters. We also want to organise them because it can be a step towards bringing

some of them into full party membership. In some cases these are our ex-members. We should remember how important this whole question is. Comrade Trotsky said, in a couple of different passages things like this:

Never forget those who “fall” by the wayside. Help them to return to the organisation if you have nothing irremediable to reproach them for on the level of revolutionary morality.<sup>21</sup>

Again, he said, you have to be very careful about calling somebody “hopeless”.

A number of comrades upon acquainting themselves with my archives have reproached me in a friendly way with having wasted and still continuing to waste so much time on convincing “hopeless people”. I replied that many times I have had the occasion to observe how people change with circumstances and that I am therefore not ready to pronounce people as “hopeless” on the basis of a few even though serious mistakes.

... It is an extremely difficult task to form an international proletarian vanguard under present conditions. To chase after individuals at the expense of principles would of course be a crime. But to do everything possible to bring back outstanding yet mistaken comrades to our program I have considered and still consider my duty.<sup>22</sup>

Trotsky was probably being defensive about someone who had turned out truly to be hopeless. But I think that his approach was a correct one. Whether it works or not in an individual case, it is the correct approach for our party.

Well, we haven’t yet done enough of this work, of organising our periphery, of chasing after the “hopeless” cases and bringing them towards us again. We know the reasons for that: We have been flat out.

We will step it up. Some branches have made a start, but we have not sufficiently expanded our supporters, even to the people we initially had in mind for this category.

The second major question that we took up this year — I am not going over these in order of priority — was turning our solidarity work into antiwar work. We deepened our understanding of the fight against war, the developing antiwar movement, and what this question means for our whole party and our approach to mass work.

We have had the discussion on the resolution already at this plenum and we have noted the very big opportunities to build antiwar activities. But what also has to be stressed over and over again is what a big chance to win new members this is. We have got to affirm that at this stage, this milieu, these antiwar marchers, are healthy; they are moving in the right direction. So we have to put a lot of effort into talking to these people who march and demonstrate.

This is what we have been looking forward to, this sort of social development. Overwhelmingly, the marchers on these actions are young people. That is the way it is going to be, that is the way it is. We haven’t yet grasped what an important area it is for

us in recruiting terms. Even in regard to people already getting active in the various antiwar and solidarity bodies, we haven't yet made systematic efforts to win them to our party.

This year antiwar work stepped up massively for us. It is a big area of political intervention. That allows us to do battle with reformism around a key aspect of the class struggle. There is a struggle going on now against war that takes a certain form. It may not be the form that we would say is the best form, or the form that must develop if we are to really stop war and defeat imperialism. But it is the form that exists, so it is where we have to begin. We have to help mobilise and politicise the thousands who are moving into active political life by the very same route that many of us here in this room did ourselves, 10 or 15 years ago.

Thirdly, we looked at the question of the social contract. I think we can be very proud of our record here. Again, we were probably six months late, but we got it right earlier than anyone else did. Since we don't sit in the same rooms as the leaders of the AMWSU or the parliamentary leaders who were cooking up the deal last year, who saw it in advance, we can only respond to the effects of the deal, of the sell-out on the wage question, the AMWSU wage settlement last year. We responded correctly to that. We began to get on top of it. We led on it for the working class as a whole in this country, there is no doubt about that, and as a result of that we started to be looked to by wider layers than we have been in the past. Our press is respected in a new way as a result of this.

It has been our party that has led the way in explaining in the labour movement — explaining that the “social wage campaign” was only a sugar coating for big sacrifices by workers. It's been our raising of the issue that has helped provide an impetus for some unions to begin challenging some of the give-backs that the ACTU bureaucrats want to accept.

Our position on the social contract has put us into a sort of leadership role in the trade union movement on a *political* level. Our problem is: Can we also be part of the *organised struggle itself* in a much more dramatic way than we have been to date?

The fourth thing that I want to mention that was a new question for us this year will help us to do this. That is getting rid of the tactical schema that we were falling into in regard to the trade unions. I think that does help us to remove a roadblock, that does help us to be part of the organised, fight-back leadership of the trade unions and of the struggle against the social contract. This new position represents a further development in our understanding of the working-class movement and our development of self-confidence as a party.

Let's step back and look at what we are saying and doing, what all these moves

amount to if you add them up. We have thrown down a gauntlet to the bureaucracy. Our ambition has certainly been confirmed by these moves. Our independence also. We thought out these moves not to prove anything about our independence but because we were independent. We were thinking: What flows out of the class struggle in this country, what do we need to do in this country to build a revolutionary party? It flowed out of our greater understanding of the class struggle in this country.

## **Boldness & initiative**

There is another lesson we can learn from the events of the last months and the last couple of weeks. That Newcastle meeting taught us something. We have referred to that over and over again at this plenum simply because it is a very pleasant experience to heckle Wran for his pro-capitalist policies and to be with a lot of workers who are doing the same thing. That is going to be an increasingly frequent and pleasant experience. The truth about it is that these media models can't mix it up. They are used to relying on bullshit and relying on the screen, relying on the distance between them and the workers, relying on passivity, relying on the fact that there is no one to answer back, there is no one who is prepared to stand up, and stand up, and stand up even while demagogy goes on from the platform, even while you don't have a chance to speak, even while there is applause and calls to sit down. But the workers there stood up and took it. And there are going to be many, many more such workers.

If there is one thing we are learning, it is the need for audacity, the need for boldness, the need for initiative. In fact, in the end all that means is we are learning over and over again the role of leadership in the class struggle as it unfolds today.

You can be sure of one other thing as well. We haven't set out on an easy course. We are sticking out our necks. Of course, we decided we would stick out our necks with our class as a whole when we made the turn to industry. We are going to be subject to all the difficulties of our class — unemployment, low wages, the pressure that puts on people.

But by aspiring to help lead the working class fight back, we have stuck out our necks even further. We have stuck out our necks because this will threaten even more our job security and our physical security. There will be political repression, we know that, in the period that is opening up. There will be enormous pressure, slander, vilification coming down on us from the trade union bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie as a whole.

Trotsky in 1935, writing about the expulsion of some of our comrades from the French Socialist Party and the sort of pressure that was coming down on us in that situation, said that our response to this should be the following:

At that moment, if not earlier, our group should have understood that no feats of magic could save us from the combined attack of the bourgeois and social-patriotic apparatuses. The only slogan was: *Relentless revolutionary offensive against the apparatuses of treason, under the banner of the Fourth International.*<sup>23</sup>

That is essentially the course we have decided on. A relentless revolutionary offensive.

We have decided on it because there are a number of openings. This plenum is essentially about our openings.

The current period is a preparatory political period, it is true. But nevertheless action has already begun, we are already engaged in battles. These preparatory battles count a great deal for us, they are very important. How we join them is very important. This may not be the decisive battle in which the ruling class tries to smash the FIA, that's for sure. It is not that yet. But how we do in this battle that the FIA is engaged in today, or how we do in trying to get the FIA to engage in a battle and the role we play in that is going to be very important in terms of our standing in the working class and in terms of the development and training of our cadre, in terms of how we move ahead on both levels in regard to other tendencies. It is going to have a very big impact on what sort of role we are going to play in the decisive battles down the road and therefore on the outcome of the big battles down the road. So these preparatory battles are very important for us.

Our general task in this period, of course, is to win hegemony of the workers' vanguard. That is quite a job, obviously. It is a big job but what we are saying is that in this period we can take some steps down that road. Our tasks are propaganda, agitation, organisation. And in this period we don't just say what needs to be done. We can begin to show in action what can be done, and in that process draw layers around the party.

An enormous breach can be opened up between the bureaucrats and the ranks of the union movement, and we need to find a road through this breach. That is the sort of period we are in. I think that is the reason for us to throw open our doors today, to try to find a road to the workers who are coming around us in the industrial unions, to try to find a way to bring them into the party — to find the organisational means and the political means to find the way we must discuss with them, the way we must organise with them, the patience we must have and the initiatives we must take. We have got to find a way to bring around us more and wider layers of the migrant workers who are coming around our movement.

If we couldn't find a road to such people, there would be something we were doing wrong — we would conclude that we haven't found the forms, we haven't thought it out. If we can't find a way of having these people join our party we are not going to win hegemony of this vanguard. Each party branch is going to have to think out the

question, be bold, find new forms and new ideas. Each situation can be so different that we can't generalise very easily on the national level, but this must be made a priority for our party. We could make some big steps forward in this area. You have to think of what the migrant community consists of, especially some of the most recently arrived migrants, who come from political experiences that are very, very different from the experiences in this country. It means that the hold of the labour bureaucracy here is comparatively weak over these people. They see us as revolutionaries, just as they were part of a much wider revolutionary movement in their own countries. It doesn't matter if it was over there. That is not the point; the ideas are much more important. We can develop our party here out of proportion to our weight in the labour movement as a whole, if we can find the forms and if we can overcome the cultural and language barriers.

## **Polarisation**

The general question that has to be looked at though is what is happening on the left, in the antiwar movement, around the left of the Labor Party, in the Communist Party. Here there have been sellouts, that is for sure. The CPA and the left wing of the ALP have moved rapidly to the right, and they are going to take a lot of people with them. They are going to confuse a lot of people. They have quite a weight. Let's not have any illusions. But it would be more accurate to describe what is happening in this country as a polarisation. The poles may not be of equal weight, but there is still a polarisation. What happens to the remainder, the other wing, the ones who don't move to the right, the ones who respond in a class-struggle manner to the antiwar movement and the revolutionary developments overseas, the ones who move to the left in this period? Where do they go? What happens to the people at the Sydney FEC that recently took place, the youth who got up and bombed the social contract? They didn't like the social contract, they knew that was rotten and a sell out. Where do they go? What about the forces in the antiwar movement who are going to react to our exclusion by the Stalinoid wing of the movement in Sydney? What about the youth who are moving to the left? There are many, many more examples of people, young people especially, who are in motion.

Moreover there are going to be more shocks that can make some of the best elements of the labour movement, of the left, fight. Some may have become passive and confused, but they are not defeated yet. There haven't been the defeats in general to turn the situation around yet, to make it favourable for the ruling class.

So our party and Resistance can look very attractive to these people today. We shouldn't underestimate how attractive it looks, with the sort of campaigns we are

helping to lead in the VBU and in steel.

But we have to have a certain attitude to this process that will develop. We will be bringing in some people from different backgrounds or trying to bring them into our organisation or discuss some theoretical points with them. We will be bringing workers into our organisation who are still trying to grapple with what protectionism means. We have to accept this and expect that we will bring into our party people who don't understand all of our theoretical positions or who have different theoretical views. We can't expect just to win formed and finished cadre, of course. We never have expected that, but in this period above all else we can't. Our party will reflect the problems in the class more. It will, if it gets wider and broader, get comparatively less homogeneous. Trotsky looked at this question at one point in regard to our American party in the '30's. He said:

... Our organisation will become attractive to very different people in the next period, and not only for the best of them ... the recent announcement of the new crisis will aggravate the disquietude, the fighting spirit, and ... the confusion. We can't avoid having this confusion in our ranks. Our comrades are "too" educated, "too" accustomed to precise, elaborated conceptions and slogans. They have a contempt for everybody who is not ideologically "OK". It is very dangerous. A developing and alive party must represent — to a certain extent — the different tendencies, disquietudes and, I repeat, even the confusion in the vanguard of the working class. Too much confusion is, of course, not good but a sound proportion can be established only through practice. More pedagogical patience is absolutely necessary on the part of our comrades toward the new and fresh elements.<sup>24</sup>

Of course political homogeneity and unity are important, and we strive to educate our party around a political line. But we can expect that the party will be a little more like the situation Trotsky described there. The situation today is still very much one of sorting out, testing out, clarification, regroupment of existing militants. An indication of that is the still small size of our party. We haven't gone so far toward winning hegemony of the vanguard to have any illusion about that task in front of us. That's the truth of it.

We don't have any big problems with winning these layers today, any problems with our composition. We are largely a party of industrial workers as a result of the turn and recent recruiting. It's in this framework that we can welcome the white-collar workers who are joining us today. Because it was clear from the whole discussion this weekend, we are orientating the whole party towards the factories, the strikes, the unions. That's where we are focused, that's what we are thinking of. That is one of the healthiest aspects of the party today that is a result of the turn. So then, if we think we

need to build a white-collar union faction to help this work, that is what we will do, of course.

## Opening the party

We have got to speed the process of winning these layers who are not going to the right. We can help this process by letting more and more people see the reality of our party today — its internal life, its thinking process, its ideas, its more complex ideas, because some of these people will be won only if we can convince them of our whole perspectives for this period and of what is happening in the world.

So a specific proposal we want to make is that we revive our magazine *Socialist Worker* in a new form, with a different thrust, a different sort of content. To a very large extent we should say up front that this revived *Socialist Worker* will replace the *Party Organiser*, the *Party Information Bulletin*, and to a lesser extent, the *Party Discussion Bulletin*.

If you look back at some of the reports we have given in the past, except for a few questions it wouldn't matter if they were generally available to our periphery, to people looking at us who are interested in our political ideas. What are we really like, how do we organise ourselves, do we have a democratic life, what is the level of discussion? The people who orient to us, and the people who are moving towards us, do need to know that, do need to understand that.

A lot of our reports from National Committees, conferences, and so on are very useful to have more widely discussed and understood on the left. Of course there are some debates and some discussions that we will want to keep strictly internal; we will need to continue our own discussion bulletin for that. That is always a question of the party thinking out what its specific needs are in any particular discussion and how the comrades who are discussing the points of difference may feel about having a public discussion.

One debate that we would want to see reflected in such a journal is the debate in the International right now around the significance of the differences between Lenin and Trotsky on the question of permanent revolution. We may want to make a contribution to that debate; certainly we will want to reprint the main documents that have been published so far. There is an audience for this sort of discussion in this country and our own members need them available anyway.

In immediate terms it means we would get out two quick issues of this magazine with the four resolutions for our conference in it. We would start to publish it straight away, then.

On the other hand, the contributions to the pre-conference discussion, unless we

make a specific exception because we think it would be useful — and with the agreement of any comrade who submits an article, of course — we would publish in the internal discussion bulletin.

But just as we did for the last conference, when we published our resolution publicly, we want to do that again this time.

On the other hand, we must make some cutbacks. *Direct Action* must go to 16 pages. That is a setback. There is no point in beating around the bush; it is not what we want. We have to make the best of it. Making the best of it is to separate out some of the longer analytical articles that we might find suitable for *Socialist Worker*, put them in *Socialist Worker*, and try to lighten up *Direct Action*, make it more readable, have shorter articles. This may mean that comrades who write copy from the branches with 12 paragraphs end up getting three paragraphs in the paper. There will be those sorts of problems. But on the whole, if we do it properly we can make even a 16-page paper a very useful tool for us. I don't say more useful, a 20-page paper with the same approach would be more useful than a 16-page one, but nevertheless it might be useful just to quote briefly something Trotsky said about this:

The paper is the face of the party. In great measure the worker will judge the party on the basis of the paper. Those for whom it is intended are not strongly with you or even your sympathizers. You ought not to repulse anybody with language that is too highbrow. Your occasional reader should not be made to think: "These people are way over my head", because then he will no longer buy it.

Your paper ought to be well laid out, simple, and clear, with slogans that are always understandable. The worker does not have time to read long theoretical articles. He needs brief reports in a polished style. Lenin said, "You have to write with your heart in order to have a good paper".

Stop thinking that you are writing for yourselves or your members. For them there are theoretical magazines and internal bulletins. The workers' paper should be lively, also humorous. Workers like to have the powers-that-be ridiculed and exposed with factual proof.

Also make the worker comrades in your organization write in the paper. Help them in a friendly way. You will see that very often the short and simple article of a worker, on a particular fact of capitalist exploitation, is very superior to an article that is academic and erudite. Take Lenin's articles in *Pravda* as a model. They are simple, lively, readable, appealing as much to the worker in the Putilov plant as to the student in the university.<sup>25</sup>

We have been striving towards this conception. If we move some of the longer analytical and theoretical articles out of the paper and put them into *Socialist Worker*, which will

be frequently published, approximately on a monthly basis, then I think we can move the paper more in that direction and make a virtue out of necessity.

This is another step added to the branch organisational changes and the new political ideas that will help us grow. It is only a small step and we have got to breathe life into it, and find other new steps that will allow us to reach the radicalising people that we want to win for our movement.

## Democratic centralism

There were two other ideas of the 1980 report which I want to take up now. They are the question of democratic centralism and the question of building an inclusive party and an inclusive leadership team.

We noted in that report that some of the features of our team are that it is not exclusive, but that at the same time it is *one* team and a *united* team. There is no hierarchy in the party. We have relative political homogeneity, and we consider this a healthy thing. We noted that we have made a good start on developing women leaders. We have been fortunate in being able to build a structured team that has developed its own style, its own tradition, self-confidence if you like. That means that our party team can speak for the party as a whole.

Now, one concern that flowed out of this situation in our party and which we noted perhaps as a weakness was that because of the split in our movement in 1972, because of the way our party had developed in general, we had not had differences in our party of a major sort and certainly not ones in which different sections of the leadership were involved. Here is what we said at the time:

There's something else that has marked us through most of the last 10 years. This has had a really profound effect that we haven't overcome; we must understand that. I'm referring to the IMT/LTF faction fight and the split here in 1972. We've overcome the split, that's decisively overcome; it's not even worth thinking about. But we haven't overcome certain patterns of thinking about political differences that came from that period. For both comrades who were in the CL and comrades who were in the SWP, the main political differences were always set in the framework of separate organisations. In general, the big questions were always posed as us and them — and not us and them in different tendencies, or even in different factions inside the same party, but in different parties. So people tended to be a little jumpy about political differences, which were seen as being factional by their very nature, as possibly leading to different parties or leading people to leave the movement. That's something we have to be very conscious of and attempt to overcome.<sup>26</sup>

Well, almost as a prophecy, we began to have some differences on the National

Committee and in the branches. I think that is related to the sort of period we are going into and the sort of developments on a world level. It is natural that we are responding to new events with discussions. We had some differences over Afghanistan, some differences on how to do solidarity work in regard to Poland, some differences on how to deal with the social wage question. In the branches we had some differences of opinion on the tactics we adopted in pushing forward our antiwar work, and recently we had some differences on how to carry out the change on union election tactics that we made and our intervention in that arena.

How did we handle these differences? Looking at these questions is a necessary part of any self-critical assessment of the party's life. Before I do that and present what I think is a correct assessment, I want to detour for a while and look at our organisational principles. Because it is very difficult to examine and discuss the question of differences in the party without discussing our organisational principles.

We have a constitution and we have an organisational principles document. We are also guided by the Fourth International statutes; we are also guided by our tradition, our understanding, our practice, by precedent almost. Those are the documents that we hold to, that we apply, that we stress, that we educate our comrades around. They are important acquisitions, and we can't build a party without them.

Now, after the beginning of the turn and the fight around the question of the fusion and the aftermath of the fusion, which led to quite some discussion, some fights, and a whole series of disciplinary measures that the party took to protect itself from disruptive elements, we thought: Well, do we have to write a new organisational principles document? And we did write one, at least we wrote a draft which we thought was inadequate; perhaps it was a little premature to write it. Our purpose was to try to clarify some of the questions that had come up — what is a tendency, what is a faction? Those sorts of things we tried to clarify a little bit more in the light of our understanding of what had happened in the discussion in those years. And that has been sitting in various drawers around the national office for a couple of years now.

There is no doubt at all that our old document is imperfect. There are things we would write far better and know far more about today than when we wrote that. But one assessment we made when discussing this report on the Political Committee is that, given the stage of the class struggle today, and secondly, because of the stage of the party today — which is a very healthy party, a relatively politically homogeneous party, a very confident party, a party that is based in industry — because of that, to attempt now to write a new organisational principles document, which would be somewhat conditioned by the experiences of the fight, the fusion, and so on, would be a distortion of our needs. To a large extent we want to put that period behind us and

go through some new experiences, out of which perhaps we will then write a new organisational principles document. That might only be a year or two down the road, but for the moment that is what we think we should do — put the period of the sharp turn behind us. The report two years ago said:

We're now entering a new period, a post-turn period. We don't have all the political answers for what's coming down the line. All the comrades in the party today are serious about building a party. But we don't have all the answers in this room or the Political Committee or the party as a whole on the big international questions, on the question of what to do next in the labour movement. We're opening up a genuine discussion at this plenum.<sup>27</sup>

That applies just as much to this plenum and today as it did two years ago. That is the stage we are at. We have started to think and operate as revolutionary politicians in what I am sure all comrades are convinced is our natural milieu. Of course we still need our disciplined, well-organised, democratic-centralist party. This is not a party in which anything goes. It is our statutes, our principles, that we apply and which guarantee a democratic centralist party. We still insist that Lenin was right. Trotsky put it this way:

If we agree with Lenin, that we are in the epoch of imperialism, the last stage of capitalism, it is necessary to have a revolutionary organization flexible enough to deal with the problems of an underground struggle as well as those of the seizure of power. Hence the necessity of a strongly centralised party, capable of orienting and leading the masses and of conducting the gigantic struggle from which they should emerge victorious. Hence also the need to collectively make a loyal self-criticism at every stage.<sup>28</sup>

Our statutes can help protect us from a hostile milieu. And it is true that we will be facing quite some tests in the next period. There will be a lot of pressure on our party; we will use our statutes, our security policy on illegal drugs, and all the other things that we think are necessary to build our party, to organise and protect our party in the coming period.

## A healthier party

The truth is that the turn has made us a much healthier party today. I just want to read a little passage of Trotsky's, in which he was discussing the experiences of the Bolshevik Party, to show to a certain extent where we came from and where we have got to, from our "Stukhov" period to the worker period. The passage will make clear what I mean:

... We had some comrades in opposition after the revolution. We had comrades who became specialists in criticism, not in principled matters but in minor ones. There was

Stukhov, an intelligent man and a courageous one, as well as witty, and at every party meeting he found something to say, prefacing with a joke, and he had applause. Imagine during the civil war — there were many things to object to the leadership, and he took advantage of it. But nobody proposed to expel him, but from time to time we explained to the members, and he began to lose his audience, and after a while Stukhov became a ridiculous figure.

He was one from the top of the party. In every body there were such Stukhoffs. It was not a question of Stukhov but of the education of the party membership, an education that rejects unhealthy criticism, opposition only for the sake of opposition. I believe it is absolutely necessary also for the leadership to be very patient, to listen very attentively, very reasonably to criticism. But the most important thing is to change the social composition of the organization — make it a workers' organization. A worker comes to the meeting; he knows everything is imperfect; his pay is imperfect, his conditions of work are imperfect, his life is imperfect; he is consequently more patient, more realistic. When you have a meeting of 100 people and between them 60-70-80 are workers, then the 20 intellectuals, petty bourgeois, become 10 times more cautious on the question of criticism. It's a more serious, more firm audience. But when there are 100 intellectuals, everybody has something to say. Party life is just a period of discussion. That's why the social composition is the most important thing ...<sup>29</sup>

I think we have moved into the second phase, even if we are not a mass revolutionary party and even if many of us may have been from an "intellectual" milieu. We have changed our view of life and what we do, and that is changing us a good deal.

I was struck as to where the party is today by the attitude of one comrade in Wollongong to the party and the error we were making in regard to running in union elections. This comrade, a steelworker who joined the party both because of our work in the FIA and our position on Latin American solidarity work, was telling us some years ago: You should run in union elections, communists take leadership of the unions, don't they? Well, we argued, No, that is tactically wrong, Comrade. But the comrade was still a loyal party member. It didn't throw him. This was still *his* party. It was *imperfect*, but it was *his* party and he was going to build it. Then we changed our view. He has changed too as a result. He is almost exhausted as a result of this change since it has involved the comrade in a lot of hard work. But that incident struck me very much. His attitude to the party was the attitude of a worker to the party. I think that can give us a lot of confidence about where we are at. This was a proletarian attitude. Trotsky said it this way:

... The maturity of each member of the party expresses itself particularly in the fact that he does not demand from the party regime more than it can give. The person who

defines his attitude to the party by the individual fillips that he gets on the nose is a poor revolutionist. It is necessary, of course, to fight against every individual mistake of the leadership, every injustice, and the like. But it is necessary to assess these “injustices” and “mistakes” not by themselves but in connection with the general development of the party both on a national and international scale. A correct judgement and feeling for proportion in politics is an extremely important thing. The person who has propensities for making a mountain out of a molehill can do much harm to himself and to the party.<sup>30</sup>

This is more and more the way our party operates and more and more the way comrades treat it. There is not a set of rules that can tell us what to do, either as a minority or as a majority in the party. There isn't a set of rules that can tell us what to do next in every situation. Compare the Labor Party, for instance, and compare the length of our constitution to the length of the constitution of the Labor Party. We have a couple of sheets and they have a thick book; every single thing you can or you can't do is supposed to be in the rules. (Of course, if you control the Labor Party, you break the rules. That is another story.) For us what to do next, how to apply our rules, is always a question of political judgment. There is a constitution that has, very briefly, certain things that can and can't be done basically giving the powers to the leading bodies. They have to exercise the political judgment about what to do. So Trotsky says:

Neither do I think that I can give such a formula on democratic centralism that “once and for all” would eliminate misunderstandings and false interpretations. A party is an active organism. It develops in the struggle with outside obstacles and inner contradictions ... the Fourth International [faces] difficulties unprecedented in history. One cannot overcome them with some sort of magic formula. The regime of a party does not fall ready-made from the sky but is formed gradually in the struggle. A political line predominates over the regime. First of all, it is necessary to define strategic problems and tactical methods correctly in order to solve them. The organizational forms should correspond to the strategy and the tactic. Only a correct policy can guarantee a healthy party regime. This, it is understood, does not mean that the development of the party does not raise organizational problems as such. But it means that the formula for democratic centralism must inevitably find a different expression in the parties of different countries and in different stages of development of one and the same party.<sup>31</sup>

That defines a political approach, a flexible approach. It points out that organisational and political questions are certainly related, but the political ones are the key ones. The, questions of strategy and tactics are the key ones in defining the party regime. The organisational question remains a secondary one. If our politics are off, it will

distort our organisational forms.

In a new period like this, with so many decisions to take and so much we need to understand, tactical debates are going to help. That is the sort of period we are entering. In that sort of period, we emphasise the thinking-out process. That won't break down our revolutionary discipline. That won't make us a weaker party at all; in my opinion, it will strengthen us. Trotsky goes on:

Whatever the difficulties and the differences of opinion may be in the future, they can be victoriously overcome only by the party's collective thinking, checking up on itself each time and thereby maintaining the continuity of development.

This character of the revolutionary tradition is bound up with the peculiar character of revolutionary discipline. Where tradition is conservative, discipline is passive and is violated at the first moment of crisis. Where, as in our party, tradition consists of the highest revolutionary activity, discipline attains its maximum point, for its decisive importance is constantly checked in action. That is the source of the indestructible alliance of revolutionary initiative, of critical, bold elaboration of questions, with iron discipline in action. And it is only by this superior activity that the youth can receive from the old this tradition of discipline and carry it on.<sup>32</sup>

And further:

Democracy and centralism do not at all find themselves in an invariable ratio to one another. Everything depends on the concrete circumstances, on the political situation in the country, on the strength of the party and its experience, on the general level of its members, on the authority the leadership has succeeded in winning. Before a conference, when the problem is one of formulating a political line for the next period, democracy triumphs over centralism. When the problem is political action, centralism subordinates democracy to itself. Democracy again asserts its rights when the party feels the need to examine critically its own actions. The equilibrium between democracy and centralism establishes itself in the actual struggle, at moments it is violated and then again re-established.<sup>33</sup>

So there is no invariable ratio, there is no set of rules that can tell us what to do. Our statutes are clear, our constitution is clear. We have the right to form factions, the right to form tendencies. But we say clearly that that right is subordinated to the majority's right to regulate when, how, and in what way these factions or tendencies operate. And that is why we can justify that the exceptional circumstances in 1921 in the Bolshevik Party led to the banning of factions. Larry Douglas pointed out yesterday, we think that was correct. We don't have a party line on it as such, but it obviously guides a lot of our thinking in regard to Cuba today. That is a judgment that a party had the right to make. There is no absolute right to anything except the right of the majority to run

the party and decide how to proceed.

## Flexible approach

Today with the turn, with the discussion on Cuba, with a lot of thinking out we are doing, we want to go as far as possible in bringing as many people along that road to our political positions, on a national level and on an international level,

So I think the approach we need now is a rather flexible one. Yes, it is possible in the party today that people can go too far. That is always possible. They can ignore some procedure or other. We will know how to call them to order if that is necessary. But what we are really stressing is that we want to find the new openings. Maybe there will be more adjustments like the trade union one that we will want to make. We want to be a thinking machine in this period above all else. We remain a centralist party. At the same time we thought out some new things and handled them flexibly, we were very much a centralist party. The Political Committee made a sharp turn. We didn't wait for the National Committee to implement that. It was the right of the leading party bodies to do it. We gave a report and said: this is the party line; the real discussion is how to implement it. That was correct. If our sharp turns or the fact that we are centralist leads to too rough a ride, we will solve that by pausing and seeking to convince all comrades. By going back to first principles. By talking it out. By talking politics, by explaining, by convincing. This is an overwhelmingly successful method of political work. We should never forget that. If you have a political problem you don't necessarily bullock away — you stop, you talk, you convince, you discuss. That is the sort of spirit we will get in our party and I think that is how we solve most of our problems today.

Of course, we will do that within the framework of the party. But we want to keep off administrative measures as much as possible in implementing the party's positions. We want to convince all comrades of our positions. We are a party that wants to talk politics to each other; we are constantly thinking things out together, formally and informally. Obviously we are a very political party.

Of course, you always have the responsibility, both as a leader and as any individual in the party, to weigh each idea you have, each new idea you have, each difference, and see how you want to raise it. And how you do that, whether you do it well or not so well, is going to be an aspect of your party-building skill by which you will be known.

But if we are going to become a much bigger party than we are today, we are going to have to use this sort of approach. Trotsky was very worried about the dangers facing small organisations, and we know he was right to be worried if we look at the history of many so-called Trotskyist organisations since Trotsky's death. Fred Zeller

described a conversation with Trotsky about the French section:

The internal atmosphere of the organisation worried him. In the small vanguard movements which fight against the stream, internal disputes are often the most severe and heated. After being expelled from the SFIO, the Bolshevik-Leninist Group was divided into many hostile factions.

“If the comrades were to look a little beyond themselves and direct their efforts to outside and practical work, the ‘crisis’ would resolve itself”, Trotsky said. “But it is always necessary to see to it that the atmosphere remains healthy and the internal climate acceptable to everyone. Comrades should work with all their heart and with the maximum of confidence.

“Building the revolutionary party requires patience and hard work. At any price, the best should not be discouraged, and you should show yourselves capable of working with everyone. Each person is a lever to be fully utilized to strengthen the party. Lenin knew the art of doing that. After the liveliest, most polemical discussions, he knew how to find the words and the gestures that would soften unfortunate or offensive remarks.”<sup>34</sup>

What Trotsky is saying is that we don’t fight political duels to the death. We discuss in order to decide and to act and then we move ahead to the next experience. We seek to preserve our cadre. As we said before, we are inclusive. Zeller quoting Trotsky again:

Trotsky frequently returned to the need to strengthen the fraternal bonds among the comrades in struggle:

“It is necessary to preserve, encourage, and watch over those bonds”, he would repeat. “An experienced worker member represents an inestimable *capital* for the organization. It takes years to educate a leader. We therefore should do everything possible to save a member. Don’t destroy him if he weakens, but help him to overcome his weakness, to get over his moment of doubt.”<sup>35</sup>

I think that was the approach the party took in Melbourne when we wanted to try out the new trade union orientation. By returning to first principles, discussing, trying to convince all comrades politically, we moved the whole party past what was becoming an obstacle. I think that is the correct approach for our party today to use persuasion, not administrative measures.

Of course, not everything can be solved that way. Serious differences may arise. In that framework there can be two opposite sorts of dangers — one that perhaps emanates from the majority leadership of the party and one that may emanate from a minority or comrades who have differences. They are opposite dangers in a sense. One danger is a danger of factionalism. I am not talking about factions here. We have the right to factions in our party; that will happen in the course of the life of our party even if it hasn’t to date. I am talking about factionalism. We allow factions. As Trotsky

said, if we don't allow factions, then:

What follows from this? If factions are not wanted, there must not be any permanent groupings; if permanent groupings are not wanted, temporary groupings must be avoided; finally, in order that there be no temporary groupings, there must be no differences of opinion, for wherever there are two opinions, people inevitably group together.

No, the tradition of the real communist movement is clear:

Pivert is deceiving himself when he thinks that Bolshevism is incompatible with the existence of factions. The principle of Bolshevik organisation is "democratic centralism", assured by complete freedom of criticism and of groupings, together with steel discipline in action. The history of the party is at the same time the history of the internal struggle of ideas, groupings, factions. It is true that in the spring of 1921, in a time of terrible crisis, of famine, of cold, the 10th Congress of the Bolshevik Party, which at that time was 17 years old, suppressed factions; but this measure was considered exceptional and temporary, and was applied by the Central Committee with the greatest degree of prudence and flexibility. The real annihilation of factions began only with the victory of the bureaucracy over the proletarian vanguard and rapidly led to the virtual death of the party.<sup>36</sup>

Our tradition is the Bolshevik one, not the Stalinist one, and obviously there are going to be two opinions on lots of questions plenty of times in our party.

But I want to say that there can be the danger of factionalism, secret or otherwise. The International has had some experience of this that some of us have learned from. We don't want groupings that go on issue after issue after issue in a semi-permanent manner. That can be unhealthy for the life of our party. We can be happy that we have avoided this problem of permanent factionalism to date.

Another error would be for a leadership to jump too early and erroneously to class characterisations about what differences mean. Not every question is related in this way. Trotsky used the example:

Nevertheless, there should be no oversimplification and vulgarisation in the understanding of the thought that party differences, and this holds all the more for groupings, are nothing but a struggle for influence of antagonistic classes. Thus, in 1920, the question of the invasion of Poland stirred up two currents of opinion, one advocating a more audacious policy, the other preaching prudence. Were there different class tendencies there? I do not believe that anyone would risk such an assertion. There were only differences in the appreciation of the situation, of the forces, of the means. But the essential criterion of the appreciation was the same with both parties.

It frequently happens that the party is able to resolve one and the same problem by

different means, and differences arise as to which of these means is the better, the more expeditious, the more economical. These differences may, depending on the question, embrace considerable sections of the party, but that does not necessarily mean that you have there two class tendencies.

There is no doubt that we shall have not one but dozens of disagreements in the future, for our path is difficult and the political tasks as well as the economic questions of socialist organization will unfailingly engender differences of opinion and temporary groupings of opinion. The political verification of all the nuances of opinion by Marxist analysis will always be one of the most efficacious preventive measures for our party.<sup>37</sup>

It is particularly important in this sort of period we are entering not to make this sort of error. Because it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It can close the ears of comrades to any sort of criticism. It can lead people to over-react to organisational errors.

I went through this overview of some of our understanding of democratic centralism and the emphasis we want to have in party life at the moment and in the coming period because it helps us set a perspective and draw some lessons from differences we have had and still do have to a certain extent.

Our judgment and the balance sheet that we draw as a Political Committee is that we have come through our first important leadership differences well. We haven't fallen into major errors. Concerning the differences we have had in the branches this year, which have been minor and episodic and not embracing a large number of comrades — but we have had discussions over the quick turns we have made in the antiwar movement, or the quick turns we have made in the trade union arena — we think that they have been handled well and correctly by the party so far.

Of course there are always difficulties and tensions in political discussions. It is not easy to be in a minority. If the majority think you are wrong, they may not hold the fact of the difference against you, but they always tend, at least for the nonce, to suspect your political judgment. That is difficult, that is hard, but that's human nature, as they say. It's a fact of life. What we do know, however, is that all this is always temporary. We know that politics and life go on. The road is rather long. We are not there yet. As Marxists, we know that old questions are going to be superseded by new and important questions, new and important expressions of opinion that won't have the same parameters as before.

## Renewing leadership

I think we have got to insist that this approach that we have had continues. We must strive for this in the party. Otherwise we can damage and poison the biggest acquisition

of the party: its inclusive leadership team that we have built up over so many years. In a pre-conference period, of course, it is especially important. If we don't have this sort of atmosphere, this sort of approach, we can put in jeopardy the pre-conference discussion and the ability to confidently renew the leadership team with the election of the National Committee.

Yes, we can have sharp debates. That is not a problem, of course, although we should strive for an exemplary tone. That is also important. But so that the members of the party can make a clear judgment on the critical questions and the way they are argued and raised, and so that leaders are elected on a proven ability to lead the party and build the party, we must have such an atmosphere and such a discussion.

The problem of renewing the leadership of the party is of course a very difficult problem for our party today. It is extraordinarily difficult. We are in a period of new tests for all party comrades. We are in a period of growth of the party. Those two things alone will make it very difficult at the conference we are approaching. It is a good sort of problem. Coming into this National Conference, more than any previous National Conference, we have far more leaders qualified to serve on the National Committee than we have ever had in the past. I stress the word *serve* because I think that is how we should see the question of leadership.

Events and the development of the political situation have confirmed the correctness of the leadership line that we have been pursuing for the last two years. As a result, our party leadership as a whole has much more authority. But we also know something else. The authority of the party leadership, just as for all individual comrades, is always being renewed at every point and on every question. This is how Trotsky put this idea:

Naturally, the party must allow considerable latitude to its leaders. But on the other hand, it is impossible to have credit with the organization if the authority of the leadership is not confirmed by experience itself, by a good policy, and by success. It is necessary to accumulate this capital, and only then will the leadership have the necessary latitude in action. To win this authority it is necessary to have a good policy.

It would be fantastic to ask from the leadership that they commit no errors. What we ask is to correct errors in time, so that the errors don't become fatal.<sup>38</sup>

This is Trotsky's view of Leninism, and we should regard it as a model:

Leninism is, first of all, realism, the highest qualitative and quantitative appreciation of reality, from the standpoint of revolutionary action. Precisely because of this it is irreconcilable with flying from reality behind the screen of hollow agitationism, with passive loss of time, with haughty justification of yesterday's mistakes on the pretext of saving the tradition of the party.

Leninism is genuine freedom from formalistic prejudices, from moralizing

doctrinairism, from all forms of intellectual conservatism attempting to stifle the will to revolutionary action. But to believe that Leninism signifies that “anything goes” would be an irremediable mistake.<sup>39</sup>

We can say that we have been trying to correct our errors as we become aware of them. We try to apply Marxism-Leninism to the reality we face. So we did correct our trade union error in the nick of time, and as a result of that I don't think there is any doubt that the confidence in and authority of the leadership of this National Committee have increased. Similarly with the other moves this year that I outlined. It is the authority of the leadership that we have today that can make us so confident about a good atmosphere and a good discussion in the party.

But whatever our successes, there is another side to this. Our National Committee is not an officers' club with an exclusive membership. We don't want to stagnate, but to renew ourselves by developing and promoting other leaders.

Now, I want to comment here that there is one problem we don't have. We don't have a problem of social composition in the leadership. We have to be quite clear on that. The National Committee, the formal leadership, are all willing to serve the party in any capacity, whether it is to go into industry or to work on full time. Perhaps it's all influenced by what our experiences in the party have been. But there is no doubt at all that everyone is willing to do either. In fact, our constitution states that comrades on the National Committee must be willing to serve the party, to work full-time, to do what is necessary from the party's point of view at any point.

The nominating commission\* at our last conference discussed this question. I intervened in the nominating commission to explain that the criteria we could use were not who were in industry now, as opposed to comrades who were carrying the work in the apparatus, in choosing our leadership. Because you could always use the example of someone who was currently in industry but in two weeks' time would be a branch organiser, and *vice versa*. Because that is the way our party is operating today; there is always a changing of assignments.

So we don't have that problem of social composition and that is a very, very good thing. No, our problems are the usual ones. Our problems are ones of promoting youth leaders, new women leaders, and migrants onto the National Committee. It is a problem of pushing forward new activists, new comrades who have proved themselves in different spheres of party work. That is the problem we have. Our

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\* At an SWP National Conference, a nominations commission, consisting of delegates from all branches, discusses all possible candidates for the National Committee and prepares a list of nominations that are then placed before the conference along with any other nominations made by other delegates. The National Committee is then elected by secret ballot.

problem is that we have too many candidates.

How is the nominating commission going to judge this question next year? We can't set it all down here. We can only repeat some generalities. But this National Committee meeting will be our only chance to give some guidance to the nominating commission. What criteria should it use? I am not going to give a report on this because of the time and because it is not necessary. The nominating commission, the comrades on it, should read the different things that have been written about the leadership question, going into it so they think seriously about the question. You can say that fundamentally the central criterion is the attitude of comrades to the party, their role in the party. That is the first, decisive, point — their willingness to subordinate their life to the needs of the party. But that is only the first point. Then come scores and scores of other qualities that have to be weighed up and assessed. If you are putting forward a list when you have too many candidates for leadership, obviously a nominating commission is going to have to balance between the need for stability and the need for experimentation. Roughly, you might say that corresponds to the full and alternate list — only roughly, it is not absolutely that, but that is why there are full and alternate lists on the National Committee.

We can't prejudge for the nominating commission what they should do. There are going to be many different personal opinions in the party about this question. The nominating commission in anyone's personal opinion may go too far, may not go far enough, may be just right. The point is, however, for all of us on the National Committee to be ruthlessly objective about the party's needs. We must understand and affirm again that leadership is not just being on the National Committee, it is not just a formal leadership question. We will see, as we have in the past, rotation of leaders as they are tested out. Sometimes they are, sometimes they are not on the NC. Sometimes they move up the list, sometimes they move down. What the party as a whole and the nominating commission is trying to do on behalf of the party in putting forward a list is to find the comrades who can shoulder the big responsibilities in leadership assignments in the party and in Resistance. We have to give a lot of confidence to the nominating commission this year to find us the best comrades who can do that for the party as a whole.

## **Test of tendencies**

We have to be conscious about this question as a leadership, as we are about all other questions of party-building activity. I don't think there is any other party in this country that has spent, or continues to spend, the time and attention on the vital party-building questions that we do. Our attention to them and our worry about them, our

concern about them, our understanding about them, has led to us inching ahead of other small so-called revolutionary organisations.

We think we have the correct political line, but that has not been thoroughly tested out yet, We think our program is correct, but it is not thoroughly tested out. We are getting a bit more of a chance to test some aspects of it now, but even so that is not yet the decisive test of whether our program is correct . Our concentration on our organisation of the party and the building of an apparatus has been very, very important in the development of a leadership team. These have been important questions in moving our party ahead.

Of course, we are getting a better test now, our program is getting a better test.

I want to return to the Newcastle meeting to let comrades get a better idea of this: how we are stacking up in regard to the other tendencies. I think that Newcastle meeting was a microcosm of the situation of the class struggle today. I want to read from the newspaper report:

That was the state of play when last night's meeting opened.

Then Ald. Cummings read the audience a telegram she had just received from the chairman of BHP, Sir James McNeill, announcing that Mr. Risby was representing the company.

He was not on the platform, but at least he was there. So were all the Hunter's Labor MPs, except Mr. R. Face, Mr. L.A. Charlestown, who is overseas.

There is one indication of the situation. There is the Labor Party parliamentary taking a junket.

The Liberal Party's regional president, Val Samuels, and the Newcastle-based Liberal MLC, Virginia Chadwick, were there.

That is, they were down in the audience with BHP, they didn't have the hide to get up on the platform.

The Australian Democrats MLC, Liz Kirkby, was there. So were members of the clergy and assorted aldermen.

Meanwhile the steelworkers in the Militant Action Campaign were telling *The Newcastle Herald* that, whatever the meeting was, it certainly was not democratic. So, we were there too with our fellow workers in the Militant Action Campaign.

The Young Socialists were quietly using the opportunity of having 900 plus people in one place to publicise their Jobs for Youth rally.

So there was the Healyite sect, using the meeting to organise their own little event off at the side. They were there too.

Observers of the Newcastle trade union movement were enjoying the unusual sight of the secretary of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council, Mr. Peter Barrack, a Communist

Party member, seconding a resolution from Mr. Hurrell.

So there were two other forces there, celebrating, if you like, the new marriage that is taking place between the CPA and the right wing of the labour machine.

“Mr Valey” — who is head of the Chamber of Commerce there — “said he was very pleased to see the two groups form a united front.” He is the priest in attendance.

“But a couple of BHP workers had told me before the meeting that they were there for just one reason: they wanted to know what was going to happen to their jobs. They didn’t find out last night”, concluded the newspaper report.

Well, that is a little microcosm of the class struggle today and the roles of the different tendencies in it. Some are up on the platform. We were down on the floor, and it will be a while before those on the floor and we ourselves get elevated to the platform.

But what is important to note about this meeting is where it took place. This meeting took place in Newcastle. Remember Newcastle? That is the place where nothing much could happen. That is the dead place. There are not many migrants there, there are not the opportunities for the left, it was said. No, dead wrong! The meeting was a shot in the arm for our Newcastle comrades. It showed how volatile things are, how quickly things can move.

Of course, there are going to be defeats in this period as well. This was a defeat, if you like: Workers went along there, they got on TV, some of them were in tears. They knew their jobs were gone and they couldn’t do much about it. They were going to take a defeat with that stinking leadership they saw getting married up on the stage.

We can’t prevent those defeats, but we can try to minimise them because that will make it much better for our party and for our class.

As we try to do that and take up the fight, as I said before, there is going to be pressure bearing down on us. But in this period we can carry out some of our best campaigns. We can grow, we can step up our recruiting. Fundamentally, what we are saying is that this period is good for us because we can convince and drive home this fact over and over again: The problem today is capitalism; we need socialism. We can say that over and over again and people will say, yes, that is right.

We have had a problem of thinking out what all this meant in the last couple of years. Two things have helped us: our school, our thinking-out machine, and our industrial implantation. That was our Marxist method. In fact, that’s what we consider Marxism is: It’s theory, but not theory off in an ivory tower, but theory guided by practice in the class struggle.

The documents that we have adopted at this plenum and that we will put to the party comrades for discussion and consideration at the coming conference base

themselves on a Marxist analysis. They could have been written, though, only because of our presence in the mass movement, because of the turn that we have made.

We can say something else about the documents. They are based on our understanding of Marxist theory, and perhaps they rely a little too much on quotes. I think that is because, to a certain extent, in the past we have had a rather slovenly approach to theory. We haven't considered all aspects of the question. But we don't quote in those documents merely because there has been a precedent — how someone else did it. We quote because of the completeness and clarity of ideas, of the understanding that we want to try to convey. Our method is not an appeal to precedent, which would be sterile. Trotsky put it like this:

Marxism is a method of historical analysis, of political orientation, and not a mass of decisions prepared in advance. Leninism is the application of this method in the conditions of an exceptional historical epoch. It is precisely this union of the peculiarities of the epoch and the method that determines that courageous, self assured policy of *brusque turns* of which Lenin gave us the finest models, and which he illuminated theoretically and generalized on more than one occasion.

Leninism cannot be conceived of without theoretical breadth, without a critical analysis of the material bases of the political process. The weapon of Marxist investigation must be constantly sharpened and applied. It is precisely in this that tradition consists, and not in the substitution of a formal reference or an accidental quotation. Least of all can Leninism be reconciled with ideological superficiality and theoretical slovenliness.<sup>40</sup>

We are beginning to overcome this slovenliness with our party school. Elsewhere Trotsky wrote:

... The simple appeal to tradition never decided anything. As a matter of fact, with each new task and at each new turn, it is not a question of searching in tradition and discovering there a nonexistent reply, but of profiting from all the experience of the party to find by oneself a new solution suitable to the situation and, by doing so, enriching tradition. It may even be put more sharply: Leninism consists of being courageously free of conservative retrospection, of being bound by precedent, purely formal references, and quotations.

Lenin himself not so long ago expressed this thought in Napoleon's words: *On s'engage et puis on voit* (start fighting and then see). To put it differently, once engaged in the struggle, don't be excessively preoccupied with canon and precedent, but plunge into reality as it is and seek there the forces necessary for victory and the roads leading to it.<sup>41</sup>

So this is the balance we seek to apply: the method of Marxist investigation of reality, and the plunging into the class struggle as it unfolds.

That, I think, is our course. We should understand that, in spite of 11 years of existence, we see ourselves as a new party. We have renewed our party by making this turn.

We face a lot of tests ahead. Trotsky said, looking at the small organisations of the Fourth International in the 1930s, when people said they failed due to bad leadership. He said, No, they didn't fail due to bad leadership. They failed because the current was too strong. It wasn't a question of helmsmanship, but that the current was too strong. We can agree. But today, what we are saying is that the current is weaker. It is still strong, there are many forces against us, but it is weaker, the relationship of forces is better, it flows more in our direction. Our job is to make sure that we do supply good helmsmanship in that situation and take maximum advantage of the revolutionary openings that are coming down the road. ■

# Recent Experiences in Party-Building

Although 1985 was a difficult year for the Socialist Workers Party, on balance it was also a rather successful year. It brought a number of important changes as we came to the end of a period of organisational experimentation that began around 1982 and continued through 1983-84.

Perhaps our efforts in those years could be characterised as our search for a great leap forward. We were experimenting organisationally to see if there was some form that would enable the party to grow rapidly.

This search for new ways of doing things was prompted by three main factors:

- Firstly, a new effervescence in the mass social movements. The peace and antinuclear movements gathered new momentum, largely as a result of revolutionary victories around the world in 1979. These victories had a big impact on the political situation in the early '80s.
- Secondly, a certain amount of disillusionment with our old organisational procedures, which we had inherited from the United States SWP and had adapted to our own situation. We had become concerned about those procedures as we saw the way the US leaders carried out a wholesale purge of their party. We began experimenting to see what was correct and what was incorrect about our past procedures.
- Thirdly, some illusions about how easy it would be to win workers to the party. This was partly a legacy of our 1978-79 turn to industry, in which we projected centring our political activity in the industrial working class. Because we thought that a majority of our recruits would be industrial workers, we attempted to change the party to take account of that.

## Settling accounts with the turn to industry

In assessing our immediate past experiences at National Committee meetings in April and August 1985, we realised that even though we had said that the turn to industry was behind us, and that we now had different priorities, we were still organising largely as we had during the turn.

For instance, the industrial fractions of the party still largely resembled branches. We even called them sub-branches rather than fractions. We had made branch meetings monthly to make it easier for workers to join the party, and we had tried to centre our political activity in the fractions, but over time we realised that this approach was increasingly disorganising our work. This was at least partly because there was insufficient political movement in the unions to sustain such an approach.

The general lesson of this was that our organisational approach must above all be concrete. We cannot afford a timeless approach. Our approach cannot be based on our wishes, or on schemas about how the class struggle should unfold. We must be able to adjust readily to meet our needs in a given situation. This is especially so at present, when we are fighting from a position of relative isolation.

Our discussion of these organisational questions also raises the question of whether we should attempt a balance sheet of the turn. But in this discussion on our organisational procedures, we'll have to content ourselves with a couple of general observations:

- Firstly, we must say that the sharpness of our turn to industry cost us dearly. We lost a lot of members. To a certain extent that was a price we paid for our previous neglect of industrial work. Although the party survived, and even made gains, the turn was a very brutal tactic for a small organisation.
- Secondly, the turn was based on false views about what could or should happen in the politics of the industrial working class around the world, and especially in the advanced capitalist countries.

Because our tactics were based on a wrong political assessment, we paid an overhead price. We disoriented and miseducated comrades, telling them that the political mood of the working class would shift decisively in a relatively short time. When we make a prediction like that and it doesn't happen, comrades naturally lose confidence in the party and perhaps also in the working-class struggle as a whole.

Those were the most negative aspects of our experience with the turn. Obviously, not all of our experience was negative. We also made some important progress in industrial work, and we gained important experience. Now the turn is behind us, and we must clear away some of the organisational leftovers of that experience.

## A new political situation

Our discussion on organisation comes as new political opportunities appear to be opening up. With the resurgence of mass political activity, there is increasing discussion of the prospects for a new party to the left of the ALP.

For our part, we must be careful to judge our organisational needs concretely. The changes we have made in recent years, together with the latest developments in the direction of left unity, can tempt us to focus our attention on possible future opportunities, rather than a realistic assessment of our present needs.

We can get tempted to neglect the present because we've been relatively successful since we began to put the turn behind us. In the three years after 1981 we grew substantially. That still didn't make us a big party, but it did mean that we had put an end to the shrinkage of 1979-80.

Unfortunately, the opening up of a more favourable political situation doesn't necessarily simplify our organisational discussion. In fact, even when we think we've got the right mix, new political developments can overturn the whole situation. At a National Committee meeting early in 1984, we decided that we needed to pay more attention to some basic organisational tasks, such as raising money and producing and selling a 24-page *Direct Action*.

But then came the July 1984 ALP national conference and the subsequent emergence of the Nuclear Disarmament Party, followed by the 1984 federal elections. Our campaign of organisational consolidation was completely swamped by these very exciting political developments.

Now, however, we are largely back to the pre-1984 situation. Unless we pay attention to our immediate organisational needs, we can go very badly astray.

What can we say about the present situation?

- Firstly, the level of working-class fightback is still very modest. Overwhelmingly, the struggles are defensive. Nevertheless, there are important political developments outside the traditional labour movement. The resurgence of the movement for nuclear disarmament is an enormously important development, though there is no sharp focus such as there was during the years of struggle against the Vietnam War. There's certainly no radicalisation of a whole generation to fuel the growth of the left and the progressive movements.
- Nevertheless, this is not a period of reaction and retreat, such as the '50s. We're not preparing to dig in and hold together a core as the party dwindles. We're not forced to consider closing down branches.
- Today, there is a quite powerful and broad radicalisation but because it's not as deep and the focus is less clear, the process of organisational clarification and

regroupment is relatively prolonged and difficult.

Today, there are more political openings than there were when we made the turn. That's why we began modifying our forms of organisation. But on balance we must now say that we went too far. We let too many things slide, and during the period of monthly meetings we built institutions that weren't adequate.

Nothing brings this reality home more brutally than a financial crisis, such as the one we faced recently. We were forced to make a series of cutbacks that made it far more difficult for us to function. This crisis brought us up fast. Looking back, the organisational discussion was central in the party during 1985.

We discussed everything: What stage of party building are we going through? What norms should the party expect? How should we train new cadre? The crisis pushed us to finalise our long standing discussion on our organisational principles. It prompted us to recognise the possibility that a generation gap could open up in the party, and to take action to prevent that.

Because the financial crisis was bearing down rather urgently, we moved rapidly to secure our most vital institutions: the 24-page *Direct Action*, the party school, the printshop and our apparatus and buildings. All of these institutions are financial burdens. *Direct Action* has never made money, and we went into debt to buy our buildings. We must constantly find the money to run them.

There was a certain paradox about our financial crisis: On the one hand the party had grown, but on the other our income had declined. At the height of the turn, when we were a hard, cadre party, we were getting in considerably more money than we were several years later when we were almost twice as big.

The overall economic situation was partly to blame. There was a recession, comrades were losing their jobs. But that wasn't the only problem, because the average contribution of party members declined by a lot more than what comrades had lost in wages. There was a deeper problem: We were mistraining the younger members who had recently joined the party.

In good part, this was a product of our new political approach. With our break with Trotskyism we had dropped some rhetoric about our historic role as the essential nucleus of the revolutionary vanguard. We had drawn back from that approach when we realised how it could distort a party. We had seen how it was used to drive people out of the US SWP. In any case, how could we go on saying we were the essential nucleus when we had found that we had been wrong on so many questions over the previous five years?

The fact that we were able to correct the worst of our errors has largely restored our confidence, though we're far more modest about ourselves these days. When we

drafted our new program, we didn't say, "Here it is, and it's holy writ". We said, "It's work in progress, and let's give it a try."

The party's stronger for that approach, but there can be another side to it. There can be a tendency to think: "Why should I give money or be so active if we're not the essential nucleus?" Some people preferred the old hype.

## An organisational correction

On top of that problem, with our new approach there also came a certain loss of confidence in all that we had done in the past. We were in danger of abandoning proper training of the party on organisational questions. In fact, we were miseducating comrades.

We took some decisions to turn this situation around:

- Firstly, we decided to return to weekly branch meetings. We found that the monthly meetings just didn't provide us with enough opportunities to bring the comrades together for discussions.

We had gone to monthly meetings in an attempt to do everything necessary to win workers and integrate them, and it seemed like a big thing to ask workers to come to a meeting every week. It's different for young people with no commitments. They come along every week and are generally looking for things to do.

But despite all our attempts to recruit workers, most of our recruits in 1983-84 came through Resistance — which is where most of our recruits have always come from. As the Hawke government's prices-incomes Accord (and the preparations for it) put the lid on the industrial movement, we were winning activists from the nuclear disarmament and international solidarity movements. Probably we won more workers through these channels than we did through industrial work.

We were winning politically active people who were able to take the pace in a party like ours, but we were still writing resolutions saying that we would mainly recruit workers. That's not to say we haven't recruited workers and migrants. We have. But such recruitment hasn't transformed the party in the way we said it would. The turn just didn't develop the momentum we expected it to.

Was that because we shifted the focus away from the turn, or because we didn't deepen the turn by going to the most oppressed layers of the working class? We don't think so. We rejected the method implicit in those questions because we thought that method would very quickly transform us into a sect.

The rise of the nuclear disarmament movement indicated that something we hadn't expected was developing in the class struggle, and in those circumstances it would be ridiculous to cling doggedly to our previous schema. That doesn't mean

we've permanently turned our backs on the trade unions. We will continue to do trade union work, and we will encourage comrades to take jobs in areas where they are likely to be able to do useful work in the unions. What's more, at the first signs of real political movement in the unions, we will direct more resources there.

Of course, the decision to return to weekly meetings didn't solve all of our problems. Because we decided to correct our previous lack of attention to organisational questions, our branch meetings in the past year perhaps tended to focus on this side of things a little too much. We were in danger of returning to the sort of finances-and-sales branch meetings that we had too often in the '70s.

How do we make our meetings richer and more politically useful? We've only scratched the surface of this question so far, but there have been some innovations. In general, we can say that if the branch executives are not putting a lot of attention into the branch meetings, the meetings will collapse into routinism. It's largely a question of balance. Routinism is not the only danger. If we over-plan our meetings, we can squeeze the life out of them.

- Our second decision was to expand *Direct Action*. Previously, we had cut back the paper to 16 pages and had optimistically said we would write shorter articles and make the paper more accessible to workers. That almost killed off the paper, and eventually we decided to save it by putting more resources into it and increasing it to 24 pages.

The decision to put more resources into the paper reflected our view that our main task was to build a revolutionary current in the context of considerable disorientation on the left. This situation on the left is largely a result of the international crisis of social-democracy and the steady decline and fragmentation of the Communist Party (which is also part of an international trend).

- Our third decision was to introduce a new dues system, under which each member would pay a set amount according to a scale based on income, dependents, etc. If we hadn't done that, we wouldn't have been able to maintain the paper, the school (even so, we had to cancel one session of the school for financial reasons), the national office, or our Melbourne premises.

The dues structure represented a tough decision to focus our financial resources on maintaining these central institutions, to stress national rather than local priorities. It squeezed the local units quite hard. Some branches weren't able to afford full-time organisers for a time.

To a certain extent, the toughness of these measures helped to promote financial consciousness in the branches, as they were forced to find extra money for their local activities.

- We also decided to reorganise our paper sales. We encourage comrades to sell the paper, and we have always expected at least some minimal effort from comrades. But faced with a financial crisis that threatened the future of the paper, we decided that comrades should buy a minimal number of papers for distribution. They could make the money back by selling the papers, or they could distribute them free if they weren't inclined to sell them. That was also a tough decision, but we didn't have much alternative if we wanted to maintain the paper.
- We also decided to initiate a *Direct Action* subscription system for party supporters. That was partly to increase sales and partly to help organise our supporters and raise a little more money.

We did this because we realised that not all members would be comfortable with our tough, new organisational measures. In particular, we expected that the new dues structure would result in some comrades leaving. Unfortunately, because we were forced to set rather high standards, we lost some members whose level of commitment would have qualified them for membership in most other parties in this country.

We needed a way of continuing to organise these comrades who remained sympathetic even though they felt they couldn't keep up with the requirements of party membership. This wasn't the first time we had considered this question. We also had to deal with it during the turn to industry, and we'll have to deal with it increasingly as we get bigger.

To put it more positively, as we get bigger we'll meet more and more people who won't join but who will regard themselves as supporters and sympathisers. That's inevitable.

These people can be a reservoir of support if we can organise them properly.

Even from our supporters, we ask for more than the Labor Party does. The ALP asks for about \$20 a year, we ask for \$100 for a supporting subscription to the paper.

We want to take the process of organising our supporters a step further by making the *Party Organiser*, as well as *Direct Action*, available to them. While the material in the *Organiser* might not all be supremely relevant to our supporters, it is one more way to help them feel that they are part of the movement.

## An initial balance sheet

Where have all these decisions left us today? Briefly, we can say that our quick changes saved the day. The party responded magnificently. We achieved our fund drive target as well as making our other initiatives work. That doesn't mean that all of our problems

are over. While we're not at death's door, we still have serious problems with *Direct Action* sales.

So, 1985 was a hard year because of the political climate and because we had to bite the bullet organisationally. We didn't have much to spend on travel or on projects such as electoral work or even a leaflet on taxation. Nevertheless, we came through it a harder, stronger, more confident party.

We should also say that our new norms and organisational procedures haven't made us more rigid. We're not interested in driving people out of the party because they don't do as much as they used to (or because they don't do as much as our older generation might have done when they were younger and working in more favourable political circumstances). Quite a layer of our longer-term members are now in this position.

## Youth & renewal

Our party was founded on the drive, energy and commitment of youth who are now the older generation of party members (though most are by no means old). We're in a better position today because we don't have to build the party from scratch. We have a continuous 20 year record of party building behind us.

Nevertheless, the next stage of party building will require the same energy and commitment as the past 20 years. Fortunately, while many of our older comrades have slowed down, we have a younger generation who we can expect to have the necessary drive, energy and enthusiasm. Our task is to find ways of renewing the party, of blending the experience and the energy we have available.

Of course, the situation we face today can pose some problems for our organisational norms. What if there are not enough good examples? What if the older generation gets *too* slack?

There are no absolute solutions, because this problem is also related to the political situation we face. Some of the tiredness and the slowing down is due to that. Comrades can throw off their tiredness overnight when something exciting breaks politically.

The drive to make Resistance more prominent is obviously important. There's nothing new about this approach. Our party emerged in the first place from Resistance (later the Socialist Youth Alliance). For a long time, Resistance and the SYA were better known than the SWP and its predecessors.

Now we want to tip the balance a little the other way. We want to encourage the younger activists as much as possible in every area of our work, including work in the mass movements. We must prepare for some turnover in the party leadership, which is presently dominated by older comrades. The party school will play a vital role in

preparing for this.

Our older generation had to take 10-15 years to learn some of the central political and theoretical lessons of Marxism. We had to do it the hard way. The school enables us to compress the learning experience for younger comrades.

For a number of reasons, we can expect the calibre of the younger comrades to be higher. They start out better prepared, and as members of a far stronger, more important party. Because of that, their experience will be far richer.

## The long haul

Obviously, a big part of our work is to train all comrades in our organisational principles and methods, and to prepare them for the long haul of party building. We don't want to go into all aspects of that discussion here, but there are some things we must stress.

- Firstly, it is an honour, not a right, to be a member of the party. Being a member is something comrades strive to do. It requires dedication and commitment and a long-term perspective.
- Secondly, involvement in the mass movement is vital to the training of our comrades. Our stress on this has been vital in enabling the party to grow stronger while many organisations that started with similar forces around the same time have withered on the vine. Of course, our commitment to mass activity is balanced against our commitment to party tasks. Neglect of either, or overemphasis of either, invariably causes problems for us.
- A third element in the training of our comrades is formal study of our programmatic resolutions, and of the theoretical and historical material on which they are based.

This is important, because if we had a failure in 1985 it was in the area of consolidation of new members. Too many provisional members didn't become full members, and too many full members drifted away after only a short time. This has happened before, at times when we have unthinkingly over-committed our resources to activity in the mass movement and haven't paid enough attention to the newer members of the party.

It's also important for us to combine educational and practical work. This is a question that needs particular attention when workers join the party. When they decide to join the party, a lot of people think: "Well, I'll go down and take out a ticket and then I'll have done my bit." It can take time to convince people that's not really enough.

When people join a party, many don't know what to expect. Recruiting is a process that continues well after the provisional membership card is issued, and even after the full membership card is issued. If we pay insufficient attention to this aspect of our

work, we waste opportunities. Today, this is one of the weakest areas of our work.

## Organisational principles

Over the past year we discussed all of this, summing it all up in a final consideration of our organisational principles. We had been dithering over these for some time.

We began thinking our existing organisational principles were out of date in 1978-79, around the time of the fusion with the Communist League and the turn to industry. There was a clash in the party over decisions we took around that time, and we lost a lot of members. That experience taught us a lot of organisational lessons.

Because we were applying organisational principles that we thought were inadequate, we drafted a new set. But we weren't happy with those either. They sat around on a few desks for a while, until we began to have doubts about the whole framework of such principles.

We began to think that way when we saw how the leadership of the US SWP was able to manipulate and distort organisation principles that were fundamentally the same as ours. They had a great canon of doctrine (which we had imitated with some adaptations) and if anyone violated this or that chapter or verse, out they went.

At that stage, we decided to write completely new organisation principles based on our views after seeing the sectarian degeneration of the US party. Then we decided that we needed some more experience before we could do that. We needed more of the lessons of our organisational experimentation of 1983-84.

Then, at the end of that period of experimentation, we tightened up our norms again. We thought we had returned, at a higher level, to much of our previous understanding. We decided that we were still in a period of slow and patient party building through a steady process of winning and educating cadres. We decided that until we were sure something specific was wrong, we'd live with it. We decided to try another rewrite of our organisation principles on that basis.

Then, finally, we cut the whole knot by saying we didn't need an organisational principles document at all. That also led us to reconsider our constitution.

As far as we can tell, the Russian Bolshevik party didn't have organisational principles anything like ours until after the 1917 revolution. Later, the Communist International wrote some organisation principles for reasons that were sound at the time. But we were in a rather different situation.

In the end, we decided that it was probably a mistake for a party as small as ours to have a long organisational principles resolution that had about the same effective weight as a constitution.

After seeing the degeneration of the US party, we decided that wasn't the correct

way to train our cadres and to organise the party. We decided that any rules we regarded as the bottom line should be very clearly spelled out in the constitution.

Of course, the constitution can't even begin to sum up all of our 20-year organisational experience. We also have a body of practice and experience that shapes how we organise, lead and train. Some of that's written down in our resolutions, in our discussion bulletins, in our assessments of various experiences. But any attempt to sum up all of that, and to distil it into rules, in one short document is bound to produce distortions. It's bound to be too hard on some questions, too soft on others, and to omit vital elements. So at this conference, when we consider our new constitution, we also want to consider a motion to rescind our existing organisational principles.

## Party discussion

The other thing we've learned about organisational principles is that they're always changing and developing because they're based on practice. We're always experimenting, changing, learning about how to build a revolutionary party.

In 1982, we had quite a discussion about the needs of the party and we proposed for the first time that some of our inner-party discussion would be conducted publicly. Our national pre-conference discussions play a vital role in helping the party to assess its experiences and develop its political understanding.

Since 1982, we've pushed that process further. The discussion leading into this conference was conducted in the pages of *Direct Action*. We might not always do it that way, but it was a useful experience, though there may be some feeling that it made *Direct Action* a little heavy.

In any case, we can have sharper public discussions that the one we've just had without doing ourselves any harm. Such an approach could even make us more attractive to people looking around for a party that's not afraid of constructive discussion and debate.

In the past year we've also made other changes in the way we function. One thing we've noticed is that the party is less and less a discussion club. One of the assumptions that came with our Trotskyist origins was the view that the main purpose of the constitution was to provide a framework for debate and factional struggle. That view marked the way we wrote our resolutions and set down our organisational procedures. Our new proposals move away from that framework, though naturally, our proposed new constitution has provisions relating to these matters.

If there are big mistakes, naturally there will be struggles in the party. But at the moment our decision-making processes involve above all a steady, two-way flow of information between the national leadership and the branches. Even where there are

differences, usually our approach is a gradual one. When we have different views on the national executive, our usual approach is to slow down our decision making, to allow comrades time to think it over.

We were operating on consensus long before that method became fashionable in some other circles in the mass movement. Sometimes we have to vote, but we do it reluctantly.

Of course, individual comrades have an input into the process of discussion to the extent that they have input into all aspects of party life. Active comrades' views naturally command more respect than the views of those who are not so active, or those who may be relatively untested.

Over the years, all of our big changes of position have come about not through inner-party struggle and fierce debate, but through a process of consultation and discussion.

That was how we changed our position on participation in trade union elections in 1982. A comrade in the Wollongong steelworks said he thought it was wrong not to contest the elections. There was no need for a big struggle. Someone had a good idea and the party took it up.

## Provisions for factional struggle

Of course, life isn't always so wonderful, and the draft constitution has guarantees that will permit factional struggles if comrades think they are necessary. One change here is that we don't provide for *tendency* struggles. In reality, we don't think they exist. Certainly, we've never seen a so-called tendency in our party, or in the Fourth International, that wasn't also a faction.

The Trotskyist tradition that we drew from tried to make a distinction between factions and tendencies. A tendency was supposedly simply a trend of thought within the party — one that wouldn't assume organisational form or discipline, and in particular wouldn't attempt to change or overturn the leadership. It would simply argue for its views. But in reality, if comrades think they have a difference that's important enough to struggle around ideologically, they'll also organise around it.

No one ever could draw the line where a tendency ended and a faction started. The whole attempt to regulate inner party discussion to that extent was wrong-headed. We don't need such an arsenal of organisational forms for our discussion. Above all, we don't need organisational forms that automatically sharpen differences by institutionalising an adversarial approach.

We hope this new constitution gets closer to the reality of what actually happens in the party. Factional struggle isn't an automatic response when we have differences. It's

nothing to be ashamed of when we have a unanimous vote at our conference or National Committee. That's a sign of the strength and effectiveness of our processes of consultation. We can be confident about our positions because we're confident about the process of consultation and preparation.

## The 1984 split

Our thinking on these questions was confirmed by the split in our leadership a couple of years ago, when some comrades effectively formed a faction whose first loyalty was to the US SWP. I don't want to go into all the details of that here, because the Control Commission has published a very thorough report, which is available for all comrades to read.

We published such a thorough report because we were dealing with a split in our leadership, and that's the most serious kind of split. In fact, unless the leadership is split there's usually no split at all. Although this was a relatively small split, it was a serious one because it cost us dearly in terms of experienced cadre. So we want comrades to be sure that it was unavoidable, and that we did all we could to resolve the differences.

The experience of that split influenced our thinking on a number of levels. It certainly helped to clarify our views on continuing membership of the Fourth International. There would have been no split had the comrades not been linked to one of the factions of the Fourth International, though it's interesting to note that the Fourth International as a whole didn't condone their actions, and did support the position we took.

All of the comrades who left voted for our resolutions prior to the 1984 conference. But within a few days of talking to a representative of the US SWP, they had changed their position. They formed a secret faction and launched their fight, which quickly took them out of the party.

I've devoted a little time to this question because it involved a split in our leadership, and that's something our new constitution can't deal with adequately. Nor did our organisational principles.

We're always learning about the question of leadership. James Cannon once said that "the question of the party is the question of the leadership of the party". That's why we pay the leadership question so much attention. If we can succeed in building a party leadership, over time we can succeed in building a party.

## The National Committee

At this point, I want to look at some general aspects of the leadership question refracted

through some of the problems we face today. When people think of the party leadership, they think first of the National Committee. That's correct, because the National Committee we elect at our national conferences should be a microcosm of the party. We must be confident that when it meets, the party meets. When it takes a decision, the party takes a decision.

What are the criteria for membership of the National Committee? Our view, stated in our organisational principles and elsewhere, has always been that the key test of leadership is ability to lead.

We can identify some of the elements of leadership:

- Understanding of the politics and program of the party.
- Exemplary levels of activity.
- Ability to bear major workloads and responsibility.
- Special skills that broaden the leadership team.

Then there are other factors we consider when electing our leadership: Should there be representatives of especially oppressed sectors of the population? What about the geographical balance?

Above all, when we elect our leadership we're constructing a team that's answerable to and recallable by the membership. One of the things we value most in our leaders is the ability to help others to be leaders. We don't get all of the qualities we're looking for in any individual. Our leadership is not an exclusive club, nor a form of recognition for deserving comrades. It's a working committee, and we strive to make it as balanced, as inclusive and as representative as possible.

When choosing the National Committee, we always aim to reflect the majority view in the party — to give the majority every opportunity to test its views in practice. In the past, we've often said that the National Committee reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the party, but really we don't aim to reflect our weaknesses — why would we do that? It's more accurate to say that the National Committee reflects a variety of strengths. It is our collective thinking machine.

Where do we stand today in the process of building a leadership? At the national level, we can say we're doing quite well, though there's always room for improvement. Even after the split, our national leadership today represents a priceless acquisition — the result of 15 years of party building.

Recently, we've tended to bring the National Committee together only about once or twice a year. At times, we've held more frequent plenums. In 1982, we had four. But, for several reasons, two has been more the norm. One important reason is the cost of bringing comrades together in this country, with its vast distances and expensive travel services.

A second reason is that we've tended to need gatherings larger than just the National Committee. As the party has grown larger and stronger it has become more difficult to be elected to the National Committee. There are a lot of excellent branch executive members around the country who could be on the National Committee, but who aren't because the competition is very strong. That's great, because it means we've got a very strong party, with considerable depth of leadership.

We've tended to recognise this by making the National Committee gatherings considerably larger than the elected National Committee. We've invited a lot of youth, fraction leaders and other leaders at various levels of the party. We've found that it's far more useful to hold the larger, less frequent gatherings. That's an informal practice that has grown up, and because it works we should recognise it more formally here at our national conference — our highest decision-making body. Naturally, the decisive votes still rest with the elected National Committee members.

This process of inviting comrades to the National Committee meetings helps to familiarise a wider layer of comrades with the functioning of the national leadership, to expand the experience available to the National Committee. That's far preferable to increasing the size of the National Committee and running the risk of debasing it and making it unwieldy.

## **Renewal of the national leadership**

Although we recognise that there are many more candidates for the National Committee than there are places this year, we're not proposing any substantial increase in the size of the body. As we elect our new National Committee, we should recognise that we're preparing for a process of turnover and renewal.

We must prepare for this, because we have to recognise that comrades too often regard election to the National Committee as a form of personal recognition. That's human nature, and we must be aware of that approach, even though we think there is far too much emphasis on it.

We must be aware of this problem because when we elect our National Committees in the next several years we will have to represent the youth who've joined the party recently. Some have already proven themselves capable of serving on the National Committee, and we can expect more to do so by the time we re-elect the national leadership at our next national conference.

We won't get full input from these people unless they are fully involved in all aspects of the party, including the leadership. If youth are carrying the weight, doing the work, they must be represented on the National Committee.

At the same time, we must also say that the National Committee is only a committee

of the party. *It has some of the leaders of the party on it.* We've said this before, and we'll say it again, but we also know that old attitudes die hard, and egos inevitably get bruised. Nevertheless, we'll do what's best for the party, and renewal is a constant and necessary process. We can't afford to allow a generation gap to develop in the party.

At the same time, we can use the process of invitation to National Committee meetings to provide for continuing input from experienced comrades who might not get elected because they have slowed down.

If comrades are on the National Committee one year and not on it the next, it can be a fairly natural reaction to ask: "How did I fail?" In most cases, there has probably been no failure at all — just a change in the composition and needs of the party. We don't want to discourage ambition. We want comrades to strive to be part of the leadership, but we also want to encourage a balanced view. The National Committee, like the party as a whole, is an absolutely conscious organism.

## Local leadership

While we can be reasonably satisfied with our development of leadership at the national level, locally we need more discussion. We've been through various phases, but at present we appear to be developing more stable leaderships in a number of cities.

To build a national leadership over the years, we've had to mix and match and move cadres around. That was necessary to enable us to build a national team, but today the emphasis is on stability in local leadership teams so that they develop lasting links, both among the comrades and in the mass movement. Today, the local branch leaderships are stronger than ever. They stand head and shoulders above the leaderships of five years ago. Of course, there are still problems. There can always be combinations that don't work.

Then there's the question of renewal. Any unit of party leadership will usually represent the past, the present and the future.

The past is important because it reflects the way the leadership has evolved — the accumulation of skills and abilities over time. Nevertheless, experience is not very useful unless comrades are confident that it is being harnessed in a way that is relevant to the present situation. The leadership must reflect the party as it is today, and it must also reflect our aims for the future. We're always striving to put together a working combination of these elements.

## A propaganda group

The SWP today is still a propaganda group, rather than a mass party capable of systematic agitation that can substantially affect the broader political situation.

We've said this before, but now we want to add that this view is modified by our approach to building a vanguard party. Building a propaganda group is not simply a matter of carrying out propaganda. It also involves intervention on the largest possible scale in the mass struggles of the day.

In building a vanguard party in this country, it's essential that we emphasise the ideological struggle. The development of our party school is important in this.

Today, the party and its leadership stand on a higher plane than they did several years ago. The party today is extremely competent. But we haven't yet won the ideological battle, the centrepiece of which is *Direct Action*. That's our main vehicle of intervention in discussion and struggle.

It's a pity we're still at that stage. It would be far better if we could get our views on radio and television. It would also be better if we could produce more pamphlets and other publications. But our resources are limited and they must be focused, and when we say we're a propaganda group, what we mean above all is that building *Direct Action* is central to our work.

As a propaganda group, one of our main tasks is to intervene in the more important discussions on the left and to gather vanguard elements around us. In recent times we've established and strengthened our links with the historical vanguard in this country. As well as making progress among youth, our paper and our branches have forged links with older workers who have been in or looked to the Communist Party.

Part of our task here is to maintain the pressure, and not to think we've said all there is to say. At one point we started to make that mistake in relation to the prices-incomes Accord.

It can also be useful for the branches to look at other ways of conducting this ideological struggle — holding forums, for example. We shouldn't leave the task of holding forums simply to Resistance. And while *Direct Action* is important, we shouldn't rely solely on it.

Branches should hold more forums. They create opportunities for leading comrades to present our ideas, and for our comrades and supporters to hear the views of other speakers.

While we're looking at our present organisational state, it's worth assessing how the Nuclear Disarmament Party experience reflected on us organisationally. One thing it certainly revealed was our ability to survive and surmount a quite intense red-baiting attack by the media.

The emergence and persistence of the NDP is a very positive factor in Australian politics, and it's a great pity that some of the stars of the 1984 election show couldn't handle a little democracy afterwards. But while the blows of Peter Garret and his

cronies staggered the NDP, they bounced right off our hide. It will take a lot more than a gaggle of promo men to do us serious harm.

In fact, far from harming us, the publicity probably did us some good. Afterwards, a lot more people had heard of us. A lot thought we were the main party of the left — which might not be so wide of the mark. Certainly, no other organisation on the left can match our political cohesion and our national cadre network, though we wouldn't dispute that the NDP pulled far more votes, and some other groups on the left have far better links with sections of the trade union bureaucracy.

Today, the work of the party is far stronger and more varied than it has been at any time in the past. In the trade unions, in the antiwar movement, in the solidarity movement, it has never been more rounded or broader. If we keep our nerve, if we're ruthlessly objective about what's happening, if we don't latch onto schemas about how the class struggle will supposedly develop, we've got every chance of coming through the present period intact and stronger than ever.

In writing this year's political resolution, we included a chapter on some aspects of party building. That's because this is a relatively difficult period for party building.

Among the old left there's a lot of demoralisation about the political situation and the prospects for party building. I'm not saying we've been untouched by such attitudes. We've had our share of comrades becoming demoralised and leaving. But we're better off than most, and we've had some good experiences as well.

The general conjuncture may be difficult, but our response is to seize any opportunity we see. At times we've been able to go against the trend.

Whatever the difficulties of this period, we know it will pass. Whether things get better or get worse, at least we won't be bored! In any case, the difficulties of the present situation are relative. This is not a time to give up the struggle. We don't see fascism on the march. We don't even see any latter-day Joe McCarthys making much progress.

We can even do quite well in this period if we renew our commitment and keep our nerve. We must also resolve to be ruthlessly objective. We're determined to break completely with the Trotskyist tendency to build the party on myths — the myth that there's a big Fourth International out there, or that what's happening in Nicaragua and the socialist countries is unimportant because it doesn't fit a particular schema.

Having said that, we're still not about to accept some of the views that are too fashionable on the left today. We don't think it's realistic to consider Australia in isolation from world trends. It's not realistic to bleat that all is lost because traditional left Social Democracy is in crisis and the ruling class is attempting to take back all of its social concessions of the postwar years. Our reality must take account of every factor,

not one or two factors in isolation.

Yes, things are slow in the trade unions, but there's plenty of life in the peace movement and in the solidarity movement.

Another element of the reality is our own role. How can we help to change reality through our activity over the next five years. If we don't ask that question, we can be surprised and overwhelmed by events.

We must also be realistic in assessing time scales and political and social trends. The working class has already suffered some serious defeats, and it will almost certainly suffer more before it renews its leadership and begins to fight back. By taking everything into account, we come up with a picture quite different from that of the reformist doomsayers who advocate abandoning the struggle because the left has supposedly failed. We help to shape reality by setting ourselves realistic goals. We build our reality, we don't dream it.

Marx was the first to put forward that view, and it's worth keeping in mind today. The SWP's intervention in the class struggle can have a big impact on the reality in this country. ■

# Towards a New Party

For more than a decade, since the end of the Vietnam War, the capitalist system has not been able to reassert its accustomed degree of control over international politics. One reflection of this is the continuing crisis in United States foreign policy, the most recent casualty of which is Ronald Reagan's presidency. In the space of a few months, the Conragate crisis reduced Reagan from Rambo to lame duck status.

Despite the best efforts of the most powerful capitalist political empires, revolts that endanger capitalist rule around the world continue to erupt unpredictably throughout the superexploited Third World.

That doesn't mean it's possible to make any firm predictions about the future. We can't say, for example, that the revolution is certain of success in the Philippines or El Salvador, that there are no dangers to the Nicaraguan revolution, or that a big struggle is about to break out somewhere that will shake the advanced capitalist countries to their foundations.

While the situation is unstable and there have been positive developments, by and large capitalism has been able to hold the lid on the situation. International politics are largely stalemated, and the stalemate is unlikely to be broken quickly. Progress is likely to come slowly, by degrees, over time.

Obviously, this world picture is not completely even. While capitalism overall faces an unstable and rather dangerous world situation, it still enjoys considerable stability in its main bases — the advanced capitalist countries such as the United States, Japan, the Western European states and Australia.

Since the mid-1970s, there haven't even been slow gains for the socialist and working class movements in the advanced countries. Rather, there has been a sustained process of grinding down the power of the trade union movements and the traditional left.

Since the onset of a new world economic crisis in the mid-'70s, there has been

resistance to this process — very strong resistance in some cases. Nevertheless, the general trend has been a steady wearing down of working-class organisation. This is capitalism's strategy. Slowly, past gains are being eroded, real wages are being whittled away, the strength of the working class is being sapped.

If this process were to continue for 20 or 30 years, capitalism would solve most of its present problems. But that's not likely to happen. The situation can't remain stable for that long. On the one hand, the capitalists are in too much of a hurry, and on the other, the working class and its allies are unlikely to accept these persistent attacks indefinitely.

For the moment though, we've not had the decisive battles that could lead to a resolution of the situation in favour of socialism or a smashing of the working class and the onset of fascism. That's partly because the bourgeoisie doesn't want to take the risks involved in that course for the moment. They learned a lot from their last fascist experiment in the advanced countries. It was very costly. World War II cost them China, most of Eastern Europe, a big chunk of Germany.

Fascism is a strategy of desperation, a last resort. The next experiment in it could cost capitalism everything — either through revolutions or through nuclear holocaust. The capitalists are not yet that desperate. Their present tactics are meeting with partial success in the advanced countries even if they can't resolve the explosive situation in the underdeveloped countries or guarantee long term success.

### **Alternation tactic**

One tactic of the capitalists in the advanced countries is the alternation between conservative and social-democratic government. At one point in France, they even had a Socialist Party-Communist Party coalition.

This tactic of alternation hasn't been necessary everywhere. In Japan and the United States, where the working class has never been strong politically, capitalism hasn't been forced into the tactic of co-opting and debasing a party that grew out of the labour movement. But in most of the advanced capitalist countries this alternation process has been operating for at least 10 years. In Great Britain it has been at work since the 1960s.

There have been relatively few big struggles against this capitalist offensive. This is largely because the working class has lacked leadership able or willing to offer the sort of resistance that could have brought even limited victories, let alone seize the initiative for a political offensive to exploit the social crisis of capitalism and shift the relationship of forces. This is the case throughout the advanced capitalist world despite the fact that in some countries there were communist parties with mass support.

Even where there have been fightbacks, there has been no overall, political fightback of the sort that might be capable of turning the entire situation around. At one stage, French steelworkers revolted in huge struggles, but in the end they were defeated because they were not supported by the rest of the rest of the labour movement. Similarly the British miners' strike. Even though the miners helped to change the entire political climate in Britain, they couldn't win alone.

In Australia today, the alternation tactic has by and large worked. A lack of support for those prepared to fight has seriously weakened the working class movement, contributing to a very difficult situation for the left.

### **Need for a political counter-offensive**

The only thing that could change the relationship of forces is a political counter-offensive that would raise the stakes by developing an overall political alternative. That would open up the possibility of victories.

The Socialist Workers Party vigorously raised this idea at the time of the 1982-83 steel crisis in Wollongong. We said it wasn't possible to win the fight against unemployment without a political program that challenged capitalism. In that particular case, the thrust of our program was the demand for nationalisation.

Until the workers' movement develops that sort of generalised political strategy, there will be further defeats. That must be the framework of political discussion today: How can the working class put a stop to this steady erosion of its position? What can it do about the present, treacherous leadership of the Labor Party and most of the union movement? How can it develop the program, organisation and forms of struggle that will enable it to turn the situation around?

One reason it's difficult to develop this program is that many people doubt that it is possible to win. During the British miners' strike, some people started saying it's no longer possible to win through struggle. There are two main weaknesses in this doomsaying:

- Firstly, strikes such as that of the British miners don't undermine the process of struggle as a whole. Losing without struggling is far more costly than losing after a struggle. Passive acceptance of setbacks virtually guarantees defeat. The lessons of Germany in the 1930s should be all too clear.
- Secondly, while there is a lack of political direction, there's no widespread feeling that the capitalist system is about to deliver the goods, that it's capable of raising our living standards. Enthusiastic support for the capitalist system is not really a notable feature of the political situation today.

Given the present world relationship of forces, defeat is by no means an inevitable

outcome of struggle. It is much more likely that any real fightback could win enormous sympathy and support if it was backed by important sections of the labour movement. Of course, there can be no certainty of victory in any situation. The ultimate outcome is always decided by struggle.

## **Obstacles to struggle**

There are, unquestionably, big obstacles to successful struggle today: The decline of working-class consciousness, increasing stratification and division in the working class, increasing integration of the unions into the state as mechanisms for controlling the working class.

Political leadership is above all what's needed to reverse these trends. This is the biggest single missing factor in the equation today. While revolutionary struggles are not on the agenda for the foreseeable future, forces are gathering for greater resistance. But even limited battles are unlikely to be successful unless the political landscape is changed. Unions alone can't win, especially isolated unions, or groups of workers who decide on very advanced and militant tactics, such as occupying a natural gas rig.

When the North-West Shelf workers tried that tactic they were in quite a strong position in their immediate workplace. But throughout the labour movement there was a complete lack of political preparation for such a struggle. The Labor Party leaders immediately started plotting how to get the workers off the rig — and they succeeded.

Winning requires a political leadership that can give advice, build support and create an infrastructure of solidarity. That sort of leadership would make it much harder for the ruling class to press ahead with its grinding down of the working-class movement, with its attempts to further cut incomes, living standards and working conditions.

## **Two-party con game**

At the moment, the two-party parliamentary game makes it very easy for the capitalist class to maintain political control in the advanced capitalist countries. Because of the domination of politics by huge wealth, the progressive forces have lost the game before it even begins. And if it's lost in the political arena, there's no way it can be won back simply through militant industrial struggle.

Things don't have to be that way. The emergence of the Greens in Germany destabilised this cosy political situation. While the Greens haven't gone far enough in developing fundamental solutions, they have made an important start. In Britain today, a party of even 10,000 militants, operating coherently, would cause enormous

problems for the ruling class. It wouldn't be so easy to get away with the Labour/Tory con game.

Of course, as social tensions heat up in the advanced countries, the two-party system can need adjustment. That's what led to the emergence of the Liberal/Social Democratic Alliance in Britain, and the Democrats in Australia. These outfits are an additional safety valve to let off the steam generated by disillusionment with the two-party system.

As the capitalist economic crisis deepens, as it must, the political stakes are getting higher. We don't know exactly the pace at which this crisis will develop. No one knows that. The bourgeois economists don't know, the stockbrokers don't know. But no one can ignore the international debt crisis. Everyone knows there are fundamental contradictions in the system, and no one has a plan to resolve them. Things are going to get worse.

Union politics alone weren't adequate in the earlier stages of this crisis, as it developed over the past 10 years, and there's no way they'll be adequate as the crisis deepens.

## Economic debate

If there's one side benefit of the economic crisis, it's that everyone is now used to discussing the problems of the capitalist economy. Everyone can hear the pundits of the bourgeois media carrying on, and can get a rough idea of what's happening.

It's rather interesting that the capitalists are happy to talk so openly about the crisis of their system. They feel they've shifted the framework of the debate, and they've convinced most of us that it's our economy, that we should worry about how much the big corporations are making and about problems with the share market, the value of the dollar, etc. They feel very confident about that, because the Hawke government, through its prices-incomes Accord with the ACTU, has helped them win the economic debate — for the moment.

They've convinced a lot of people that it's *our* country, *our* economy, *our* dollar — that we're all in the same boat — multimillionaire and unemployed single mother alike. Of course, it is our country, but for the moment we don't control it, and we can't be held responsible for the value of the dollar, or anything else to do with *their* economy.

But all that's rather hollow. There are long-term structural weaknesses that must catch up with the Australian economy. We don't hear much any more about how Australia is going to ride out the crisis on the back of a resources boom. Yet that was the last word in economic prognostication not so long ago.

The present problems with the economy are not a result of Paul Keating's mistakes, as some on the left are saying. Nor are they a legacy of Liberal mismanagement, as the Labor right likes to claim. They are an inevitable product of the impact of the capitalist world crisis on a structurally weak and inherently uncompetitive capitalist economy.

The Labor left argues that the Hawke government could have taken a different course — a more traditionally liberal Labor approach. In fact, the Keating-type approach was the only one open to a government that wasn't prepared to break completely with the ruling class.

Abstractly, it might be possible to criticise specific policies — certain tariffs, or the deregulation of the finance market. But there was no alternative course that was acceptable to the decisive sectors of the ruling class.

Capital does what it has to for its survival, and if you choose to operate in a capitalist framework — as the whole Labor Party does — you go along for the ride. You certainly have to drive down workers' living standards.

## Restructuring dream

Many trade union leaders now openly endorse the view that it is necessary to reduce living standards — temporarily, of course. They've imprisoned themselves in the capitalists' political framework.

In union circles, it's fashionable these days to talk of restructuring. But any attempt at economic restructuring must take account of the fact that Australian capitalism is too weak economically to do much but let the multinational corporations take over. The biggest Australian companies can respond by becoming multinationals themselves, but an internationally competitive, capitalist Australian manufacturing industry is a utopian dream.

To construct an economy that serves the interests of the majority of people in this country it will be necessary to relieve big capital of its present political and economic power. That can't be done within the framework of capitalist politics, and it most certainly can't be done through parliament.

So why dream of utopias? Why not fight for socialism? It's necessary to fight exactly the same enemies in either case, to fight exactly the same institutions, and to mobilise exactly the same people.

Any differences within the ruling class are not about fundamentals, but only about how far to go at the moment, about what political cost is acceptable. While it is always necessary to choose the lesser evil when you've got no other option, as a long term strategy that path leads into the wrong camp.

There are always tactical differences in the ruling class: When and how far to drive

down living standards, when and how to switch to the Liberals, what role for the arbitration system? But it is really a dream to think the bourgeoisie can be forced to invest here, to control prices, to stop speculating financially, etc.

While capitalists run the state, the media and the major political parties, it's simply not possible to organise production rationally. Today, there is no significant section of the capitalist class that can be an ally in struggles to reform capitalism. Attempts to do this through the ALP and parliament remain an empty charade, leading to disillusionment, confusion and defeat.

Of course, the left must do more than simply proclaim the need for socialism. Fundamental change is not on the immediate agenda, but that doesn't mean resistance is useless. A program of immediate reforms is a necessary part of a transitional program to promote mass mobilisations leading to more directly socialist struggles.

Moreover, the left must be able to answer questions about how to build and develop the Australian economy. Naturally, our answers must be founded on an understanding of the need to go beyond the current framework. That's the only way to develop a rounded Australian economy.

Our skills will, of course, be tested in discussions on protectionism, on economic nationalism, on war and so-called defence. The need is to come up with policies that can take the political initiative away from the right without conceding important ground to it.

In this country, much political discussion of reform programs seems to take place in blissful ignorance of some of the most obvious pitfalls — particularly the limits that must be placed on concessions if reform is not to turn into reaction. Too often, there is no conception of struggle for reform. The perspective is simply to bargain with the ruling class, using the rights and living standards of working people as coin.

Purported reform strategies must be subject to very careful scrutiny, particularly as to whether it is capable of implementation, or whether only the parts that favour the capitalists will ever see the light of day. That was the inevitable record of the prices-incomes Accord. Naturally, the capitalists and the government accepted the concessions that the union leaders offered, and just as naturally, they refused to grant the real reforms, because there was no struggle that forced them to do so.

In assessing a reform program, it is courting disaster to leave out of consideration the questions of parties, of classes and of control of the state, not to mention the prevailing economic and political climate.

When such factors were undervalued by the left supporters of the Accord, disaster followed. The right was strengthened and the working class was weakened. The practice of issuing blank cheques to the right must end if there is to be any meaningful discussion

of a reform program that can strengthen the position of the working class, rather than simply bargaining away established positions.

## The new right

The emergence of the new right in this country is often cited as a reason not to criticise Labor governments, and to tread carefully on the question of struggle for reform. The new right is often presented as a departure from normal politics in Australia.

In fact, it's not. Its emergence is an almost inevitable consequence of the weakening of the labour movement in recent years. When the Labor Party and trade union leaders deliberately lower the movement's defences, of course the ruling class will drive straight into the breach that has been opened. What's so surprising about that? When the union movement refused to come to the aid of the meatworkers' union in the Mudginberri dispute, of course the ruling class took that as encouragement to drive ahead.

No matter what new theories the opponents of struggle may come up with, the class struggle does exist, and the bourgeoisie is fighting it ruthlessly. The only interesting twist in this situation is that the Labor Party right wing now also warns against the new right while it plunders the new right's policy arsenal. The offensive against working conditions under the second tier of the two-tier wages system is a direct steal from the new right.

New-right-style government remains an option for the ruling class when and if the Hawke-Keating project runs out of steam, but it is far from the only option. The most avid supporters of the new right are not the very largest capitalists, but the smaller operators, who are usually not the most farsighted or cool-headed faction of the ruling class.

Electurally, the new right hasn't been very useful to date. The most powerful sections of the ruling class didn't get very enthusiastic about the Bjelke-Petersen push. Since the Liberals will eventually carry out any useful new right policies that Labor overlooks or rejects, why risk losing the middle ground by saying so at election time?

The labour movement can't afford to allow itself to be held hostage to the view that Labor offers any alternative to the attacks of the bourgeoisie. Labor is carrying out those attacks in the way the most powerful sectors of the ruling class consider most effective at the present time. The left courts disaster by giving Labor a blank cheque, and giving the arbitration system a blank cheque.

If the movement continues to dodge the question of building a real political alternative, it imprisons itself in bourgeois politics. The way to fight the new right is to break with the ALP and the policies of the Hawke government. The alternative is to sit

passively while Hawke's government prepares the way for something even further right than the new right.

## The Rockdale factor

It seems many others share our view that a break with Labor is necessary. The 1986 Rockdale and Bass Hill by-elections said it all. They rocked the Labor Party to its foundations, though in the end that shock only produced a renewed drive to the right. Labor responded with a decision to abandon part of its own constituency in the attempt to base itself more firmly on some of the Liberals' traditional ground.

Rockdale and Bass Hill confirmed the trend that the emergence of the Nuclear Disarmament Party revealed in 1984 — the development of a growing constituency to the left of the Labor Party — a constituency that is increasingly conscious of the need for a left alternative to Laborism.

In 1984, this left constituency was more diffuse politically. While the NDP's support reflected a general protest vote, it also reflected a certain liberal confusion about politics — the view that the nuclear question was everything.

Now the protest sentiment embraces a much greater range of issues. There's a much broader realisation that something stinks with Labor. That was clear in strong performances by a range of alternative candidates in the 1987 federal elections and in the dramatic drop in Labor's support in its traditional heartlands.

Recent developments have confirmed that while Labor in government is certainly a lesser evil than the Liberals, on all the main issues Labor will nevertheless continue to tighten the screws.

While Labor remains in government, working for change inside the Labor Party is a totally forlorn hope. For those who wanted to do that, the time was about four years ago. That's when the work should have been done — not now, when Labor is essentially a dead duck as a force for progressive change.

## In the unions

What has all this done to the unions? How have they responded?

The Accord has been effective because the unions haven't fought back, and are still not prepared to fight back. This is reflected in the very feeble union response to several years of anti-worker budgets and mini budgets, and in the truly pathetic performance of the union movement in recent bargaining under the second tier of the wages system.

After the 1986 budget there was an attempt at a left response — a rally of a couple of thousand in Canberra around the slogan, "Change the direction". But even that

missed the point. What's really needed is a break with the ALP. Calling for a change of direction gives credibility to the view that at this late stage it's possible for Labor to change course, and we should focus our energies there.

It would have been better to stick to a series of particular demands that could have united those who seek to build a left political alternative with left ALP and other forces.

In the end, an effective union response to Labor's economic policies must include industrial action. But it's precisely here that we see the tie-up between the present union leaders, Labor governments, and the ALP. A real industrial response would involve a break with Labor. In the current climate, any militant action runs smack up against the Labor Party.

Though there hasn't been that sort of response, there is growing discontent with Accord-type politics. In contrast with the near unanimous support for the original Accord, the ACTU special congress that adopted the two-tier system recorded at least 20% of delegates against. The mood was even more sour at the 1987 ACTU congress. But as with the Accord, most unions didn't hold mass meetings to test rank-and-file opinion on the two tier system. They simply endorsed the new system from the top.

### **Difficult climate**

Knowing that industrial action automatically involves a political clash with ALP governments, and in all likelihood the ACTU, most union leaders won't launch struggles, no matter how restive their members become. Rarely has the real relationship between the ALP and the unions been so clear. The ALP leaders and the top union officials are not controlled by their base, rather they control it. And they do so in the interests of big business.

There is no way out of this situation that does not involve a political break by the unions — a painful decision to recognise that Labor is finished as a union party and that it is necessary to build a new, independent political voice.

Union moves to break with Labor should be encouraged. Such a break is a precondition for a real revival of the labour movement (though confusion or disagreement about this need not stand in the way of joint struggle around other questions).

Short of a total break, the ALP shackles will not drop from the union movement while Labor remains in government. The final balance sheet on the Accord will be drawn when it becomes clear how much it has sapped the unions' will and ability to resist a new Liberal onslaught.

Meanwhile, industrial action will continue to have a partial and fragmented character. The irony is that the architects of the Accord told us it was desperately important that

we all stick together to defend the weakest sections of the working class. But the superannuation struggles and the second tier of the new system have exactly the opposite effect. It's not the first time, and it won't be the last, that left union officials have argued both sides of the question as it has suited them.

There is a grain of truth in the view common among union officials that nothing more than Accord-type wheeling and dealing is possible today. But the responsibility for this state of affairs is largely theirs. They have helped to demoralise their ranks by miring the unions in the industrial courts and acting as industrial cops.

All this has helped to produce a widespread mood of caution, even apathy, in much of the working class. There can seem to be little point in taking risks if you know your union won't back you.

Another element in the situation is a certain polarisation. Alongside demoralisation and conservatism there is also an increasing tendency to look for solutions, and to begin by changing the union leadership. Some officials, of both left and right, have been dumped because the members have been angry about the decline in their living standards.

But overall, workers aren't going to struggle if they can't see how they can win. They've shown they won't support stunts, token one-day stopworks designed mainly to give left officials a little cover in the ranks.

Meanwhile, the absence of a political lead leaves workers disillusioned with the ALP little alternative but to swing, however reluctantly, to the Liberals, or perhaps to the Democrats.

There have also been some real defeats for the working class movement: the SEQEB sackings, the BLF deregistration, the Mudginberri dispute. These defeats have been severe enough to encourage the new right to get a big war chest together and decide they are going hunting. This push won't be turned back until the unions win at least one of these big clashes, or perhaps put up such a fight — as the British miners did — that the ruling class will be more cautious next time.

That was the lesson of the Clarrie O'Shea struggle in 1969, when the unions made it impossible for the arbitration system to continue using its penal powers. Of course, the political and economic climate was more favourable then.

But the right's offensive will continue until the unions fight a big struggle through to the end. Such a fight will require clear political perspectives. At present, the big danger is that when a big confrontation does come on, there won't be substantial resistance. There is a real danger that demoralisation will be so deep that the workers won't fight.

## Labor pays the price

Some degree of working class demoralisation has been essential to Labor's Accord project, but it also carries a political price, as Rockdale reminded the machine men. But the Labor right is not about to change direction and the left is firmly opposed to creation of a new political alternative.

Despite the growth of discontent with the Accord, there has been little regrowth of rank-and-file unionism. Union elections don't provide sufficient focus, and the lid is still tightly on industrial action. But in the end that regeneration is essential, and it will probably require initiatives from political people.

In our experience, where there are active socialists on the job things are better — resistance is greater, confidence is higher. But the overall condition of the union movement gives reason for concern about the attitudes of young people towards unions. In Italy, for example, discontented youth at one stage began attacking the whole establishment, including union leaders. The whole consciousness of the need for unions began to vanish.

Things haven't gone that far here yet, but it's a possibility we should watch. Militant youth and an organisation like Resistance could be important in heading off such an evolution. Meanwhile, due to the present rundown state of the union movement, there will be further defeats. Things are going to get worse before they get better. We are going to see developments like the Wapping dispute, in which media boss Rupert Murdoch exploited divisions between unionists.

There is considerable potential for similar problems here. The Transport Workers Union often clashes with the railways unions over the question of road versus rail. The Miners' Federation wants the government to reduce tariffs, while the metalworkers' union (AMWU) wants them increased. The ruling class will seize on these and similar divisions. Who is going to have a job? Which union will service a particular sector?

The situation will get very difficult if unions are forced to go into big clashes with useless leaders — leaders who won't fight, who are lazy, complacent or incompetent, who aren't prepared to go to jail to defend their members if necessary.

But that's not the only problem. A bigger problem is the lack of political leadership. Norm Gallagher was prepared to go to jail. There was no doubt about the courage and militancy of the BLF leaders. But over at least a decade these comrades consistently underestimated the political factor. Then, when they came under political attack, they responded by affiliating to the Labor Party just when the main focus of political resistance began to shift outside the ALP.

## What sort of political alternative?

What sort of political alternative can be built? We're at a political impasse, and that's the main problem in the industrial arena as well. We must strike out for a new political alternative, or the battle will be lost.

In Britain, Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill and their supporters have put up quite a fight inside the Labour Party, but even their experience has shown that putting militants into the Labour Party is a poor choice. They have fared badly at Labour conferences. Perhaps that tactic can make the fight a little richer in the Labour Party for the moment, but it doesn't really challenge the existing set-up in the labour movement as a whole. In the absence of such a challenge, the left is paralysed.

The key to unlock this situation is to be found in a dynamic between struggle, union leadership and an alternative political party. All three factors must combine. The left's inability to develop this key is a big obstacle to creation of a mass socialist party. It limits our ability to inspire comrades, to integrate working-class comrades in the movement, to show them a strategy that can enable them to win on the job.

That's why the SWP and the other left parties have not grown more substantially over the last two or three years.

We've tried to get around this reality by helping to build other social movements: the antinuclear movement, solidarity movements, the black movement, the ecological movement.

That's more or less the right approach, and that's why our party has held its own in this difficult situation. But that alone won't enable us to crack the main political problem holding back the struggle for socialism.

## The new social movements

The new social movements that have emerged over the past 20 years or so ultimately face exactly the same political impasse that confronts the union movement. In the peace movement, for example, there is presently something of a political standoff.

The ALP can't kill it. Those who wanted to kill off the Palm Sunday marches have failed so far, although they keep trying. (Of course, we shouldn't mix up hostility to the whole thrust of these events with honest attempts to find new ways to generate interest in the peace movement). The big push to kill off the peace movement was crushed between the rocks of rank-and-file opposition and the Gorbachev peace initiatives. Those initiatives made it a little harder to play the plague-on-both-your-houses game.

But while the ALP can't kill the movement or co-opt it, neither has the movement itself found a way to break out of its current impasse. The solution lies in a combination

of politics and organisation — the development of a political strategy that can win peace.

In the end, the leaders of the peace movement face the same problem as everyone else. They must turn against the Labor Party, and recognise that winning peace is not just a question of mobilisation in the streets and of movement work separate from the rest of society — separate from the question of who's in power.

The new movements need a political party that fights for their interests — a political alternative with a more than verbal commitment to peace and social justice. Without real political progress, or even the hope of it, activists get worn out campaigning year after year. Campaigns against uranium mining or against the United States bases run directly up against the whole political system. Winning involves changing the whole system, and without a strategy to do that, activists get worn out, groups fall apart.

To win, the unions, the peace movement, the women's movement, the Aboriginal movement, must challenge Labor and the Liberals politically at all levels, including the parliamentary level.

The suggestion that Labor should be challenged in the parliamentary sphere horrifies some, particularly some of the remaining elements of the ALP left. While the Labor left is comfortable with extra-parliamentary challenges to Labor, it regards parliament as strictly Labor territory.

That might be acceptable if the Labor left could deliver, if it could enforce Labor's traditional anti uranium policy, for example. But since it can't deliver, it is important to find an effective way of challenging Labor in the parliamentary sphere. What many of Labor lefts fail to see is that a strong, independent left political alternative could even strengthen the left's hand in the ALP itself.

The peace and environmental movements possibly enjoy majority support at the present time, but they are too rarely able to translate that support into real political victories. That situation won't change until there is a political alternative behind which they can throw their weight.

The Aboriginal movement has perhaps gone further than most towards a recognition of the political problems it confronts. It has discussed, and at times supported, electoral challenges to Labor. It also faces a number of problems: Will it forge alliances? Does it want to change society as a whole, and how? It's not enough just to reject the ALP: It's necessary to go on to build an overall alternative.

Now is the time for political action. Rarely in the past 90-odd years has the Labor Party stood so thoroughly exposed. Rarely has there been such an opportunity to build a real political alternative to the left of the ALP.

The need for a new political party is recognised across a wide spectrum of the left. For several years, discussion on this topic has involved not only the Marxist or socialist left but many other activists. A lot of people recognise that a new political direction is possible. That's not to say such a departure is easy.

There is a good reason for this. When we discuss the new party question, in the end we are really discussing the party *question*.

## The party question

What is the party question? There are many answers, or at least many aspects to an overall answer. This is a wide ranging discussion that involves many progressive people with differing political views, so there will obviously be different approaches. But many people clearly recognise the difficulty of functioning effectively in Australian politics without a mass-based progressive party.

In the end, the party question is the most important political question of all. This has been widely recognised for the best part of a century, though there is some tendency for disillusionment with Labor to spill over into disillusionment with parties altogether.

In the 1890s, the largest mass-based organisations — the trade unions — recognised their exclusion from political power in the absence of a party to represent them, and took steps to remedy that situation. They formed the Labor Party, a step that fundamentally changed the shape of Australian politics. Today, despite the ALP's obvious inability to deliver the goods for working people, the trade unions still cling to their allegiance to Labor.

Today this means that most Australian workers are politically disenfranchised. It largely explains why right-wing forces have been able to seize the political initiative without substantial working-class opposition.

Effective opposition requires the ability to project political alternatives through electoral activity, and through publicity work and action in the streets and in the factories and offices. Only in this way can an overall, effective response be mounted.

In calling for a new party after his expulsion from the ALP, Bill Hartley recognised these political realities. As well, some radical environmentalists and others — recognising that the ALP represents a roadblock, and looking overseas for lessons — talk about the need for a green party. To change society in the direction they advocate will require involvement in politics through a political party. Single issue campaigns will not be enough.

The Communist Party, once the major force in Australian politics outside the parliamentary arena, is also discussing the need for a new party. This is motivated by

a certain decline and weakness, but it also reflects an understanding that the current impasse of the left can't be overcome without the vehicle of a party.

The Marxist-Leninist groups and parties also continue to advocate construction of a party, though among them there are different approaches. Some get caught in the trap of defining their role in ideological terms and general principles while failing to recognise the equally important role of active tactical approaches.

Some simply proclaim their program and assume that this guarantees them a big future role. But programs are really products of life itself. They need living verification.

This is a difficult time for Marxists to get a hearing in advanced capitalist countries, but the prospect of a new party offers a way forward. Some force will emerge to fill the vacuum that exists to the left of Labor.

Here's the problem for the Marxists: The vacuum won't necessarily be filled by those who insist abstractly on the leading role of a vanguard party and the importance of program. It's not very useful simply to tell the Greens or the former ALP people that they need a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. This may be true, depending on what's meant by vanguard party. But truth has to make its way over some rough roads these days.

The activists who can help to recompose the left will be convinced of such a need only through a political practice that involves them. To their credit, these activists are not likely to react well to those who presume to teach them lessons.

In many Latin American countries today, the revolutionary movement is composed of Marxists and of Catholics influenced by various theories of liberation. This is not a tactical alliance made by the Marxists. The two trends are integral components of the movement. Given the stage of party building here in Australia, we have different but equally complex needs.

## Present opportunities

It's no use proclaiming the need for a party in general while failing to take the necessary and possible steps to build one. Such a course reduces formally correct positions to paper abstractions.

Failure to recognise present opportunities for party building can take several forms:

- The worst failure, particularly if persisted with indefinitely, is to remain an individual on the sidelines of the discussion. The lack of a mass-based party that can unite us all in the struggle for social change is often used as an excuse to remain aloof from the efforts and experiments of those who are trying to solve the problem.
- Others say the real fight is still in the ALP, just as it was 10, 20, 40 or 60 years ago. The left needs the numbers etc., etc. Eventually a real socialist party will be needed but the time's not ripe.

This becomes the last line of defence for the right wing today. Even in terms of ALP politics, no left victory is possible without the will to make a complete break if necessary. The right knows this, and has broken in the past, as in the 1916, 1931 and 1955 splits. The ALP left will always lose until it develops the courage also to use this tactic.

- Another problem can arise from forces looking to an alternative out of organisational rather than political motives. No alternative formation will amount to anything if it simply goes into new battles in defence of old policies — policies that could in most cases be easily accommodated in a business-as-usual Labor Party.
- Then there are those who don't see any possibility of unity except around their own programs. For instance, some Marxist-Leninists say “Okay, but any unity must be based on our program”.
- Their mirror image can be found among those Greens who insist on their particular shibboleths as a condition of any new formation, and spurn the “discredited” socialists and communists.
- There are also those who say they are building a party but who in all their mass work insist that trade union officials should be totally autonomous, or that campaigns should be conducted without any reference to party politics. But party politics is about power — the power of the state, of the courts. It is about political education and action to expose how these institutions function. Trade unionism alone, no matter how militant or rank-and-file, will prove wanting.
- Then there are those who want to insist that the workers, the people, the masses, are not yet ready to break from reformism, so in the meantime, while we build our party, the broad arena can be left to the ALP, which represents the level of consciousness of the masses. Today is only for propaganda around our good ideas. Any new party will inevitably fail, etc., etc.

This can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. There are problems, but we must throw our weight on the side of the question that seems most likely to lead to a solution. Holier than thou preaching from the sidelines is never very helpful.

While this spectrum of approaches can obstruct efforts to build a new party, the pressure to build one will not go away while Labor continues on its present course. There's no sign of that changing.

## **An all-embracing project**

To be effective, the new party must be an all-embracing political project. It cannot be simply a parliamentary party, though parliament would be one of its arenas. It must

contest elections to dramatise its program. But it must also promote, and help to coordinate, mass action. Above all, it must educate people about the nature of the capitalist system and help them develop the methods of organisation necessary to change it.

It must supply the political infrastructure and mobilisation capacity for workers who begin to fight and find themselves in head-on confrontation with the ALP, with the arbitration courts, with the capitalist state, as well as with the employers. It must aim to unite all sectors in struggle while reflecting the diversity of opposition to the present system.

It must conduct political struggle as ruthlessly as the capitalist class does, extending the fight into every possible sector, using every means at its command. When the capitalists fight at the union level, they don't just say, "We'll lock the gates and see who holds out longest". They get the courts ready, they pump up the propaganda machine, the priests start worrying about it from the pulpit. The whole thing gets turned on, flat out.

A new party would have to learn from that. Of course, there would be differences. Naturally, it would rely much more on the masses than on the courts. It would counterpose our strength to theirs over time. That's what a party should do. A new party would not, and could not, be like the Labor Party, which says "leave it to us in parliament".

## The Accord

Understanding the centrality of the party question naturally flows on to a shift in the SWP's own present educational and tactical approach. We want to shift the axis from abstract opposition to the Accord to the concrete question of building a new party.

This new party question has now assumed more importance because it is in this direction that real openings lie, and it is the really effective way to challenge the Accord today. That doesn't mean we now think the Accord is okay, or that it doesn't matter, or that we don't need to draw lessons from the past three years. But one real step towards building a party that can effectively challenge the ALP's Accord politics is worth more than 100 fine resolutions against the Accord.

So we've changed the axis of our approach. After all, there is only so much you can say against the Accord propagandistically. Beating a dead dog isn't much fun. Every time we hit it now, a swarm of flies goes up. Now we want to develop our position, and that means building a new party.

We don't know whether a big new political party will emerge in the next 18 months. But we do know that we'll do all we can to push the process forward.

In the unions, the time has come to call for disaffiliation from the Labor Party. In the trade unions, we have to once more raise the idea that political action is needed, and the Labor Party blocks political action. Rank-and-file committees should consider what alternative political action they can take.

How to become part of the new party movement? How to help build a political and electoral alternative to the Labor Party? That must be a question for every worker, for every militant, for every rank-and-file committee. In the new social movements the same applies. We have to encourage support for this political formation. In the past we said it would be sectarian to call on the movements to support or oppose the ALP in elections.

But times have changed. If a movement decides it should support a political alternative, that's great. It would be correct, for example, to urge the peace movement to support the NDP.

In 1984, when this question came up we said no, we don't need People for Nuclear Disarmament to take a position on the NDP or the ALP. No longer. In the end, when and how and in which way to apply such an approach is a matter that should be approached with extreme caution. It's a tactic that must be handled sensibly.

But this is a view we must start to raise for unionists' and other activists' consideration, without allowing it to lead to splits and terrible disputes. Otherwise, support for the ALP will remain the *de facto* policy, and that's not useful.

## The potential exists

There's little doubt the political opening exists for a new party to the left of the ALP. From the NDP to Rockdale is quite a time. The mood is there in the mass movements and the working class.

Even the limited testing of the water we've done has been interesting. When *Direct Action* ran "We need a new party of labour" on its cover some of us were apprehensive about how it would be received, there were a lot of nerves (especially among the young comrades who'd never heard of an adjective going after a noun). But the response was quite good. Quite a range of people said that's exactly right. So we think we're striking a chord among a significant layer of people.

Nevertheless, creating a new party won't be an easy process, and nothing we're saying in this report indicates anything to the contrary. There are some parallels between the present time and the 1890s, when the Labor Party was formed. Like the present, it was a time of defeats. A terrible political impasse faced the labour movement, and there was a growing understanding of the need for political action.

As well as parallels there are, naturally, also many differences. Today we have to

deal with massive confusion about the Labor Party. It still has overwhelming control of the unions. And while we can say there's a need for a political break, there's still no spontaneous, overwhelmingly powerful movement of the working class in that direction. There's no social explosion in the wind, as there was in the 1890s.

Secondly, the vanguard organisations remain relatively weak. We try to overcome this weakness with a system of alliances. But for us, the question of a political alternative — a new party — is the question of questions, and agreement on this can help develop unity among individuals and organisations that might otherwise differ strongly.

Agreement on this can modify, reduce, set in context other differences. It is important enough in itself to lead responsible socialist activists to find ways of minimising or putting aside other outstanding issues, understanding that a new party would create a better framework and environment for forward movement.

From this it follows that we are prepared to be flexible about how we build a new party, what it should be, what its organisational forms should be. Our opinions on these matters are still evolving, or at least are constantly modified by other views.

A new party should aim to be as inclusive as possible. A great deal of give and take will be necessary to get it off the ground. On the other hand, it would be unrealistic and pointless to build a new political party that was not a genuine left alternative to Labor. The miserable failure of the Labor Party to live up to the expectations of its supporters is what makes the new party viable and necessary.

The point is to develop a clear alternative that speaks to the aspirations of the thousands of disoriented Labor supporters and mass movement activists. Some Labor supporters may denounce the project as assisting the Liberals and the new right. But development of a left alternative to Labor will place great pressure on the ALP right, and will help to shift the whole political balance back towards the left.

The rightward course of the ALP has been unchecked because there has been no viable left alternative. The right calculated that there would be no day of reckoning, no matter what betrayals it committed.

In any case, any responsibility for disunity must lie at the feet of the ALP. Its policies and its traditional, sectarian hostility towards left-wing individuals and organisations are really responsible for difficulties in developing united action and collaboration.

This lesson can be driven home by proposing critical support or allocation of preferences to ALP candidates where appropriate. But what we refuse to do is to leave the electoral arena to the ALP as some sort of right, while we devote most of our energies to the mass movements. Such a course would end up in the dead end of syndicalism, or in the long run make us a harmless appendage of the ALP.

## ALP left

This is not to reject the work of some ALP left-wingers. Alliances with them are necessary. But in the long term, their project is doomed. The right would never allow their victory in a united party. If the ALP left looked like getting the upper hand, the right would split.

As a permanent, ongoing tactic, work in the ALP is unrealistic for the left. In immediate terms, habitual attachment to this tactic threatens to cut off the ALP left from its natural constituency, and risks missing a unique opportunity for the left to regroup and build a stronger base from which to plan future projects.

The point that unites supporters of a new party and the genuine left of the ALP is the desire to avoid or break out of the present marginalisation of the socialist movement.

We all want to build a bigger, stronger, more effective socialist movement. Now, for the first time in many years, there is a bigger left constituency outside the ALP than in it. The ALP left must realise that the situation has changed. The only way to build an effective left today is to unite as many elements as possible of the non-ALP left in one formation.

There are so far a number of attempts to develop discussion and united projects among various groups and individuals, but the problem with all initiatives to build action coalitions, whether they be called Broad Left or Fightback, is that this is not a good time to mobilise for action. Confusion and demoralisation run so deeply that many people are just not prepared to move into action.

It will take time to overcome this impasse. Meanwhile, an opportunity exists now to build a political alternative. The crisis of the left creates a dynamic that leads serious forces to put aside past differences, and even important theoretical questions, in the attempt to explore prospects for unity.

In fact, the various coalitions desperately need a purpose, a project that can enable them to go beyond dialogue in relatively narrow circles. We can wear out our welcome with talk about unity if we can't show some progress or focus the discussion for the thousands of left-wingers who are watching with interest.

It is possible to organise large conferences — [the] 1986 [Social Rights Conference] showed that. But we must begin providing answers as well as posing questions. The new party project presents the left with an opportunity to seize the initiative and solve many of the problems confronting it.

## Limits of the left

There are a number of ways the political vacuum to the left of the ALP could be filled. One alternative that has interested many people is a Greens-type party similar to

those which have developed in Europe. Some might argue that this would be the best road at the moment. But while there have been, and are, attempts to build such an organisation here, we doubt these attempts will have the same impact as in Germany.

Many Greens advocates appear somewhat paranoid about the traditional left. Thus they narrow their political space to a niche between the Democrats and the socialist movement. There is a risk that such a stance would imply political hostility to the trade union and labour movements, and possibly a bureaucratic approach to the formation and organisation of a new group.

We want to support and participate in whatever gets going. But we also want to nudge the process along ourselves. Our experience in organising and building a party can be a real asset to a new party involving many people with little or no party experience at all.

There are limits to what we, or other left forces, can propose alone. Our limits, and the limits of the other left parties, are set by our credibility in the wider political arena. It's no use pretending to be something we can't be. We are not the German Greens nor the United States Rainbow Coalition, however much we might welcome the emergence in this country of movements genuinely comparable to those.

We alone, or others who might initially be attracted to a left-wing new party initiative, would find it difficult to occupy all the available political space to the left of the ALP. Moreover, we lack the experience and skills to do that.

In any case, sections of the already organised left, and certainly many outside it, at this stage would not accept the validity of such an attempt. Such reservations must be taken into account. It is important to achieve the maximum possible unity. Without that, no project can succeed.

On the other hand, there are no other forces with sufficient weight and credibility to carry off a new party project alone. The situation would be more complicated, and in some ways more interesting, if there were a large, reasonably well-established force, not necessarily specifically socialist, committed to building a democratic organisation and prepared to accept traditional left forces as a legitimate part of it.

But that's not the situation. Our judgment is that's not the way things will move. At a certain point we must make our choices on the basis of realistic possibilities. In this situation, it appears the best model would be a new socialist party, or a party with a core of socialist ideology.

There are different ways of expressing the same general concept. For us, there can be no question of dropping our ideals. The discussion is meaningless without them. For us, the new party discussion is about tactics in the struggle to realise our ideals. Formation of a new socialist party is a step we're confident will achieve widespread

support. It will build the left's unity as we take a step forward.

It wouldn't be too hard to thrash out the basic program of such a new party, though we shouldn't expect that all political problems will be solved beforehand. That's not the way living programs develop.

In fact, it would be presumptuous to think relatively small forces initiating the new project could determine the program and policies of a new and growing party. That's why we can't answer the question of exactly what a new party might be like. First, let's see who is in it. Let them decide. This is called democracy.

Of course, who should be in it is also a question of democracy. People have a right to decide who they wish to associate with. If some activists want to form an organisation and exclude the traditional left, that's their right. As a party, and as individual left-wingers, we also have the right to decide whether to participate in any project, and to express our opinions on who should participate.

Our view is that this should be a genuinely new party that attempts to reach out to the thousands of unorganised socialists, trade unionists, mass movement activists, disillusioned ALP members and former members who genuinely want to build a democratic, non-sectarian, socialist organisation.

We feel, nevertheless, that we should explore the possibility of giving a new party a different sort of name. We think it may be more effective to choose a name other than the traditional Socialist, Communist, Workers, Labor or Revolutionary.

This could help to give us a chance to influence and win the many unconscious socialists who agree with the main planks of a socialist platform but who have become confused by problems and failures of the socialist movement and the difficulties of building socialist organisations in advanced capitalist countries.

Such an approach would maximise the left's political space, possibly enabling it to break out of its isolation, and at least eliminating unnecessary obstacles. It would also maximise the new party's attractiveness to non-aligned people. Our model, then, is based on what we think is possible, what can happen soon, and what we can be part of.

No doubt, a new name will be the subject of much discussion, and once again flexibility will be necessary. But the concept we need to embody is the program of social justice abandoned by Labor.

A different name and language could also maximise the electoral impact of a new party, particularly among trade unionists. It could facilitate an approach to unity with other left-moving forces from the peace, environment, women's, gay and black movements.

## Election tactics

Election tactics are in many ways a separate discussion. Even if no new party eventuates, we will be looking for the broadest possible left alliances in coming elections. If there is a new party, it will almost certainly need a system of alliances.

Whether or not we join a new party, we shouldn't assume it will be the only effective electoral vehicle. It could, however, be very authoritative in pressing for a unified left electoral tactic. It would also make it more difficult to exclude the left.

In the event of more than one new party emerging, a united electoral tactic will assume even greater importance. Elections can be a very important forum for the left, as the NDP showed in 1984. But more importantly perhaps, they are the yardstick by which many people measure us.

While there is massive disillusionment with Labor, there is no automatic acceptance of any alternative. Many people tend to look at the possible electoral impact of a new formation before they consider other aspects of it.

Of course, this country's undemocratic electoral system makes electoral success difficult. This is one reason for the long term stability of the ALP. The undemocratic nature of the parliamentary system makes it even more impractical to see a new party mainly in electoral terms.

The electoral question also affects the timetable for a new party. At present, the conditions are probably as favourable as they have ever been for building an electoral alternative to Labor. The disillusionment with Labor gives us a unique opportunity to dramatise and build a new party, and the longer we take to produce a result, the more people will doubt our ability to do it at all. The new party question has been quite widely discussed for some time, but it has all remained rather vague.

As time passes, the pressures increase for single-issue activists, and even for members of existing left parties, to give up what can seem a hopelessly unequal struggle. The sooner there is a concrete project to discuss and refine, the better.

Then real questions, rather than vague fears, can be addressed. As unity is sought around a real project, and as people begin to see the real potential for a new party, they can be expected to take a more reasonable attitude to outstanding differences. Ultimately, it will probably be only as common organisational interests begin to develop that many differences on the left will be discussed in a less factional framework.

## Organisational questions

Many of the problems facing the new party will no doubt be organisational. People from different traditions may have trouble aligning their views, reaching compromises, etc. Clearly, in these circumstances the new party will be a fairly loose organisation.

Yet it can't be so loose that there is no reality to the party at all. Finding the balance that allows maximum involvement will be a test of the political skills of all who are involved.

What are some of the things we would seek? Above all, the party must be democratic. It won't attract and hold activists otherwise. There are two sides to this question. One is the right of the members to elect and recall representatives. The other is the right to democratically decide policies and to know that these decisions will be reflected in the party's work. Such general formulas don't settle everything, of course. In organisational matters, practice is the key.

A new organisation would take time to establish mutual confidence among its members and to begin to act cohesively. But this must be a goal. The new party must develop its own life, and institutions that have the confidence of all members. A simple federation of factions wouldn't last very long.

There will be different concerns among people joining the new party. Those not presently members of parties may be concerned about how their political work will be affected. Will the party impinge on their autonomy and the autonomy of the mass movements?

This is not a one-sided question. The mass movements need a political party that doesn't attempt to subordinate them to itself. They need a party that achieves things a movement can't. On the other hand, it would be useless having a party that allowed its program to be subordinated to perceived tactical needs (for example in the trade unions), as the Labor Party did when its leaders developed the Accord.

If the party grows, activists' confidence in it will also grow. That confidence will be based on two main points: Firstly that the party doesn't threaten the movements' autonomy, and secondly that the party has a real existence and purpose in discussing and working out realistic strategies.

The party's contribution will be political clarity based on a political, social, and geographic spread, and a strategy based on the needs of the mass movement as a whole.

At its best, a party is a vehicle for generalising, mobilising and focusing the political power of individuals and movements. It is the inability of individuals to achieve this that leads to creation of parties in the first place. Naturally, confidence and cohesion can't be built overnight.

Members of existing parties will have some other concerns as well. They could be reluctant to commit everything to a new party from the safe, if small, framework in which they already operate. This is understandable, and any new party would need to accommodate such legitimate concerns.

Just as individual activists will take time to develop confidence in a new party, so

too will those joining it from already existing formations. They will not want to see resources, built up over years of effort, dissipated by poor decisions in a new party.

## Rejecting sectarianism

What would we, as the SWP, do if a new party comes along more or less fitting our bill? Above all, we'd slip the SWP into idle mode and give the new party our best shot. The most important thing about our best shot will be our attitude. If we join a new party with the view that we have all the answers because of our past experience or theory, we could risk wrecking the whole project.

We only have to recall how much we have changed over the last five years to realise we don't have, and never did have, all the answers. The very point about a new, broader party is that it is more likely to come up with answers. That's not to say we don't have an important contribution to make. If we didn't think so, we would dissolve the SWP right away.

But the development of ideas is a process. We will change, and maybe help others to change. If any comrades think otherwise, they shouldn't join a new party. They'll only be disappointed.

The real test of the organisational viability of the new party will be how soon decisions start to cut across old views and alignments. We have to approach things with open minds and assume that everyone else who joins a new party will do the same.

We have had some experience of building unity in our own party. That will stand us in good stead. We will have to keep a sense of proportion, and to make use of our relatively new understanding that perfect programs and organisations don't exist, and that theory is developed through practice.

On the other hand, our sense of proportion will also have to tell us what's the bottom line, and when the attempt to break out of left isolation leads to a right-wing failure, rather than a left-wing success.

We have a certain following and prestige to take into the new party process. We have been one of the few left organisations that has grown over the past five years. We know one of the reasons for that is our more modest view of our own achievements.

We rejected the know-all cultism of the sects. While we can argue the doctrinaire questions with the best of them, we also know that that sort of politics leads nowhere on its own. Theory is useless if it's treated as an ornament, an end in itself, rather than a tool.

The post-Stalinist left inherited a difficult situation throughout the advanced capitalist world, and in the '80s we're trying to struggle out of that situation. The

answers we are giving today are not the dogmatic certainties retailed by the sectarians. We don't have a whole string of tactical prescriptions. We're more interested in politics and processes.

Funnily enough, this has led us to read more theory — particularly Marx and Lenin. But above all, it has opened the road to collaboration with others who are coming at things from different traditions or no tradition at all, but who are nevertheless genuinely attempting to find a way out of the impasse facing the progressive movement.

When is all this going to happen? Again, there can be no certainties, but the question is on the agenda for immediate action. We are developing discussions with everyone who wants to talk, and promoting and dramatising the new party question in any and every way we can.

For our part, we'll continue to raise the new party question on the anti-Accord left in particular. There is interest in this question in that milieu, and we are in the best position to organise this sentiment and help mobilise it into a new party.

## Can we succeed?

Will the new party project succeed? We don't know. While we can explore every possibility, it doesn't depend only on us. But raising the question raises consciousness about the party question in general, and people who want a new party will develop more confidence in the SWP in the meantime.

One of the big problems a new party will face is scepticism, even cynicism, on the part of thousands who have been burned by existing parties. While they know that ultimately, even immediately, a new party is needed, they are doubtful it can be done, and concerned that a new party won't be any better, that it will be prey to all the careerism, opportunism, sectarianism they are already fed up with.

But the new party won't come into being without decisions by many individuals to get up and do it. This is not a time to stand back. And the only guarantee of any party's future lies in the active involvement of its members — their control over the program and the decision-making process. Putting the views and interests of the members first, rather than obeying the dictates of outside forces or institutions, will be central to the party's health.

The sceptics have the power to ensure that this is what a new party will look like. But they may have to shed what can be a cosy stance of non-involvement and throw their hopes and passions into a party-building process once again. That way, even past negative experiences in party-building may finally prove of some value.

What does all this mean for the SWP in more immediate terms? I think we covered a lot of it at our January 1986 national conference in Canberra. We said then that the

key thing for us was to continue our drive to build our party, and that it was necessary for us to push up against the reality of our relative isolation, to try to change that, to check out every opportunity to break out.

Our decision to focus on our own party building needs was based on a cold, hard estimate. Now we're taking a similarly hard look at possibilities for progress greater than we can hope to achieve alone. In doing so, we don't want to de-emphasise our own immediate party building commitment. While the situation is on a higher plane, and we've helped to influence the rest of the left by throwing our weight behind the new party project, we still need to carry out our own party-building tasks.

In drawing a balance sheet of our recent performance, we have to say we didn't do well enough. We under-emphasised some important tasks. Failure to carry out the SWP's organisational tasks would be doubly irresponsible today. The new party won't solve all our problems. Involvement in a new party won't mean less attention to organisational tasks, or that we can all relax and that the Great New Party — i.e. other people — will do all the work and we can lay our weary selves down.

Just the opposite is the case, I'm afraid. Greater responsibility will lead to greater, though perhaps different, tasks. To the extent that we slacken off organisationally, the problems of a new party can be compounded. A new party is not a magic solution, just a better framework in which to continue building a party that can take us farther down the road to socialism.

We are the organisation that has had most success in winning new, young people to socialism in the last few years. To the extent that these people are not trained in part- building tasks, they will have less to contribute to a new party. Creating a new party organisation will be no small task, nor will developing the sort of commitment on which the SWP has prided itself, and which has made possible so much of our success so far.

In fact, now is the time for the greatest effort on all levels, so that we can fully make our contribution to the creation of a new party more capable of fulfilling the goals for which we founded the Socialist Workers Party.

The worst mistake we could make would be to assume that nothing can be done now to stop or slow the rightward shift in the overall political situation. The crisis of capitalism must be our starting point. This is a good time to explain our ideas, not a time to huddle in a corner or organise retreats.

To put it another way: The outcome of a period of capitalist crisis can be defeat or victory for working people. The class struggle is sharper, the stakes are higher. If we fight and if we strengthen our class institutions, we will at least increase our chances of survival. More probably, we will win new ground, and possibly even open the road to

socialism.

We should not assume that the golden period of the socialist movement is over. Our movement is only 150 years old, and this is neither the first, nor the worst, crisis we have faced. We must keep our heads, our sense of proportion, and figure out the way forward, rather than burying our heads in the sands of old formulas.

This is not a new experience for the Marxist movement. It's up to us to do as well in our time as have others in the past who found ways to develop revolutionary answers from a study of everyday realities. ■

# What Politics for a New Party?

## 1. The Prospects

For several years, people on the left have been discussing the prospects for a new political party, and there's no doubt that many think the political space exists for such a project. There are already two major initiatives towards formation of a new party, and in the 1987 federal elections the Australian Democrats tried to move in on some of this space on the left.

These movements on the left are even taken seriously enough to rate the occasional mention in Australian's highly monopolised media. The Murdoch family's *Weekend Australian* of November 16, 1986, carried an interesting, though very garbled article entitled "The rise of the new left", and subheaded "Alphabet soup of groups in feverish quest for new party".

"Senior members of Australian left political parties will meet today in an attempt to settle control of a proposed new political party", it began. "The National Committee of the CPA and ACU are the key participants in the discussion. And the far left pro-Soviet SPA will hold its own conference on the issue with the SWP meeting in January to solve the question. This feverish movement on the left and the emergence of the new party is the most important development in Australian radical politics in many years."

While the article as a whole was hopelessly muddled, that last point was correct.

"The SWP is approaching the formation of a new party with greater urgency than any other left-wing group", it added. "The organiser of the coming SWP conference, Peter Annear, describes the agenda as a discussion on the need for a big, broad radical party to the left of the ALP."

## New elements

Of course, the basic purpose of this article was not really to consider the ideas of the left organisations, but to do a job on the left, and to advance the proposition that any new party would only be a remake of existing organisations. In fact, none of the forces involved in the movement towards a new party think this would be sufficient.

To really take advantage of the political vacuum in Australian politics today, a new party must include new elements. One of the main points of the new party project is to find ways of involving the unorganised forces never previously in political parties. There is potential for far more than a regroupment of some, or even all, of the existing left organisations.

The new party could have a rather broad constituency, including many former ALP members. Probably this is the largest part of the constituency that has had previous party political experience.

As well, there are a number of groups and individuals identifying with projects inspired by the Green parties in Europe. The people around Bob Brown in Tasmania seem to be organising more systematically than previously.

There is a constituency of women increasingly dissatisfied with Labor Party governments. Aboriginal people also are very dissatisfied with Labor. Many trade unionists are looking for answers. The question of disaffiliation from the ALP is under discussion in some union circles.

Where and when will the cut be made? How will the new party develop out of this very rich alphabet soup of activists and groups all across the country? I'm sorry, I don't have all the answers. It's not that simple. Development of a new party will be a process of discussion, of striving for agreement between different forces and individuals.

While this discussion has been going on for some time now, it is by no means completed. Not everyone has spoken their piece clearly and fully.

Since we're also actors, and not merely observers in this process, we have a duty to contribute to the discussion — to make our contribution and to clarify our role. We have a duty to say what we think is happening, and what should happen.

We have quite a lot to say about the difficulties facing the working class movement and the movements for social change at the present time. We've done a lot of analysis of the austerity policies of the Labor governments, and the political imperatives driving those policies.

Under Labor, all of the things we've come to expect as rights over the past 20 years have come under challenge. Labor is slashing services in areas such as housing, health, education, social services. Our civil liberties are under attack, unemployment is on the rise. We're seeing the development of an underclass of impoverished people larger

than at any time since the Great Depression of the 1930s. At the same time, there is also a growing overclass of people (the yuppies, etc.) who are doing very well out of the system for the time being.

As this situation has developed, we've seen the media become increasingly tightly controlled, increasingly directed politically, increasingly monopolised.

How to defend our basic rights in these circumstances? Experience under the Hawke government has made it very clear that the traditional answers — the Australian Labor Party and business unionism — are simply not adequate.

### **Crisis of the left**

No one can honestly say there are not real problems on the left today. There is discouragement. Activists have become discouraged and stepped back, saying nothing can be done. Many have retreated into private life, into surviving. Others say no overall fightback is possible, so they focus on the single issue they think is most important.

There's a retreat into our inner-city villages and away from work among the great mass of the Australian population. None of the political parties of the left have a significant presence or impact in the major working-class areas, such as Sydney's west.

That's the reflection of a retreat forced on us by the difficult situation we face, and of a decline of the organised left as a whole.

So the question of a new party is not merely one for movements such as the women's movement and the trade union movement. It's an imperative question for every left-wing political party that wants to find a road forward.

Without a new political party that can unite the various forces of the left and provide a framework for analysing the present situation and charting a political course, the crisis of the left will grow sharper. One very obvious reflection of this crisis is the fragmentation of the sectarian left over the past three or four years.

The sectarian organisations that rely on cults or a dogmatic approach to reality have split repeatedly and declined. That is a phenomenon with roots in the political situation we face — as is the decline of organisations that thought we could have ridden on the back of the ALP-ACTU prices incomes Accord into a new position of strength for the socialist movement. The Socialist Workers Party hasn't declined or split. We've held our own, but we know that's not enough.

### **Historical perspective**

What are the longer term questions that have led to these problems that heavily condition the discussion on prospects for a new party? Is the situation really so bad that nothing can be done? Has the terrain of politics changed so dramatically that all

the traditional things we've learned and understood are now irrelevant?

I think it's always important to have a sense of historical perspective when discussing a crisis of the left, a crisis of the socialist movement. Of course, we should also be alert to the old trap of dissolving the specifics of today into the generalities of an historical outlook. But there have been far more difficult periods for the Marxist movement in the advanced capitalist countries.

The political situation today is far more favourable for the left than it was in the 1950s, though it's true that the socialist movement is weaker now, and more affected by the propaganda offensive to the effect that socialism is irrelevant.

There are people around, in greater and greater numbers, looking for real social change. That's a very important difference from the '50s, when capitalism seemed to be delivering the goods. Standards of living were rising and capitalism seemed to be solving its problems. No one believes that today.

We can look back further, to the period after 1871 in Europe. At that time, there were several decades of capitalist stability and of very little active socialist political or struggle except in Russia of course.

That period produced the first great revision of Marxist theory — a widespread acceptance of the view that social revolution was impossible, and that capitalism would gradually broaden out into a truly human society. But that period passed. It was followed by enormous struggles during and after World War I. Today's Labor Party leaders have very little to say that wasn't said by the theoreticians who tried to revise Marx in the period after 1871.

Is it always right to be for revolutionary change in a non-revolutionary period? The traditional answer, of course, is yes! And that's even more the case today. Things change, and we can help them change. Struggles to defend past gains and to win reforms can pave the way for change, and revolutionary methods provide the best means of winning reforms. In today's circumstances, such methods offer the only means of defending past gains and winning reforms.

Nevertheless, people are often bowed down by their immediate environment. We face an immensely powerful ruling class. This is one disadvantage in comparison with the past. Our rulers are more powerful today. They're shifting more and more of the social surplus into their own vaults, reinforcing their ability to control and manipulate politics, strengthening their ideological dominance.

Even so, because this is still a wealthy society and our own material conditions are usually not too grim, the left can tend to settle into a rather cosy existence. This can be particularly the case if the left allows itself to lose sight of the real developments in this country and around the world.

We can live our left lifestyles in our inner city villages. But we should be aware that this lifestyle can also become part of the environment bearing down on the socialist movement and the left, and helping to produce theories and approaches that don't take account of the realities of working-class life, and the realities of the international situation.

This can help lend currency to theories that class struggle is really just an outworn slogan, rather than a political reality.

Of course, the past 25 years have brought enormous changes in the political situation. The unions and other instruments of struggle of the previous half century have tended to recede into the background somewhat, while the social protest movements, such as the peace, environmental and women's movements, have assumed more importance.

This is not to deny that some trade unions have been involved in, and supportive of, some of the new movements. But the cutting edge of the movements has been outside the organised labour movement. That's a very important factor shaping the present discussion on the new party.

The past couple of decades have brought real changes in capitalist society and in the working class, but these changes are relative, and the changes in politics are relative. There is still a strong trade union consciousness in important sections of the working class, so nothing is settled as to the future of the past traditions of struggle.

Equally, nothing is settled as to the ultimate role of the new movements that have emerged in the past 20 years. While it seems likely they will play an important role in shaping the future, their weight in relation to other factors is still uncertain, and it is not excluded that they could suffer defeats and fade away.

## Marxism

Despite the fact that we're told repeatedly that Marxism and socialism have failed, the tools and the lessons of the past do remain relevant.

That doesn't mean Marxists can be complacent about the criticism to which their views are subjected. Some of the claims that Marxism is dead seize on real problems as their starting point. The ruling class ideologists are smart enough to pick on the failures, the errors, the betrayals and defeats of the socialist movement.

Of course, they don't pick on some of the worst failures of the socialist movement — 1914, for example, when the social-democratic parties led the workers of the world off to war with each other.

Nor are we reminded of the failings of capitalism, the reality that most people living under capitalism today spend their entire lives in deep poverty, and even on the edge of famine. When we're told of the failures of the socialist movement, we're not

also reminded of the facts of life under capitalism so we can get a balanced view.

I think we have to reject the claims that Marxism has failed. After 150 years, Marxism provides a political guide to hundreds of millions of people around the world. From Nicaragua to South Africa to the Philippines, fighters for a more just world see Marxism as their most important tool — their means of understanding the world they seek to change.

If we lose sight of that, and if we simply focus on our lives in our inner-city left villages, on the little movements of which we're part, we won't understand how to proceed.

Of course, we know that the Marxist movement hasn't got it right in the advanced capitalist countries. We haven't been able to develop our programs and our organisations in such a way that we've put revolutionary change on the agenda.

In fact, we haven't even found the ways to maximise our advantages, to maximise our immediate political impact. We have to think out these questions — to develop the most effective mix of parties, alliances, movements, coalitions.

But that still doesn't answer the question of questions: How to build an organisation that's not ultimately under the control of the ruling class? Occasionally, we can get a little bit of media coverage, such as the *Australian* article, but even that's usually part of an attempt to manipulate and control.

The ruling class is very fearful of any prospect of the emergence of a political party that is truly independent, that has independent politics outside the capitalist framework. A political party is an essential prerequisite for a viable movement for social change.

The modern political party is a tool the bourgeoisie understands very well. After all, they developed it as one of the main instruments of their struggle to wrest control of society from the old feudal rulers. The party form represented their right to operate in the public realm, independently of the feudal state. Later, it was used to develop the modern capitalist state.

The idea of the political party is today deeply entrenched in all politics around the world. So, of course, there will be constant and recurring attempts to build a left political party.

## False ideas

In these attempts, there will naturally be false starts and failures, because building a party is no small task, and when difficulties arise, false ideas can emerge.

One such idea is the view, prevalent in some sections of the Marxist left today, that Marxism's day will inevitably come because it is the correct program. The program is something that comes down on tablets, like the Ten Commandments came down to

Moses, and our day will come because we've got this program.

Reality is not like that. That's not how a party is built. It's not even how a program is formed. Most of the party formations that cling to this approach have been around for years, and they'll probably be around for some time to come. We'll continue to work with them wherever possible, but we shouldn't hold any illusions that they have much to offer by way of political insights that can help chart the way forward.

Others on the left make a different error. They say: "Well, nothing can be done now, so we might as well moderate our views and get into the Labor Party. That's the only realistic arena for political action today. Yes, maybe down the road there'll be a chance for the struggle for socialism."

This is just another version of the our-day-will-come theory, nothing more.

We reject both of these approaches. We don't believe we should stop looking for political answers, or stop struggling to build an independent, viable, mass-based political party. In spite of all the difficulties facing the socialism, it remains the only movement with answers to the social and political problems besetting the capitalist system today.

In any case, if we decide nothing can be done, as sure as hell someone else will find a way of doing it. That's the lessons of the Greens in West Germany.

If the socialist left becomes complacent and self-satisfied, if it leaves the search for political answers to someone else, perhaps the party that emerges won't be such an effective vehicle as it might have been if Marxists had influenced it, participated in it, built it and learned from it.

To understand the past properly it is important to recognise that Marxism and Leninism have never been about dogma, but about understanding reality and finding revolutionary answers in the framework of that reality.

Above all, Marxism is about persistence. Lenin had a phrase: Return to the attack again and again. I think that should be our view also, particularly on the party question.

We want to build a party capable of providing the leadership necessary for a successful struggle for fundamental social change when the time is ripe. An essential part of that task is building a party that can lead effective struggles for change and reform now.

At the very least, the new party must seek to gather the constituency that exists, and begin the task of altering the face of politics in this country.

## 2. The Discussion

There are many different threads to the new party discussion to date, and it's difficult to be comprehensive about them. But obviously, one of the key elements in the discussions is the state of the new social movements.

The movements that have developed over the past 20-25 years have reached a certain impasse in recent times. How do we win peace and nuclear disarmament? We've had big demonstrations, but they haven't done the trick. A more rounded political approach is needed. We have to address the question of who's in power.

The process of thinking out these questions is more advanced in some other countries. The European Greens developed largely out of a process of single issue activists discovering that they had to address the question of power. So a central element in the discussion is the failure of the non-party example.

This is an important question, because it is also very possible that as activists realise that the single issue movements don't have all the answers, many could become inactive or join the ALP if they fail to find a more effective form of struggle. Both courses lead to dead ends.

A second element in the discussion is the decline of the Communist Party. There has always been a major formation to the left of the Labor Party in this country, so the decline of the Communist Party creates an obvious vacuum.

Despite the fact that formations to the left of Labor have never attracted large electoral support, they have played a big role in Australian politics. In the trade unions and in other spheres, the Communist Party played this role through the '40s and '50s.

A third factor is the relative failure of the newer leftist formations that emerged in the 1960s. Discontented with the nature of the Communist Party in the '60s, a new generation of young people tried to re-win the lessons of past movements for fundamental social change.

They were only partially successful, and in the end, they repeated many of the errors of previous generations of Marxists and leftists. Most obviously, they tended to latch onto leaders of earlier generations — particularly Mao Zedong and Leon Trotsky — and to incorporate the weaknesses as well as the strengths of these figures.

For many, though not all, of the '60s radicals that was part of a learning process. Today, we can get a clearer view of the limits of what was passed on from the past in this way.

A fourth element in the discussion is the nature of the Hawke Labor government and other Labor governments around the country. There can be a sort of academic debate: Are they worse than Chifley or Billy Hughes?

That's not really important. What's important is the consciousness that the present Labor governments are very bad. A lot of people are looking for left alternatives. This is reflected in the impact of the Nuclear Disarmament Party, the setbacks for Labor in the Rockdale and Bass Hill by-elections, and in Labor's loss of support in its traditional bases in the 1987 elections.

A fifth factor is the emergence of independent electoral formations at all levels, from state and federal elections to local government. Some of these are directly based on forces breaking from the Labor Party, while others reflect disillusionment with Labor in other quarters.

A sixth factor is a maturing of the left forces, reflected in decisions in some quarters not to settle for building sects and cults, but to tackle the task of thinking our way out of old sectarian frameworks.

Another reflection of this is the more cooperative attitude that has developed on the left over the past two or three years. While substantial differences remain, among the larger left parties there is a recognition of the need for consultation and cooperation wherever possible — a recognition that there is more that unites us than divides us. This maturing process is very encouraging.

All of these factors have fed into a process involving discussions, coalitions, conferences, alignments (and dare I say manoeuvres), on the left and among the Green forces, the former ALP members, etc.

Our view is that all who strive towards fundamental social change should work together far more closely, even if the process of coming together in a new party is difficult. It's useful at this point to look back over a little recent history. The 1984 elections and the emergence of the NDP is a good starting point, because it was those events that cast the spotlight on the enormous opening that existed for a new party.

As everyone knows, the SWP got deeply involved in that process (although not as deeply as some later tried to make out). When we did this, others on the left warned us: "You'll get no joy out of the NDP. It's not a Marxist-Leninist organisation. It's a single-issue organisation. It's only a petty-bourgeois organisation. Stay clear!"

We thought differently. We knew the thrust of the NDP was progressive, that it spoke to the aspirations of hundreds of thousands of Australians. The memory of the

NDP experience in 1984 is a major factor motivating the new party discussion today.

Nevertheless, there were other, less positive aspects of the way the NDP emerged. Most significantly, there was an attempt to manipulate the sort of party that would emerge to fill the vacuum left by the ALP's shift to the right. Sections of the ruling class were prepared to tolerate, and even promote, a party led by Peter Garrett. They won't be so enthusiastic about a new socialist organisation, or perhaps even a Green party.

As well, the NDP emerged in an unorganised way. That was inevitable in the circumstances in which the leaders of the time attempted to run the NDP. You can't build a left party organisation through the mass media, or around one individual.

While the West German Greens have very well-known leading figures, they also put enormous emphasis on the democratic questions — on controlling their parliamentarians, and on replacing their parliamentarians after a certain time.

The Greens are discussing these questions at the moment, and whatever may be the outcome of that discussion, there's an understanding that there's no point building a party of stars, of unaccountable leaders who, over time and under pressure, are perhaps no more to be trusted than the leaders of the existing parliamentary parties.

After the NDP's promising beginning, there was a coldly calculated attempt to destroy it. The media and some leaders of the NDP decided at a certain stage that this new party wasn't going in exactly the direction they wanted, so they decided to destroy it. But they overestimated their own power and importance, and underestimated the power of the grassroots supporters of the NDP. Although they could damage the NDP, they couldn't destroy it.

Most of the ranks and supporters of the NDP disagreed with the decision of the leaders to walk out. The NDP had made itself a fixture in electoral politics. It is now an important progressive electoral alliance. But much more than an electoral alliance is possible and necessary.

## **New projects**

Now, after the dust has settled, we can say the NDP showed the size of the constituency for a new party. Let's say it had 10,000 members (though there was no agreement in 1984 about who was a member), and it pulled hundreds of thousands of votes. That's an enormous, fundamentally progressive constituency which is looking for real change in this country today.

There is, unquestionably, a large constituency for a new type of progressive politics. The question is, who will organise it, and how?

There have been, and are, a number of attempts. Many people who have been involved in various electoral alliances are interested in a more comprehensive political

alternative, there's discussion among some of the left parties, there's interest among many people who've left the ALP, and there's interest among activists with their origins in the environmental movement.

One of the more formed currents was initiated mainly by people who came originally from the Melbourne peace movement. It hopes to involve people like Bob Brown, Peter Garrett, Jean Meltzer and Jo Vallentine.

Joe Camilleri and Jim Falk, prominent figures in this current, have put some thoughts on paper in *Arena* (No. 77, December 1986) and in the book *Moving Left* (Pluto Press Australia, 1986).

These people make it clear that they have some hesitations about how broad a new party should be. Joe Camilleri thinks the existing left parties can't play a useful role in a new formation.

The other parties of the left, including the largest of them, the Communist Party of Australia, are numerically too small, their credibility too tarnished, and their capacity to communicate with the rest of society too limited for them to have much impact on Australian political life [writes Camilleri]. No revamping or renaming of any one of these groupings, or some combination of them, is likely to overcome the problem of marginalisation.

There are certainly elements of truth in that, but the implication is that those in the organised left have nothing to offer, and can't be a part of any new party process. Representatives of parties that have recognised much of what Joe Camilleri says, and which have accordingly declared their interest in a new party, haven't been invited to discussions on this project. We don't take that personally. The important thing is to understand the error of this approach — the underestimation of the necessary working-class content of a new political party in this country. This is not West Germany. The labour movement has a different weight and history here.

Those who dismiss the existing parties misjudge the real mood in the constituency they're trying to involve. They underestimate the desire for unity and openness.

They also underestimate the problems of building a political party — the cadres, the techniques, the skills that are necessary. It's not enough to have a few leaders able to manipulate the mass media.

It's a mistake to underestimate the potential contribution of those who've been through the very difficult experience of putting together political parties in the circumstances of the past 20 years.

In any case, a project that attempts to exclude part of the constituency is very unlikely to succeed. No one will ever build a successful party that attempts to be simply a collection of compatible souls.

## Greens & Reds

The main tradition of opposition in capitalist society is the socialist tradition, and since it hasn't succeeded in the advanced capitalist world, there's a view in some quarters that it can't succeed, that it's necessary to figure out another, completely new, tradition of opposition.

There can be several elements in this search for something new:

- There are genuinely new ideas and insights that can, and do, enrich the socialist tradition.
- There's an attempt to narrow down the political framework, to ignore or avoid considering the international dimension, international responsibilities and to dodge the question of class oppression.
- There's a tendency to rehash old, already discredited ideas, particularly varieties of pre-Marxian utopian socialism.

Leon Trotsky once made an interesting comment on this latter phenomenon:

“Under the guise of new ways, old recipes, long since buried in the archives of pre-Marxian socialism, are offered to the proletariat.”

While there's no doubt that there are many sensible voices in the discussion of prospects for a new party of the left, the discussion has also produced all sorts of inconsistencies, evasions, half-answers, even mysticism. This shouldn't necessarily worry us. Any big, new step forward will always throw up old discussions and old confusions as new ideas are hammered into shape.

In all this, we haven't seen or heard anything that makes us doubt the correctness of our revolutionary socialist approach. Having said that, we are also convinced that broad agreement is possible with the many forces in this discussion on most questions of the day.

Some of the longer-term questions can be left to sort themselves out over time, through experience as well as discussion, as we work together on immediate questions. Part of the discussion can also be an attempt to find better ways of communicating. We should do all we can in that direction.

Jim Falk makes some interesting points along these lines. He says it's not necessary to call yourself socialist, and the Greens shouldn't automatically reject socialist ideas, but should seek unity. He contrasts the British ecologists, who don't say that at all.

“What I conclude from reading Green literature is that the claim to have developed a theory that stands on a fundamentally different base from socialist thought is not established by the Greens, and may well be misleading”, writes Falk.

It should not be overlooked that a mirror image of the desire that this literature demonstrates — to exaggerate differences in order to distinguish Red from Green —

may also be easily detected in the arguments of many who consider themselves socialists. If this tendency continues, it runs the risk of creating an unnecessarily divisive assessment of the possibility of the views of those who count themselves Green, and those of a substantial array of people on the left overlapping on many important issues. But there are hopeful signs that this tendency is not uniform, and could be reversed. For example, the view that the underlying perspectives of Green and undogmatic Red in fact substantially overlap is held by some prominent representatives of the European Greens.

We can hardly disagree with that. And there's a lot that we agree with in Joe Camilleri's views as well.

Camilleri makes a sound analysis of the capitalist crisis, of the situation of the working-class movement, of social-democracy. He calls for a radically different social order, and he doesn't think the Labor Party or the trade unions can be adequate vehicles to achieve that.

He also rejects the view that the mass social movements can alone be the vehicle for fundamental change: "Nor do these movements collectively offer an attractive ideological alternative, much less a coherent political strategy."

He concludes that a new political formation is needed, and he makes some correct criticisms of the Greens. We certainly have enough common ground to make substantial progress towards a joint transitional program (which is a buzzword that's sometimes tossed around in these discussions on prospects for a new party of the left).

That's not to say there are no problems. Most seriously, there is disagreement over whether class society is the fundamental problem, and there are different views of the capitalist state.

This is not just a question of finding new, more transitional language to describe phenomena on whose fundamentals we agree. It's not just a question of calling the workers the labour force. That sort of adjustment and compromise is fine if it can help clear the way to agreement on the fundamentals in our little left villages, but it won't solve the bigger problems. Those require more systematic discussion.

Sometimes, the differences over language cover evasion of the issues, and confusion about how we should work and where we should be going. Joe Camilleri says we need a "value centred program". But which values? Where do they come from? Humans are divided into classes and can have completely different values, completely different perceptions of exactly the same phenomena.

To give him his due, Camilleri's answer is a radical one. He says the starting point is justice for the poor. But without a class view, how do you situate the problems of wealth and poverty historically and internationally? Classes affect the whole world,

and they affect the future.

Camilleri makes a criticism of what he calls the technocratic mode of production. He uses this term so he can avoid mentioning the capitalist mode of production and the existing socialist states. He lumps together two fundamentally different systems. In international policy, he calls for nonalignment and independence, which is okay as far as it goes.

But in the end, we must ask why humanity faces the problems it does today. What are the origins of the cultural malaise that Camilleri identifies? Why are we unable to meet the material needs of humanity around the world?

He says the problems flow from unequal exchange. But unequal exchange between whom? It's at this point that there's an evasion. Because he doesn't want to offer the traditional answers — the socialist answers — he has no answers at all. No one has come up with any other answers.

Joe Camilleri says there's a systematic imbalance and leaves it at that. That sort of vagueness dodges the question of what's really happening in the world today. It sidesteps the fact that revolutions are happening today — revolutions in which workers and peasants take state power out of the hands of their capitalist rulers.

That's very clearly the way things are developing in the Philippines, in South Africa, and the way they have already developed in Nicaragua. Although the political and social situation is more complicated in this country, in the final analysis it's also the way things must develop here.

Jim Falk discusses the shortcomings of the Greens at some length. But he also tends to blur some of the central issues. He says the Greens don't understand the question of class. But, he adds, many Marxists didn't initially understand the feminist movement when it first began to develop. That's true (of *some* Marxists), but how does that get us closer to an effective method of organising and uniting all the forces that want fundamental social change? More importantly, how does it bring us closer to an agreed strategy for such change?

Falk says we'll work out some of these questions later, and on that we can agree. But today the German Greens are having problems and debates because of their inability to work out some of these questions. The Greens phenomenon is not static. It's still developing, and we should be alert to the lessons of the latest developments, as well as those of the Greens' initial formation and electoral success.

Behind the vagueness on the question of class is vagueness on the question of power and the state. Jim Falk says we seek to change the terms in which the state can operate. But it's precisely because we're losing that struggle that there is a crisis of the socialist movement today. Only when we have state power will we be able to fully

match the resources and power of the ruling class in the battle of ideas.

Joe Camilleri avoids the question of the state by joining a drift to utopianism. He says we'll establish popular control over corporate power. That's true. But how to do that without eliminating corporate power? Is there another way of doing it?

Camilleri supports a return to smaller-scale productive units, and in the process makes a dismissive reference to "Marxist texts". Perhaps he's trying to address people who don't begin from a Marxist tradition and who might feel uncomfortable discussing Marxism. But even so, should we really be telling these people that everything can begin entirely anew? Human society isn't like that. Nor is politics.

In politics, as in science and technology, we necessarily build on the past, and if we're to identify those areas of the past that provide the firmest foundations, we must recognise our debt to past generations of seekers after a more just society.

Obviously, we can't settle debates about state power and corporate power, or about small scale versus large scale production, by quoting from Lenin or Marx. But neither can we settle important questions through silence, vagueness or confusion.

We want unity, but we also know that the utopian schemes that are often offered as a substitute for Marxism can be in and of themselves sectarian. It's a new form of sectarianism to say "this is our scheme, our shibboleth, and everyone must rally round it. If you don't agree, you can't be part of our movement."

The Marxist movement, at its best, is not sectarian, because it bases itself on real social developments, on what's possible, on how the forces of production can be developed, modified, changed. Strategies for change must be founded in reality. That's also the key to real unity.

## The Communist Party

The Communist Party of Australia is another important current in this discussion on the prospects for a new party. The CPA raised the question at a 1984 conference on socialist renewal. Nevertheless, its practice over the next few years was mired completely in the politics of the prices-incomes Accord.

We said frankly (might I say perhaps a little too frankly), that there could be no new politics based on that sort of strategy. A new party would have to strike out in a different direction, just as the NDP did.

Until 1986, we think the Communist Party didn't make much progress on the new party question. But there has been a change since the Broad Left Conference in early 1986. That conference took place in a very difficult context for people who had staked a great deal on the Labor Party's performance in government.

By the time of the Broad Left Conference, discontent with the Accord was increasing,

and the disillusionment with Labor was very deep and widespread. The alienation of the anti-nuclear movement had been made very clear during the 1984 elections. Aboriginal communities around the country were deeply angered by Labor's attacks on land rights. Far from delivering on its tax promises, Labor was pushing a consumption tax. Its assault on the Builders Labourers Federation was in full cry.

After the Broad Left Conference, the Communist Party's leadership issued a new economic program sharply disagreeing with the course of the Hawke government. In July 1986, the CPA National Committee took up proposals for a new party, and issued a statement, *Towards Socialist Renewal*, in 10,000 copies.

The CPA also initiated discussions with other left parties and groups around the country. Since that time, the CPA has confirmed its rejection of the political course of the Labor governments and issued a broadsheet calling for a new direction in economic policy. Both *Tribune* and the Communist Party leadership opposed Labor's new, two-tier wages system. It remains to be seen whether these positive moves will lead to a more thorough rethinking.

## The Socialist Workers Party

Where does all this leave the SWP? For us, 1986 was a very significant year. It brought important new openings towards realignments, and at the very least a changed atmosphere on the left.

We think the axis of left politics in general is the party question, and today, specifically, it's the new party question. Getting that question right is the most important thing we can do today.

The new party question has a certain dynamic, whatever differences or confusion there may be on other questions. Trying to build such a party sets us on a certain course, which we think is fundamentally progressive and healthy.

There will be those on the left who'll tell us we've made a terrible mistake, but we'll refer them to our party program, in which we are very clear about what we mean by a vanguard party, and by a vanguard. (Perhaps, in future, we might be more cautious about the term vanguard since so many people seem so frightened of it, though in most cases they're really reacting to mistakes that have been committed in the name of self-proclaimed vanguards.)

But whatever term we might use, we are convinced that a conscious and organised vanguard is indispensable in the struggle for fundamental social change. This vanguard consists of the politically advanced sections of the working class and its allies, bases itself on the accumulated lessons of the history of the international struggle for socialism, and is organised in the revolutionary party of the working class.

That sort of vanguard cannot be proclaimed, but must come into existence through struggles — the types of struggles we've seen over the past 20 years, the struggles of the trade unions, the struggles that lead political activists to join political parties.

The Greens are part of that vanguard. To say differently is to entirely misunderstand Lenin's and Marx's views on the vanguard. Only those who stand at the head of struggles can truly be called vanguard fighters. Our proposition is very simple: To gather the vanguard into one party and over time to develop it into an effective fighting force.

To the SWP, there's no question of changing or dropping parts of our program. Rather, the question is to get unity where we agree. On the question of the party — the key programmatic question — we'll seek unity with all who agree with us, just as we do on the fightback in the union movement, and in all other areas of political activity. We're always seeking the broadest possible alliances.

The fact that we think existing parties can play a useful role in the new party project doesn't in any way conflict with the reality that the new party is the project of a wide layer. The left has an opportunity not simply to regroup two or three organisations. That, alone, would be a positive thing if nothing else were possible, but today far more is possible. A simple regroupment would miss the main chance.

Of course, if the new party doesn't eventuate, the development of more cordial dialogue among the left parties is in itself a welcome development, and one we hope will last.

## The Fightback Alliance

Another element in the political situation during 1986 was the Fightback alliance. This was a current that developed over the previous couple of years, mainly as an outgrowth of an entirely new atmosphere among some sections of the left.

In the course of the struggle against the Accord and the opposition to Labor's campaign to destroy the Builders Labourers Federation, some left parties and individuals found themselves increasingly in agreement.

During 1986 and early 1987 the Fightback alliance held a number of meetings and conferences promoting the need for rank-and-file activity to defend trade unions and democratic rights.

But this type of campaign can't afford to ignore the dynamic between industrial struggle, or struggle around other single issues, and the lack of a credible alternative capable of unlocking the broader political situation. The SWP strongly pressed this point, in the form of the new party question, in the Fightback coalition. But we were a minority on that question.

Some participants in the coalition thought the key task was to fight to have the ALP return to more progressive policies. In fact, some were members of the ALP and the ALP left, and therefore it was natural that they should be very hostile to, or at least should fail to understand, the need for a new party.

Others saw their own Marxist-Leninist parties as the only road. They thought they had such a correct program, and such a correct tradition, that they would inevitably, one day, succeed.

We don't think that's a Marxist-Leninist approach at all, and we said frankly that it's a grave error to neglect the present opportunity to build a new party capable of uniting forces far broader than those of any of the existing parties. We pointed out that to neglect this opportunity was to risk being left far behind by the real political developments in this country.

It's easy enough today to hold successful conferences, to resonate the awareness of all the things that are going wrong in this country. But at a certain point people want some answers about what to do as well.

Most people have a fairly clear idea of how bad things are. But what the hell should they do about it? The left will wear out its welcome if it simply confines itself to saying how bad things are — if it can't put forward a political project that offers a way forward, and that people can begin to unite around.

If the forces who made up the Fightback alliance would rethink and come into a new party project, that would be a big step forward, because these parties, groups and individuals do represent people who have made a big commitment to the cause of socialism and social change.

If they won't rethink on that question, we'll continue to work with them wherever we have agreement, as we did in the Fightback alliance.

In the same category to some extent is the Industrial Labor Party, Bill Hartley's attempt at an electoral project. We think the ILP project was based on an underestimation of the potential of the forces that don't originate in the Labor Party and the trade union movement. It was a mistake not to attempt to put together a united project with the forces coming from the social protest movements of various sorts.

But perhaps above all else, the ILP was based on a misjudgement of the need for unity, and the very real and deep desire for unity among the constituency looking towards a new party.

## 3. The Program

What are the problems in developing a left program for a new party? We've already looked a little at this question in relation to the Greens.

I guess there are two possible types of errors in trying to develop a political program — you can be ultraleft or opportunist. All errors tend to be off dead centre in one direction or another.

The SWP tradition, I think has been correct in many things but if anything we've made left errors. We've been ultraleft. We probably hold that in common with most forces originating, as we did, in the Trotskyist movement.

### Ultraleftism

Ultraleftist tendencies are deeply ingrained in Trotskyism, going right back to Trotsky's 1938 *Transitional Program for World Revolution* — the formative document of the Fourth International.

The *Transitional Program* makes many very useful and correct points, particularly about the link between immediate struggles and longer-term aims. That's a question that's still very current today, so it's worth discussing just what remains valid in Trotsky's program, and what we should discard.

Today, it's clear enough that this program was wrong in some important ways in regard to advanced capitalist countries. Take this point from an article that had a big influence on us in the '70s. It's by George Novack, a longtime leader of the Trotskyist movement.

“The Fourth International remains the only international movement equipped with this valuable instrument of orientation” (i.e. the *Transitional Program*).

“The pro-Moscow communist parties, the Maoists, Titoists, and the followers of Castro, the social-democrats, the New Leftists, the anarcho-spontaneists, none of the other tendencies operating among the anticapitalist forces have developed anything like it. This is one of our advantages over them”, said Novack, modestly. It's terrible, but we believed this.

One structural aspect of the original *Transitional Program* is of considerable importance,

though this often goes unnoticed by its readers. It is divided into four distinct sections, each referring to different areas of struggle. The first and longest part pertains to the situation in advanced countries. Properly so, because the evolution and outcome of the class struggle there is ultimately decisive for the cause of world socialism.<sup>42</sup>

But that, of course, entirely misses the point about the real course of the world revolution this century. The *Transitional Program* got it wrong, Trotsky got it wrong. Since the Russian Revolution of 1917, the struggle between capitalism and socialism has focused in the colonial world. Throughout its entire 50-odd year history, the Trotskyist movement has been wrong on this central point.

That's not to say Trotsky's political method was all wrong. This is how he describes what he was trying to do in the *Transitional Program*:

What is the sense of the transitional program? We can call it a program of action, but for us, for our strategic conception, it is a transitional program — it is a help to the masses in overcoming the inherited ideas, methods and forms, and adapting themselves to the exigencies of the objective situation. This transitional program must include the most simple demands. We cannot foresee and prescribe local and trade union demands adapted to the local situation of a factory, the development from this demand to the slogan for the creation of a workers' soviet.

These are both extreme points from the development of our transitional program, to find the connecting links and lead the masses to the idea of a revolutionary conquest of power. That is why some demands appear very opportunistic — because they are adapted to the actual mentality of the workers. That is why other demands appear too revolutionary, because they reflect more the objective situation than the actual mentality of the workers. It is our duty to make this gap between objective and subjective factors as short as possible. That is why I cannot overestimate the importance of the transitional program.<sup>43</sup>

But then he gets to his estimate of the political situation in the middle of the 20th century:

You can raise the objection that we cannot predict the rhythm and tempo of the development, and that possibly the bourgeoisie will find a political respite. That is not excluded — but then we will be obliged to realise a strategic retreat. But in the present situation we must be oriented for a strategic offensive, not a retreat. This strategic offensive must be led by the idea of the creation of workers' soviets to the creation of a workers' and farmers' government.<sup>44</sup>

That was almost 50 years ago, and it's not the way things turned out. But for most of our existence as the SWP we persisted in believing that the world had turned out that way, or was about to turn out that way.

In fact, a strategic retreat did become part of the order of the day for the working-class movement in the advanced capitalist countries. The capitalist class did win a respite. That is a fact.

Most Trotskyists refuse to see this. They don't want to see it. It took us a long time to see it, so we can understand the mentality very well. Of course, most Trotskyists also misunderstood the method of Trotsky. Other things in the *Transitional Program* — like the importance of immediate demands — are often neglected.

We were often impatient over the past 15 years. It took us a while to realise that things were not going to turn out the way we thought.

We were waiting to bring on the relevant transitional demands with the answers to the expected crisis of capitalism. But the crisis developed at a much slower tempo than we expected.

We were sometimes mechanical in what we did. We were wrong, time and time again, in predicting and expecting the working-class fightback. But we had an explanation, as most Trotskyists do as to why there was no fightback: Only one thing was lacking. The *Transitional Program* said so, right up front, as every Trotskyist knows, "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat."

At first glance that can seem a very profound statement, but really it's a commonplace. It's always true abstractly. But if you believe that's the central thing you have to understand, everything else is betrayal.

The trouble is, that statement doesn't tell us enough. It's necessary also to understand why there is this historical crisis of leadership in the working-class movement.

What has happened that allows the development of a labour bureaucracy linked to the Labor Party in the way we see it today? In the end, the Labor Party is actually fulfilling its true nature, not betraying. That's not to say it's wrong to polemically say the Labor Party is betraying, after all, it puts itself forward as a popular party.

It is correct for us to say, "You rotten treacherous people, you sold out Aboriginal land rights", providing we also understand and explain that Labor was always going to sell out Aboriginal land rights.

It's in this context that we have to understand how to develop a program of immediate, democratic and transitional demands, and it can be different from the way we looked at it in the past. The process of creating new leaderships does not simply proceed through denunciations, but through practical experience. Not that betrayal doesn't exist. It certainly does.

## Opportunism

The discussion on ultraleftism is relatively straightforward in comparison to the discussion on opportunism — the other main wrong direction in which searchers for an effective, realistic political program can stray.

To start with, let's avoid one of the main pitfalls on this question — the temptation to speculate on motivation. Is opportunism a product of confusion or backsliding? Either way, it doesn't really matter. We're not going to get very far if we focus the discussion on whether people made a certain error because they were treacherous or because they were stupid.

In a discussion in which we hope to bring people closer together, it would certainly be a mistake to put things on that level. We need to discuss errors in terms of strategy and tactics, not motivation.

There certainly are big differences of approach on the left. If the SWP's problem has been unreal expectations of revolutionary developments, it's probably fair to say that the problem for others has been unreal expectations of capitalism's ability to accept reform in a period like the present.

Nevertheless, given the present circumstances — particularly the obvious deepening of the crisis of capitalism and the widespread disillusionment with Labor in government — today we can probably get close to agreement on a lot of programmatic questions.

We can probably agree that any program (whether we call it a revolutionary program or a program of radical reform), is not possible without a couple of important factors:

- That large numbers of people are mobilised in support of that program, and that they must be the ones to guarantee it, and no one else.
- That the question of power is settled. That the program won't be implemented by saviours from on high.

Can we also agree that a program for fundamental change won't be put in place by a business-as-usual Labor government?

Another element is a genuine commitment to transition — to seriously trying to find the road beyond the struggles of the day. At this point, it's probably not very useful to speculate on some of the bigger questions — what transitional society will be like, and whether it represents some stage of capitalist development.

Some people approach this discussion by writing programs, which they give names like *New Economic Program*, and they try to set down just what the new society will be like. I don't think that really gets us very far. We're not really in much of a position to debate the future. What we really need is discussion on our approach to today's problems, and an approach to transition.

## Reforms

The experience of Labor in government has made it very clear that reforms are not on capitalism's agenda today. The situation is getting worse, and we have to look for reforms that lead in the direction of a break with the capitalist framework.

We also have to understand what's not possible today. There can be wrong directions and false starts in the search for practical measures to minimise the impact of the capitalist crisis on the lives of ordinary people. I think it's utopian to try to restructure capitalist manufacturing industry, for example. That's not a reform today. Capitalist restructuring will go on, but it will make the situation worse for ordinary people, and we don't want to be associated with that.

Again, it's a mistake to think that we can develop, within the present capitalist framework, small-scale economic enterprises that guarantee jobs and don't exploit the working class so much.

That's not to rule out more specific demands about democratising the workplace, or limiting the prerogatives of big capital. However, if we apply a reform program piecemeal, if we settle for one aspect of a broader program, we can end up creating a new obstacle or even contributing to a disaster.

For instance, there's no point advocating tariff controls today, unless we also put them in the context of a broader program for a planned economy and a state monopoly of foreign trade. Tariff controls alone won't solve any economic problems.

Nor is there any advantage in attempting to create little islands of socialism within capitalist society. For some people, the prices-income Accord was an experiment along those lines — an attempt to find a way for the working class to intervene systematically in the economic situation.

Of course, not everyone saw it that way. Others were more nervous about it, and saw it merely as a realistic tactic — the only possible course given the relationship of forces in the trade union movement and the lack of a political alternative to Labor in government.

We don't agree with that view. We think there were alternatives. A different political course was necessary. It was necessary to back those who were willing to struggle, whether they were the Food Preservers Union or the BLF.

When considering a reform program, I think we have to keep three objectives in mind:

- We're trying to limit defeats, and to defend the base of the working-class movement. If you're not doing it for that reason, you shouldn't be in the working-class movement to start with.
- We're trying to win whatever economic, social and political gains may be possible.

- We're trying to open the way for a counter-offensive against capital.

In any bargaining in regard to program, it's important to keep in mind the real situation, the real state of the working class, of the mass movements and of the rulers. All these elements were ignored in the Accord.

## Interventionism

In the present, difficult situation for the labour and progressive movements, an idea has gained currency that union intervention in the capitalist economy can provide an effective defence against the offensive of the new right and other anti-union, anti-democratic forces.

Some people have raised the idea of an intervention fund. This would involve gathering the funds of union-run superannuation schemes and investing them in capitalist companies.

While there's no doubt that we should have an opinion about what should be done with superannuation funds (they shouldn't go to South Africa for a start), it's really very unrealistic to think that any organisation or individual can play the capitalist game without adapting to its logic of seeking to maximise profits.

In the current economic situation, that logic inevitably leads to attempts to reduce production costs through the introduction of labour-saving (i.e., job-eliminating) technology; to pay the remaining workers lower wages; and in general to attack workers' living standards and working conditions.

It's totally utopian to think that an organisation aiming to compete on the capitalist market can have any other goals and interests today. Nevertheless, some influential trade union officials want to insist that such interventionism can win progressive reforms, or at least can play an important role in defending existing conditions.

This thinking is rooted in a view of the political situation that is a good 10 years out of date. Throughout most of the postwar period, until the early '70s, the capitalist system could afford to pay higher wages, to maintain a more adequate social welfare system. Today, it can't.

These days, talk of reform often refers, in reality, to restructuring of capitalism in order to help it survive its present crisis. In Australia, this means trying to make Australian companies more competitive internationally by driving down our wages, making us more vulnerable to unemployment, cutting back our social welfare, and balancing the budget. Capitalist calls for cuts in government spending are usually motivated by a desire for greater direct and indirect government subsidies to private companies.

If that's what's meant by interventionism, we don't need it. We shouldn't bow

down before the theory that bigger profits for them will mean more crumbs for us. It's just not true.

Even so, the left cannot afford the interventionism discussion. Many people see it as a discussion about reforms, or even about a realistic bargaining position.

Many trade union officials, while conceding the limits of any interventionist strategy, nevertheless argue, that in the real world deals must be done. That's true, but if we must do deals, an elementary precaution is to be on guard against getting done in the dealing.

Too often, that's all forgotten. Under a pile of ifs and references to other countries and other times that bear little relation to our present reality, an enormous amount of wishful thinking, and even ostrich-like behaviour, takes place.

There are some on the left who stretch even the boundaries forward in human evolution, trying to disguise their political bankruptcy with leftist, pseudo-Marxist rhetoric.

This is definitely not what's needed now. We need clear balance sheets on what we win and lose, and where our deals have led. Above all, we need a very careful accounting of what is happening to the working class as a whole as a result of all this.

Demobilisation and demoralisation guarantee further defeats, one way or another. It's totally irresponsible for those at the top of the trade union movement to bewail a supposed lack of fighting morale in the ranks when strategies and policies imposed from the top have heavily contributed to this.

It's time to take stock of just where some of the policies of recent years have landed us. Today, the main issue concerning many trade union officials is simply how to impose discipline on the workforce. It was a very short, though slippery, road from guaranteeing profits under the Accord to this.

Unions certainly must consider their overall social responsibilities, but we can't ignore the role of classes, parties and capitalist governments — especially if we want to claim to be realistic. We have to consider all this realistically when we are looking at the outcome of any project.

We should even listen to some of our experts! In late 1986, Ted Wheelwright, a well-known left-wing economist, wrote a very interesting article for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It was titled *The sheep's back broke long ago*, and it explained that the idea of a capitalist restructuring of Australia's economy to win the export battle is a utopian dream. Wheelwright pointed out that it is several decades too late to do that.

Of course, such a project might have some chance of success if Australian workers were willing to accept a reduction in their living standards to levels comparable to those in South Korea or Taiwan. If they were prepared to do that, perhaps Australian

capitalism might have some chance of carving out a significantly bigger portion of the world market for itself.

But it's sheer fantasy to think that Australian workers would voluntarily agree to work for 54 or more hours a week for a couple of dollars an hour. In South Korea, such superexploitation of the workforce is maintained only as a result of military repression of all independent trade union activity.

Australian capitalism's other alternative is to reduce imports, but Wheelwright doesn't have a high opinion of that option either:

This would involve a recognition that in terms of resources of all kinds per head of population, Australia is a lucky country, and should have an economic policy which maximises what can be produced here and minimises imports.

This policy, however, is not in the interests of transnational capital and its supporting governments in Australia, and so is most unlikely to be adopted.

That's a very realistic view. Such a policy won't be adopted because the ruling class does not want it. There is no significant section of capital that wants to do it that way, because that would require a massive diversion of capital away from activities like stockmarket speculation and corporate takeovers.

It would require sustained investment of huge amounts of capital in relatively low profit local industry. Australian workers wouldn't accept wage cuts of the order necessary to make such an investment program attractive to capitalism. Such cuts could be imposed only through extremely repressive measures, involving the effective destruction of the trade union movement.

That's the problem with projects that attempt to frame a labour-capital consensus on restructuring and intervention. It is completely unrealistic to hope for an alliance between the unions and a section of capital to create a more competitive economy. It is unrealistic because it is based on an unrealistic estimate of the needs of capital, and of the present relationship of forces between labour and capital.

Ted Wheelwright's conclusions are rather pessimistic: "The export-or-die philosophy will most probably prevail, and its likely failure runs the risk of provoking a class conflict of almost Argentine-type proportions. As living standards fall, unemployment rises and the interests of working people are seen to be sacrificed on the altar of transnational capital and historical economics."

That's not a pretty picture, but it does pose the alternatives. Really, the only alternatives that do not sacrifice the interests of working people on the altar of capitalist profitability are socialist ones. The only realistic alternatives involve breaking right out of the present political and economic framework.

Development of a program of investment, and control of foreign trade and finance,

as well as cooperation with unions, requires breaking the power of the big corporations over these matters. It also means a struggle against their parties — of whichever stripe.

Without this, any working-class political strategy is nothing more than a pipedream. There's no getting away from the fact that the only realistic working-class strategy is a socialist strategy.

Meanwhile, what can be done right now? Above all, we must fight to maintain as much as possible of our present positions, the positions established by the working class in past struggles. If we lose these positions, if we are further weakened, all hope that the working class can play an effective political role recedes into the indefinite future. Moreover, if the working class is diminished by unemployment, is demoralised and defeated by the bosses and their governments, we can't rule out the prospect of a fascist-type cataclysm.

In developing a left program, we have to start where mass consciousness is today: With this or that environmental struggle, with opposition to the Australia Card, with support for any and every struggle to defend existing living standards. We must support any measure that strengthens the will and ability of working people to fight.

## **Socialist answers**

During a period of serious and prolonged economic crisis, the workers' movement cannot, however, confine itself to purely defensive battles. The crisis of capitalism, in Australia and internationally, precludes the possibility of simply preserving what presently exists.

The capitalists will strive to resolve the crisis to their advantage by imposing decisive defeats on the working people. The imperatives of the private profit system force them to return to the attack again and again — until they are victorious, or until they are defeated.

If workers' struggles are confined to simply responding to these attacks, demoralisation will eventually take hold, and increasing sections will be defeated. To avoid this outcome, the workers' movement must educate, organise and mobilise its forces to impose an anticapitalist solution to the crisis.

This may be a difficult, and new, road for many workers, but it is the only realistic one, and it becomes more difficult the longer we delay. We must revive the traditions of struggle, however painful it may be to realise that we are no longer the Lucky Country. We must begin developing a program and party of action that can unite all who want to break out of the present economic and social dead end of Australian capitalism.

We think that's the road forward, that's the vision of Marxism. We also think that

view reflects a true recognition of today's political realities.

In the end, the socialist vision is a very optimistic one. It reflects confidence in humanity's ability to solve its problems and have economic security, a clean environment, an end to sexism, war and racism.

It is unlikely any vision short of that can mobilise people around the world for fundamental change. People are not likely to be attracted to a movement that says it just wants to fix up a few things in our little part of the world.

Nor are they likely to be very inspired if we tell them that everything is right out of hand and the only answer is to go back to an earlier stage of civilisation, to smaller scale production that will give them less of everything. Aside from anything else, that's just not possible. A new society will be based upon the highest possible technical level, not some arbitrary mark conjured out of a non-existent golden age.

## **A democratic program**

What program will have a chance of rallying the sort of support we need? Above all, it must be democratic. That's where we must begin, because that's the concern of a great many people today. It's where most of the big movements of recent years have placed the emphasis.

In the end, a democratic program becomes very important because of the blockage of the socialist revolution in the advanced countries. The fact that there's such a delay leads to steadily greater illusions in bourgeois democracy and, as a by-product, steadily greater discontent as people run up against the limits of bourgeois democracy.

In renewing and restating our socialist vision, we must emphasise that socialism is the ultimate democracy. We fight for the most complete democracy, and in doing so we should point out that we mean not just majority rule, but an accounting with the questions of class inequality and oppression, and with questions of special oppression — particularly race and sex oppression. These three factors will make our democracy far superior to anything of which bourgeois democracy is capable.

As well as our democratic program, we need a program of immediate economic demands, with which we try to build a bridge towards transitional demands that challenge capitalist rule. Priorities in this area must be tuned regularly in line with real developments and alliances growing out of people's everyday experiences.

No program for fundamental social change can ignore or underestimate the international dimension. Obviously this is clearest in relation to the question of peace.

But more than that is involved. Although the struggles in different parts of the world take different forms, we have vital interests in the outcome of Nicaragua's struggle against the contras, in the struggles of the blacks in South Africa. If these

struggles are defeated, we are weakened. If they are won, our oppressors are weakened.

Perhaps this will be a hot question for some who lean towards pacifist views, and who say they want a non-violent revolution. We don't know if we'll convince everyone to support just struggles for national liberation in various parts of the world, but perhaps we can agree that people in various countries have the right to rebel against the oppression they face in the ways they decide are most effective.

What else can we say about a program for a new party? Above all, we're confident the people fighting for real change today can successfully come together in an organisation that will be far more effective than anything we have today.

We don't believe we can build a vanguard party without the vanguard — the real vanguard, the people who are involved in struggle today. Getting them together in a party will be a big step towards the creation of the instruments of struggle we need.

There can be dangers in the process of creating a new party. There can, for example, be an overemphasis on electoral success as a measure of the party's effectiveness. The German Greens are having discussions around these questions. There's a real gap between some of the parliamentary representatives of the greens and the activists who make up the base of the party.

Maybe we're a little lucky in this country, because the undemocratic electoral system means that electoral success won't come at all easily. Those with an eye for a royal road to a parliamentary career will probably stick to the tried and tested channels.

## Who will be in a new party?

At this stage, the question of who will be in this new party is still very open. We're prepared to discuss with anyone who's interested. We'll support all initiatives in the direction I've described.

Our basic position is to unite everyone who's interested. I'm reminded of a previous attempt to build unity around a party that was appropriate for an earlier time.

When a unified Communist Party was formed in the United States, James P. Cannon (one of the founders of the Communist Party in that country, and later a leading Trotskyist) discussed the question of unity and the workers' attitude towards it. He said:

... They will hail it as the morning star. They are looking for it. I say, comrades, they are looking for it with longing eyes. The workers do not like division, there is nothing that dispirits them more than to see their own battlefield divided, their own leaders demoralised. In the past we were not able to give them unified leadership. Let us move quickly away from past mistakes. The past is dead. Let the dead past bury its dead. We have come together to face the future. Let us judge each other upon activities of the

future and not upon activities that lie behind us.

The final word is for unity, unity of the revolutionary workers.

Down with those who speak against it! Down with those who seek to divide the revolutionary movement! Long live the unification of revolutionary forces!<sup>45</sup>

Of course, the language is different. The time was different, perhaps the needs were different, but the task is the same: To develop unity among the real forces that are challenging capitalism today.

If we eventually find that more than one new party comes out of the movement we're discussing, we'll do our best to develop practical unity wherever possible — particularly in electoral projects, and in other campaigns.

Some people may ask whether we're going too fast in this process, whether we shouldn't discuss it further. In truth, we're going too slowly. The time is ripe now, and we should try to seize it.

What does this project mean for us, as people who've been involved in revolutionary organisations and parties? Above all, it means rethinking our approach to politics, and one of the most important lessons of politics is that there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies.

People and circumstances change, ourselves included. In fact, if they don't change, there is no hope for social change in this country. We believe that the leadership of the movement for fundamental change will be recomposed and renewed repeatedly in the course of the political process. Without that process of renewal and change, there's no chance that the masses of people can change and make a social revolution.

For people not in parties, there's another message. Perhaps there is cynicism, scepticism, disappointment with past attempts to build parties. These people must risk it. They must have a try, or in some cases another try.

People who are not in organisations have an enormous responsibility — perhaps even more responsibility than those who are already in organisations. These people must make their views known. Join the process in any way they can, and above all, by the weight of their influence, enforce unity on it.

Is all this going to be easy? No, not at all. But can we do it together? Yes, we think we can. That's the promise and potential of the movement for a new party of the left. ■

# Building the Revolutionary Party: Some Recent Experiences

## 1. The Old Party & the New Party

Organisational decisions are always an important part of any Socialist Workers Party gathering whose task is to assess the overall political situation and our course. Today, perhaps, our organisational discussion assumes greater importance than usual because of the rather difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves.

We are in what we often call a period of transition for the party. This is partly because it's a period of transition in politics and partly because we're deeply involved in attempts to build a new party of the left. This situation creates some dangers and difficulties for the party, and this is reflected in a mixture of recent achievements and failures.

Our involvement in the attempt to create a new party can blur our understanding of our political course in the present political situation, and paradoxically it can undermine our consciousness about the importance of party building. We run the risk of losing our sense of purpose.

Obviously, any discussion of our organisational tasks must be set in the overall political context — the continuing world economic and social crisis of capitalism, particularly in the colonial world; the promise of the reform movement in the Soviet Union and other socialist states; and the crisis of working-class politics in the advanced countries.

## The past two years

To begin with, I want to look at a balance sheet of the last couple of years, since our national conference in Canberra in early 1986. At that gathering, we assessed the previous two years of party building in a report called *Recent Experiences in Party Building*.

We pointed out that 1985 had marked the end of a period of experimentation in the party. In the previous couple of years we had tried to open up the party in response to the development of the antinuclear movement and some level of fightback against the Fraser government in the early 1980s.

But with the pressure of the Labor Party bearing down on the mass movement in the wake of the 1983 election of the Hawke government, the party needed to regroup and assess where it was going, as the political momentum of the last years of the Fraser government abruptly died.

This led us to believe that we had been making a rather long-term error, probably from about 1974-75. Throughout that time we had expected a transformation of the political situation through some form of working-class fightback led by the trade unions. In 1976, we got excited when the ACTU called a one-day protest strike against the Fraser government's abolition of Medibank, but we've been waiting ever since for further developments.

## Crisis of working-class politics

We were to some extent victims of a paradox that has marked politics in the capitalist world for the past decade or so. While the capitalist system has been facing steadily increasing difficulties, none of which it has any prospect of resolving, there has also been a serious decline of the working-class movement in the advanced capitalist countries. Just when the socialist movement might have been expected to grow, it has plunged into a serious crisis.

It's not difficult to understand why this has happened. A number of serious structural weaknesses have become clearly evident in the working-class movement over the past half century. The most serious of these weaknesses is definitely the post-World War II evolution of the trade union bureaucracy towards virtually complete acceptance of bourgeois political perspectives.

No longer do the union officials debate whether workers or capitalists cause inflation. Now they start from the assumption that the only practical course is to defend profits. After developing steadily throughout the postwar years, this tendency has gained increasing momentum in the past decade.

That has naturally made things very difficult for the socialist movement, which has

always regarded the working class as the main agent of fundamental social change. This difficulty has been compounded by near-universal acceptance of the false view that the trade unions must be at the centre of struggle for progressive change, and must therefore be the focus of socialist political activity.

The definitive collapse of this schema gave impetus to a process of realignment and rethinking in the socialist movement, though no one could pretend the reaction was as swift and decisive as the situation demanded.

## Organisational adjustments

For our part, in 1985 we decided to put a period of organisational experimentation behind us, and to concentrate on a process of consolidation. We saved our assets by introducing a new dues structure, and we stressed party organisation and education by going back to weekly branch meetings. We took steps to ensure that Resistance was not starved of resources, and we began explaining to people joining our movement that they should prepare for the long haul, that it was unlikely there'd be any quick breakthroughs.

We began preparing the party for a relatively difficult period. We emphasised education about the nature of capitalism, the need for dedication and commitment, and the need to find the tactical forms that would enable us to take maximum advantage of any political opening — wherever it might occur.

Then, in 1986, we went a step further in our thinking on the state of the working-class movement. We turned away from attempts to create a union-based fightback movement, and focused instead on the question of socialist renewal — on the need for a viable socialist alternative, a new party of the left.

In the past couple of years there has been a renewal of discussion about left unity. None of the major left organisations have been able to avoid considering this question.

One problem in this was that our attention to regroupment led to a certain neglect of other areas of work. For example, at the beginning of 1986 the SWP's credibility was high in the antinuclear movement. We were well integrated and playing a big role around the country. That's not true today. There has been a decline in our work in that area, though that was partly due to a decline in the movement.

## Our immediate needs

A second problem is the tendency to neglect the immediate needs of the SWP because we've started thinking about a future new party. *Direct Action* has been neglected, and raising money has been neglected.

At one level, it comes down to a question of resources. If our organisers are

directing their attention towards building a new party, they're not concentrating on organising education of the members of the existing party. They can neglect sales of the paper and recruiting to the party.

In *Recent Experiences in Party Building* we observed that when you start to think the political situation is a bit dead and not much can be done, you're probably missing something. This happened to us most recently with the upsurge around the Hawke government's identity card. We must confess that we missed this quite important break in the political situation. The whole of the left missed it.

There are some reasons for that. Obviously, the Liberal Party and sections of the petty bourgeoisie have a lot more power and resources than we do. When they decide to campaign around an issue, and the bourgeois press gives them a run, they have considerable power. Nevertheless, the situation would have been better had we been there at the front, building committees and demonstrating the relevance and effectiveness of the left.

It's our business to choose the issues, to anticipate and influence developments, to find the things that can be done, and we didn't do any of that with the ID card.

But we have had successes. Resistance has done very effective work in the student movement over the past two years.

And the student movement has been one of the very few areas of fightback. There have been very few examples of such organised resistance to the schemes of Labor Party governments around the country.

While this has been a difficult period, one thing we can say is that the party's periphery has grown. We're certainly not becoming more isolated. In fact, many people who've been rather demoralised by the overall situation have begun to look to us more than they might have previously.

We have made real gains recently. We've helped to isolate those on the left who support the prices-incomes Accord. We've had important political victories on that level. Today, no one on the left is prepared to campaign aggressively for the Accord. That's a very important advance on the situation a couple of years ago.

But while we've had political victories, we haven't had sufficient organisational gains as a result of them. The party hasn't grown substantially, though Resistance has grown rapidly.

Of course, in the longer term the real measure of Resistance's success is how many Resistance members join the party. Some have, but not enough. This is another reflection of the difficulties of the situation we face.

## Recomposing the left

How can we rebuild a major socialist current in this country? Our approach has always been to set some goals, to decide what we can do given our present situation and resources. There's no point dreaming about what we could do if we had 10,000 members and unlimited funds. We must start from our real situation today.

In the past couple of years, we focused our energies on an attempt to recompose the left. We decided that we wanted to *be part* of the biggest left political organisation in this country. We decided we had been wrong to say that we would *become* the largest left political party. We think a new, united left party could go a long way towards unlocking the political situation in this country.

We decided to find out more about the discussion on the left outside our own circles. This flowed from our realisation that the tactics of party building are more complex than we might previously have thought. It's not just a question of recruiting one by one, or even 10 by 10, until we've eventually got a mass party.

Our emphasis on the new party tactic emerged only fairly recently. In early 1984, we were sceptical of the new party idea. At that point we emphasised the need for a fightback. We tried out the Social Rights Campaign, and concentrated all of our fire on the Accord. When the Communist Party called for a new party at that time, we were rather scornful.

In early 1984, our assessment was that virtually no one but the CPA would join the new party proposed by the CPA, except perhaps a small group of very conservative pro-Soviet trade union officials.

But later, when it appeared that there might be real prospects for a new party, we didn't cling to our previous position. We recognised that some important circumstances had changed. In particular, the mid-1984 emergence of the Nuclear Disarmament Party broke open several important elements of the political situation.

Just as the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution helped to set us on a new course, the NDP also helped to change our direction quite dramatically. It showed us that the political landscape could change quite rapidly. We were the only left party to draw that conclusion, and to move quickly to build the NDP and change our old position of effectively unconditional support for the Labor Party.

For all its talk of socialist renewal and a new party of the left, the Communist Party didn't understand what the NDP represented. Like most of the left, it tried to ignore the NDP and pretend nothing had changed. It concentrated on campaigning for Labor's re-election.

But the NDP changed a great deal, and since that time we've done all we could to promote the idea of a new party. At first, we hoped that the NDP might develop in

that direction. But before there could be any discussion of such ideas, Garret, Vallentine and Meltzer walked out, doing their best to kill off the NDP in the process.

We still thought there were real prospects for a new party, and sought discussions with anyone who might be interested. By the time of the 1986 Broad Left Conference, we were putting forward the view that there was space in this country for a Green Party or a Red-Green Party. We still think that.

In late 1986, the CPA began to change its position on the Hawke government's economic policy. At that point, we opened discussions with the CPA. So it's only a little over a year ago that we began to think there were real forces capable of forming a new party of the left. Before that, we had simply thought it was a good idea but couldn't see how it could be done.

We now know we were on the right track in our new assessment of the real prospects for a new party. In the past year, there has been a lot of interest in this question. In particular we've seen the coalescence of two projects that could have some chance of success: the Charter process (in which we're involved) and the Major New Initiative/Rainbow Alliance. As well, we've seen the election of Rob Wood as an NDP senator, a widely supported election campaign by former Labor senator George Georges, the emergence of the Illawarra Worker's Party on the NSW South Coast.

There have also been discussions ranging far beyond these forces, and almost universally there has been a positive response. Probably never before has there been such widespread acceptance of any idea supported (though this acceptance still doesn't reach into any section of trade union officialdom).

## **Continuity with our past**

Above all, our support for a new party is part of a general party-building strategy. It doesn't represent a sharp break with our past. The fact that we regard it as our main tactic indicates how much we're still in a propaganda period. We're very much looking towards regroupment of the existing left and socialist forces. There's not a lot of scope for political action right now.

When we talk about a new party, it can seem like a break with our past. People can think that the very act of forming a new party will make all of the old party-building tactics obsolete. Some who are attracted to the idea might be expecting immediate electoral success that will rocket them to Peter Garret status. Similar ideas can infect our party. We all want an easier life.

While we think the new party represents a continuity with the past, that's not to say there's nothing new about the new party project. We mean it when we say we have learned and will continue to learn from other forces. We know that we don't have all

the answers.

At the same time, however, we should be aware that this view can weaken our resolve and our view of our own importance. If we don't have all the answers, maybe the SWP isn't so important? If we're going to dissolve into a new party, why build the old party?

Acceptance of that attitude would be a big political error. Without the old party, there won't be any new party. While we might be preparing to dissolve our existing organisational forms in the context of a new party, we're not about to dissolve our program, our ideas, our individual cadre or our assets. We will certainly take certain essentials into the new party with us.

It's rather inevitable that we sometimes get a little lost in this complicated new party tactic. In recent months we've probably been a party with something of an identity crisis. This can be compounded when, inevitably, we go through some rough patches and start to doubt that we can put together a new party. Because so many comrades have put so much work into this chance for an important political breakthrough, the prospect of failure can seem devastating.

Impatience can be another problem: We had a good idea, let's just do it. Well, the bad news is that it might take longer than we thought, but the good news is that we have the time to do it. Labor won the July 1987 elections, and that means the opportunity for a break to the left will persist for at least another three years.

Despite our errors and slowness, and the errors and slowness of others, we have got some extra time to carry through this project. We initially hoped that we might have the process far enough advanced to mount a big campaign in the 1987 federal elections. But Hawke called them early, and in doing so he probably did us a favour. Knowing what we now know about the pace at which sections of the left make decisions, it's just as well Hawke gave us some extra time.

Comrades have been afflicted by another doubt as this new party tactic has unfolded: Is it really worth it? Is it worth building a party at all, and is it worth trying to do it with the people we've actually met in the process?

At this point we must reaffirm our view that a new party is very definitely on the political agenda. If we make the blunder of deciding that the new party can't happen, it's just about certain that someone else will make it happen. That's most certainly the lesson of the NDP's emergence.

## 2. The Communist Party & the New Party

Unless we're very wrong about the broader political situation, there will be a new party, and we must be part of it. We don't want to stand by in isolation and watch it happen. Despite all the difficulties we've had in the new party movement so far, there are still grounds for optimism that the new party could be a reality within a year.

This view is to some extent based on an assessment of the other forces in the process, and particularly the CPA. We don't see the new party as a product of a fusion between the SWP and the CPA, but relations between the two parties will inevitably have a major bearing on the Charter process, in which we're involved.

Some recent developments have made collaboration between the two parties a great deal easier. In early 1984, when we considered the CPA's call for a new party, we tried to estimate just what was happening to the CPA. We thought there could be two possible courses of development:

- The least likely course was a political rectification by the CPA — a recognition of some errors it had made in the trade union movement and the labour movement, and a pulling back from reformism together with a reaffirmation of Marxism. We thought that was very unlikely, because the CPA has for many years been systematically eliminating any reference to Marxism or Leninism.
- Far more likely was a split that would cause the CPA to fade away as an obstacle to those moving towards socialist views.

### Evolution of the CPA

In the event, we were right and wrong on both counts. There was a split and there was a partial rectification. The Taft split rid the CPA of some (though not all) of its most right-wing elements. It changed the relationship of forces and opened up a new dynamic in the Communist Party.

The discussion with Taft was fundamentally about whether a party was necessary. Taft wanted to dissolve into the Labor Party, while the majority wanted to maintain a

left party. Some wanted the Communist Party while others wanted socialist renewal, but all were united in their rejection of liquidation into the ALP and in their defence of the central programmatic question of Marxism Leninism — the need for an independent, working-class political party.

Naturally, there are still problems with a number of the CPA's political positions. Its rectification on Labor's economic policies was only partial, and it appears incapable of finding any way of putting forward a socialist program in the trade unions. As well, there have been many years of miseducation about Marxism and Leninism.

We were wrong in our predictions about the CPA. Perhaps that was because we only attempted to think one move ahead. We considered a split quite likely, but didn't consider what might happen as a result of a split. Perhaps we'd have anticipated developments better had we known more about the Communist Party and had we not been struggling with our own political problems. Even so, dealing with the CPA will always be a complex task because it is a complex formation.

### The 1986 rectification

The 1986 rectification on Labor's economic policies produced important changes in the CPA's line. It initially rejected the two-tier wages system, although there was no examination of what had led the party into erroneous positions in the first place. In particular, it seems there was no attempt to look at the underlying assumptions of the party's attitude towards the trade unions over the past 30 years.

The CPA doesn't have our attitude towards correcting its policies and program and thinking things through. When we think we've made an error, we attempt to trace the sources of that error, and to decide what we should change as a result. The CPA tends more towards a system of pragmatic adjustment.

Nevertheless, there have been real changes. Laurie Carmichael doesn't feature much in *Tribune* any more. More than a few CPA members seem embarrassed that he's still formally a member of their party.

There have been other important changes as well. Some leading members of the CPA have reacted favourably to some things we have said, for example in our report on *What Politics for a New Party?* at our January 1987 national conference in Sydney.

It seems we have opened up a real dialogue. Of course, our progress still remains to be tested. What will happen when we have an important political difference? There will certainly be tests: What will be the attitude towards *Australia Reconstructed* or *Future Strategies for the ACTU*, etc.? We think it's rather vital whether you vote for or against such documents.

We hope the response to new political developments will be an open-minded

attitude to discussion. At a recent CPA National Committee meeting, a central leader of its trade union work proposed support for *Australia Reconstructed*. His attitude was not that this was a good thing, but that there was no alternative. That's a blunder, but it's important that we keep a sense of proportion about it. It's not wilful betrayal. It's certainly not the attitude of Bill Kelty or Laurie Carmichael. In any case, that report wasn't adopted.

We also know that the Communist Party doesn't have our approach to dealing with differences. In general, it doesn't attempt to discuss out differences and take a vote and then let the majority get on with the job of testing its line in practice. The CPA tends to fudge differences, to ignore them or steer around them rather than trying to resolve them.

When *Australia Reconstructed* first hit the deck, we thought we might have come to the first big political test of the new party process. But when we read *Tribune*, we realised there was a range of opinion, and there could be a discussion across the whole of the left. We could have a real discussion. It needn't be Carmichael vs Trotskyism as in days of old. Because the discussion was in a different framework, and we weren't intervening from outside, it could be far richer and far more useful.

It's useful for us to be able to get down to detailed discussion on things that might appear to be differences. For example, when we write the economic program for the new party, interventionism will come up. We don't have any problems with interventionism (though some seem to think we do). Interventionism is just another way of saying campaigning for reforms. So we'll discuss specific reforms. Is restructuring industry and losing jobs a reform? No, that's a step backwards. It doesn't help working people to defend their rights. What's next? Banking? Yes, the banking system should be regulated, etc., etc. We'll be able to write a quite acceptable economic program for a new party.

Of course, what the CPA will put on paper often bears little relationship to what its trade unionists will do in practice. The CPA openly says that, and justifies it on the basis of the independence of the mass movement. We can live with that as well, assuming the independence applies to the left as well as the right.

## **Eurocommunism & the CPA**

When looking at the CPA it also helps to remember that it is effectively part of the Eurocommunist current that emerged internationally in the mid-1970s.

Recently, the Eurocommunist parties have been having big discussions as a result of declining votes, declining influence in the labour movement, the worsening situation of the working class, and the emergence of the Greens.

In the French Communist Party, this discussion has led to the emergence of a big current called the Renovateurs. Some members of the CPA seem very interested in this development.

As well, the October 1987 *Marxism Today* carries material on similar developments in the British, Spanish, Italian, Swedish and other communist parties. Jose Palau of the Spanish Communist Party is interviewed by a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

“So you fell into the trap of seeing yourself as administering or pursuing a social-democratic type of approach”, the interviewer says. “We did make that mistake which was partly conditioned by the way we emerged out of Franco’s dictatorship, when we were forced to be very careful, and so on.” Palau replies. “And this caution was very justified, we have to change a lot of things in ourselves, but we have to keep the essence of our very nature, of being the ones who want to radically transform our societies. And for doing that we need other contributions, which do not come from the workers’ movement tradition, or from Marxist roots.”

Then there’s a discussion of the radical social movements, and Palau maintains that the communists must be identified as the ones who want to radically transform society. That’s a shift from the old Eurocommunist view that the communist parties would increasingly be integrated as administrators of capitalism.

In many ways, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was probably the most right-wing of the Eurocommunist parties. In the *Marxism Today* interviews, PCI leader Luciana Castellina, looks at the evolution of her party: “Yes, we took on board all of the new social movements, but we created a sort of rainbow alliance within our party. On the one hand we had our traditional trade unionist orientation, then we responded to the gay movement and there was a gay group, then there was a women’s group”, and so on and so on.

It’s actually a description (on a larger scale obviously) of the Communist Party of Australia. This leader of the PCI puts forward radical solutions and a sound understanding of the role of the new social movements.

Similar developments in the CPA have made it part of a genuine attempt to find the way to a party that has a vision of radical social transformation. Of course, the CPA hasn’t had the sort of discussion that the European parties have. It hasn’t concluded that it made social-democratic errors. Perhaps that’s a discussion yet to come.

It’s important that we try to discuss such questions with people who are saying a socialist party is necessary. We want to be part of the real, living movement, and there’s no reason to believe we can’t be part of such a discussion.

Equally, there are no guarantees about the future course of the Communist Party

or about its commitment to a new party, but we do know that the CPA has repeatedly called for such a party, and many of its members are actively working for it.

Perhaps there's also a negative reason that makes it difficult for the CPA to withdraw from its commitment to a new party. Like us, the CPA is faced with the problem of what it does if it pulls back. None of the existing left parties has been able to get a break on the others in recent years. We've each blocked the others' progress. If we don't break that deadlock through the new party, the problem remains with us.

Perhaps in such a situation we could say that we're better equipped to tough it out until the others weaken. We're more united, our cadres are better trained. But all that would be small consolation for missing an opportunity to make real progress through a far less wasteful approach.

In any case, I think we can be optimistic about the prospects for a new party. We're committed to it, the CPA says it's committed to it, and a range of other forces are also interested.

## 3. The New Party & the New Social Movements

The other main force in the movement towards a new party consists of people politicised by the new social movements — particularly the peace, environmental, feminist, Aboriginal and gay movements. On the Marxist left, there are various attitudes towards these new movements. For some, they don't fit easily into any political category and they therefore must be some form of temporary political aberration, while others tend to embrace everything about them — the negative as well as the positive.

The SWP has steered a more careful course. We've always welcomed and supported the new movements, while recognising that political ferment inevitably tosses up bad ideas as well as good. We've learned much that is useful from the new movements, and at times we've also picked up some bad habits. Such interchange is natural as we try to come to grips with the new movements and the political realities behind them.

We've worked in the new movements as socialists, seeking united action around points of agreement and discussion on points of difference. In general, we've found a great deal of sympathy for socialism in the new movements.

The new movements have also stimulated a very rich political debate about their role and importance and their relationship to the socialist movement. This is a discussion among the vanguard of the fighters for social change. As we have observed before, the social vanguard includes a broad range of activists, some of whom belong to parties and some of whom don't.

In this milieu, we will continue to put forward socialist ideas. We're not about to flop down and say we've lost confidence in socialism and that any inanity is a good idea providing it's new (or more probably so old that only a few keen students of history have heard of it). We're polite about putting forward our views, but we say what we think.

There are all sorts of views in the new social movements, and some of them are wrong. We see one example on the far left of the milieu — the activists who will work very hard for overseas struggles but won't get involved in Australian politics. Such

failure to understand the interconnection of world politics is common among the most left-wing activists, but there are other errors that affect activists right across the spectrum of the new movements.

Some simply elevate their movement as the talisman that will solve all social problems. This approach is especially common in the feminist and environmental movements. Others look entirely to change through the electoral arena, local government, cultural politics, etc.

### **Movement & party**

Throughout the new movements, many activists hold strong views as to why they don't need to join a party. Some say parties are irrelevant, Leninism is irrelevant, parties have failed. The particular variation on the theme usually corresponds with its origins in one or another part of the milieu: ALP members, academics, little circles and cliques, supposedly pragmatic trade unionists.

All to one degree or another reject the need for a party. In many ways that's the biggest political problem facing the new social movements, because the movements can't win without a party that will represent their interests. We greatly value our joint activity with the new movement activists, and the chance to discuss with them — to listen to their views and to explain our views on the party question.

### **The problem of cooption**

Particularly since the 1983 election of the Hawke government, there has been a quite vigorous struggle for the heritage of the social movements. The ultimate question is whether they're going to be part of a revolutionary movement or whether they'll be co-opted and end up as part of the problem.

Bourgeois society has considerable capacity to co-opt and divert social movements, and the Labor Party is one of its main mechanisms for doing so. In the absence of a strong revolutionary movement, the process of cooption and diversion is fairly well inevitable.

The process of cooption can often be subtle, and sometimes it flows from twists in initially progressive attitudes. The question of individualism provides an example. Individual rejection of the authority of bourgeois institutions such as the family and the state is often a starting point for radicalism, but such individualism can become a negative factor if it leads to a complete retreat from any collective responsibility.

The politics of culture, style and fashion are particularly susceptible to cooption. At first, different hairstyles and fashions can seem radical, but it's never long before the capitalist fashion houses decide there are profits to be made. Capitalism can cope

with lots of different little lifestyles and fashions, providing people keep buying, and don't challenge anything too important.

Participatory democracy — the rejection of hierarchies — can become simply a new method of manipulation unless activists remain constantly on guard against sharp operators.

These are just a few of the more obvious problems with many of the attitudes frequently encountered in the new social movements. The meaning of all this is that the new movements are still ultimately subject to class forces. Some elements of the new movements can even wander into very reactionary positions.

Rudolph Bahro of the German Greens puts forward many reactionary ideas in his book, *From Red to Green*. He thinks we need to slow down production in the advanced capitalist countries, because they're rich enough to cope with slightly lower living standards. But if production was cut in that way, millions would be plunged even deeper into poverty in the Third World. The ferment of the new movements can produce bad ideas as well as good ones.

In the end, the most serious errors flow from denial of the class struggle, denial of the nature of the state, and from failure to find an effective agency for lasting social change. Just recently, *Arena* carried an interview conducted by Boris Frankel with a German Green. Frankel is associated with the Major New Initiative/Rainbow Alliance.

What are the agencies of social change, Frankel asked, adding that the Greens don't have viable economic policies. The German Green replied:

You are pointing to the major deficiency of the new movement. It has been accused in Germany of being unable to assume political responsibility into proposed blueprints for a better future. This accusation is to a fair extent justified, however the general feeling is, and this is supported by some political and social analysts, that the political space, the universe of alternatives, has become in Western society something of a triangle, rather than the left-right universe that we've been used to in the postwar era. There are interesting theoretical proposals and concepts developing out of this political project. One is self-critique, so to speak, of the notions of a mixed economy and the Keynesian welfare state. [*Arena* 80, 1987, p. 117]

Then he adds a whole lot of waffle about triangles and so on. He has no answers, and what's more, doesn't draw any conclusions from that fact. He doesn't conclude that there's something fundamentally wrong that requires a complete breakout from the framework of capitalism.

I think Raymond Williams had a point when he described the Greens as “the strongest organised hesitation before socialism”. That's the problem. In many ways the Green movement is a hesitation. The point is to think things through and to come

up with real answers — socialist answers.

## New movements, old errors

Frederick Engels observed many years ago that any new turn in the political situation will often open the way for old ideas, old mistakes. Today, much of what we're dealing with is a resurgence of pre-Marxian utopian socialism.

We must continue to confront all of these problems head-on. We can be tempted to turn away from the new movements to build a party purely on the basis of those who agree with us more or less completely. But that would be a serious error, it would be a form of liquidationism, because we'd be giving up the task of building a mass party and settling for a sect.

We understood this quite well in the early '80s, during our earlier attempts to open up the party, when we still thought the way forward lay through organic growth of the SWP. We had started to grow rapidly and things looked good.

At that point, we said that we should expect more confusion in the party as it grew. We said we'd be bringing in people from different backgrounds, and that would lead to more discussion on all levels. Above all, we'd be spending more time explaining our theoretical assumptions. Today, we must accept that we'll be in the same party with people who don't understand all of our theoretical positions, or who might have different theoretical views. We can't expect to win already rounded cadres.

We've always expected that as the party grew, it would more closely reflect the moods and attitudes of the working class. We knew it would be comparatively less homogenous.

Trotsky looked at this question in regard to the American SWP in the 1930s:  
 ... Our organisation will become attractive to very different people in the next period, and not only for the best of them. ... the recent announcement of the new crisis will aggravate the disquietude, the fighting spirit, and ... the confusion. We can't avoid having this confusion in our ranks. Our comrades are "too" educated, "too" accustomed to precise, elaborated conceptions and slogans. They have a contempt for everybody who is not ideologically "OK". It is very dangerous. A developing and alive party must represent — to a certain extent — the different tendencies, disquietudes, and I repeat, even the confusion in the vanguard of the working class. Too much confusion is of course not good, but a sound proportion can be established only through practice. More pedagogical patience is absolutely necessary on the part of our comrades towards the new and fresh elements.<sup>46</sup>

Sometimes, when we confront the worst confusion in the mass movement we can tend to have a sectarian response. But that's the wrong response. The correct approach

is to say: “Okay, let’s hear what you have to say, but you listen to us as well.”

## Leninism & sectarianism

Of course, that indicates a certain confidence in our own education and our own views. We advocate the strategy of building a vanguard party (though we don’t necessarily use that term in all circumstances because it is the subject of a great deal of misunderstanding and perhaps wilful distortion). In discussion, we’re often battling with the widespread misconception that Leninism is essentially the idea of building a sect or an elite.

In the new party movement at present there’s a certain amount of discussion as to whether we need a new party or a new movement. In some cases, what people are saying is that they don’t want a small party. They want something really big. We think the point here is that a big, successful party *is* a movement.

The Bolshevik Party was a mass current of people who joined the social-democratic movement in Russia. It took Lenin a long time to develop a finished party out of that current. The massive growth of the Bolshevik Party was a product of a spontaneous political rebellion.

Today, we’re dealing with a movement of people spontaneously rebelling against the Labor Party’s betrayals, and against the capitalist system. That’s the movement in the broadest sense, and you only get a vanguard party when it begins to encompass a lot of people politicised by the spontaneous movement.

Naturally, there are many different elements in this real vanguard, but our strategy is to gather all of those elements together in one party. We don’t think this is a simple task, and it must be expected to take time.

The real forces that will make up a vanguard party will be far broader than the most militant wing of the trade union movement, or the most politically conscious wing of the environmental movement. A genuine vanguard party will be a far broader movement against capitalism. We’ve clearly got a long way to go before we get such a party, though I think we should recognise that the vanguard is very broad today. While there may not be huge mobilisations, there is a very real social polarisation. The vanguard exists. Now we need the party that can unite it.

Once such a party was formed, our aim would be to clarify ideas, to make the party a forum for discussion among the vanguard — the living forces for social change. Of course, when we talk about discussion in this context, it must go hand in hand with political action. Practical experience can be as important as discussion in working through various ideas.

## The party principle

One of the most important ideas we advance is the party idea. At our cadre school, we have a class called *The party principle*. It is based on readings on the 1905 Revolution in Russia and the period afterwards until 1914 — i.e., a period of enormous upsurge followed by a period of retreat in the Russian movement.

We study this period of upsurge together with the ensuing period of retreat because in many ways the two periods sum up the difficulties we've faced more or less permanently in our attempts to build a party.

From the mid-'60s on, we've had upsurge after upsurge of democratic struggle — Aboriginal struggles, women's struggles, environmental struggles, gay rights struggles, the struggle against the ID card. We've had wave after wave of struggle by people seeking to control their own lives and to resist capitalist oppression.

Yet we've also had a long period of political retreat by the working-class movement. During the '50s and '60s, when living standards were rising, the working class didn't see the need for socialism. Then came a period of defeats in which the working class couldn't find the ways to fight back, to rid itself of a corrupt, cowardly trade union bureaucracy. This led to increasing acceptance of the view that the socialist movement has no answers, that a left party isn't necessary.

It's interesting to read what Lenin had to say about the period of bourgeois revolution that opened up in Russia during and after 1905. It's as if he were describing the situation we face:

The character of the revolution now in progress ... quite naturally gives rise to non-party organisations. The whole movement, therefore, on the surface inevitably acquires a non-party stamp, a non-party appearance — but only on the surface, of course. The urge for a "human", civilised life, the urge to organise in defence of human dignity, for one's rights as man and citizen, takes hold of everyone, unites all classes, vastly outgrows all party bounds and shakes up people who as yet are very far from being able to rise to party allegiance. The vital need of immediate, elementary, essential rights and reforms puts off, as it were, all thought and consideration of anything further. Preoccupation with the struggle in progress, a preoccupation that is quite necessary and legitimate, for without its success in the struggle would be impossible, causes people to idealise these immediate, elementary aims, to depict them in rosy colours, and sometimes even to clothe them in fantastic garb. Simple democracy, ordinary bourgeois democracy, is taken as socialism and "registered" as such. Everything seems to be "non-party". Everything seems to fuse into a single movement for "liberation" (actually a movement liberating the whole of bourgeois society); everything acquires a faint, a very faint tint of "socialism", owing above all to the leading part played by the socialist proletariat in

the democratic struggle.

In these circumstances, the idea of non-partisanship cannot but gain certain temporary successes. The slogan of non-partisanship cannot but become a fashionable slogan, for fashion drags helplessly at the tail of life, and it is the non-party organisation that appears to be the most “common” phenomenon on the surface of political life: non-party democratism, non-party strikeism, non-party revolutionism.<sup>47</sup>

Lenin goes on to point out the limitations of the Russian movement (and, we might add, ours). The bourgeoisie isn’t threatened by these movements or by demands that simply aim to perfect bourgeois society. What the bourgeoisie does fear, above all, is a party that proposes not to perfect bourgeois society, but to go beyond it. Lenin points out:

In a society based upon class divisions, the struggle between the hostile classes is bound, at a certain stage of its development, to become a political struggle. The most purposeful, most comprehensive and specific expression of the political struggle of classes is the struggle of parties. The non-party principle means indifference to the struggle of parties. But this indifference is not equivalent to neutrality, to abstention from the struggle, for in the class struggle there can be no neutrals; in capitalist society, it is impossible to “abstain” from taking part in the exchange of commodities or labour power. And exchange inevitably gives rise to economic and then to political struggle. Hence, in practice, indifference to the struggle does not at all mean standing aloof from the struggle, abstaining from it or being neutral.<sup>48</sup>

Nor, says Lenin, is there any neutrality in the struggle between parties: “Indifference is tacit support of the strong, of those who rule.”

This is also the point we must make in the mass movements today. The time to act on the party question is now, not at some distant point in the future.

In a very difficult situation for the revolutionary movement, Lenin tirelessly fought to construct a party, regardless of all obstacles:

The Marxists have a fundamentally different view of the relations of the unorganised (and unorganisable for a lengthy period, sometimes decades) masses to the party, to organisation. They have a fundamentally different view of the relation of the unorganised masses of the party to organisation. It is to enable the mass of a *definite class* to learn to understand its own interests and its position, to learn to conduct its own policy, that there must be an organisation of the advanced elements of the class immediately and at all costs, even though at first these elements constitute only a tiny fraction of the class. To do service to the masses and express *their* interests, having correctly conceived those interests, the advanced contingent, the organisation, must carry on all of its activity among the masses, drawing from the masses all the best forces

without any exception, at every step verifying carefully and objectively whether contact with the masses is being maintained and whether it is a live contact. In this way, and *only* in this way, does the advanced contingent train and enlighten the masses, expressing *their* interests, teaching them organisation, directing *all* the activity of the masses along the path of conscious class politics.<sup>49</sup>

In every way, this period of party building was just as essential to the ultimate success of the Bolsheviks as the more stirring times of 1905 and 1917.

We shouldn't lose sight of this today, not because we can predict (any more than Lenin could in 1913) that success is only four years away, but because we know there is no other course that can lead to success, however far away it might be.

## 4. Autonomy & Leninism

There is quite a discussion on the left about the relationship between political party and mass movement. This is a question that arises again and again. Party activists have been largely forced onto the defensive by increasing acceptance of the view that only non-party work is really legitimate, and that party activists, almost by definition, must have some hidden agenda.

### In the trade unions

This process has gone farthest in the trade unions. Today, trade unionists who are members of some left parties will not accept direction, or even advice, from their parties. They say that is unacceptable interference in the mass movement. For most left trade union officials, their own so-called autonomy appears to be the highest principle of the labour movement.

For all their cries about autonomy, the voices of these same officials fade to a whimper when the Labor Party shoves its policies down the throats of ACTU congress delegates. But let a left party express an opinion on trade union politics and the official roars can be heard for miles around!

In reality, there's no such thing as an autonomous trade union. Trotsky pointed that out about 50 years ago in a discussion with some anarcho-syndicalists:

... Facts show that politically "independent" unions do not exist anywhere. There never have been any. Experience and theory say that there never will be any.<sup>50</sup>

Today, the Australian trade unions are controlled lock, stock and barrel by the Labor Party. Even in strong unions, the official attitude is that it's okay to be a member of the Labor Party, and to work for the Labor Party, but it's not okay to be a member of the SWP, and it's especially not okay to sell *Direct Action*.

The truth is, all unions are under the control of one political current or another. The union officials who demand autonomy from the left parties of which they are members are really saying they want to run with the dominant political current in the industrial sphere, and today that's the Labor Party. But being a member of the Labor Party, or deciding to run politically with the Labor Party, has nothing to do with

independence or autonomy.

One of the biggest obstacles confronting the left today is the view that only Labor Party politics can be practical in the industrial arena. Almost to a person, trade union officials refuse even to consider any political affiliation other than the Labor Party. Yet in reality, the affiliation to the ALP is the union movement's greatest fetter.

Of course, we're not advocating any rashness on the part of left trade union activists. Trotsky made some sound observations on this question also:

... In the trade unions the communists, of course, submit to the discipline of the party no matter what posts they occupy. This does not exclude, but presupposes their submission to trade union discipline. In other words, the party does not impose upon them any line of conduct that contradicts the state of mind or the opinions of the majority of the members of the trade unions.

In entirely exceptional cases, when the party considers impossible the submission of its members to some *reactionary* decision of the trade union, it points out openly to its members the consequences that flow from it. That is, removals from trade union posts, expulsions, and so forth.

With juridical formulas on these questions — and autonomy is a purely juridical formula — one can get nowhere. The question must be posed in its essence, that is on the plane of trade union *policy*. A correct policy must be counterposed to a wrong policy.<sup>51</sup>

Trotsky goes on to say autonomy isn't really the point at issue in any case. The real debate is over what line to advance in the mass movements.

The trade union officials' attitude on so-called autonomy reflects one common distortion of Leninism in the mass movement. There are many others, and we should, whenever possible, explain the real views and practices of Leninists.

## Myths about Leninism

Our real practices are light years away from the common view of Leninism as some sort of rigid authoritarianism. We have few problems with consensus functioning in the mass movement because that's overwhelmingly how we operate in the party. We're never in a hurry to proceed to a vote on points of difference within the party. We always try to resolve differences through discussion, though we recognise that sometimes there's no alternative but to take a vote and let the majority assert its will while the minority records its dissent.

Sometimes, people who have a real or imagined grievance with the SWP will claim that there's something wrong with us (our leaders are too heavy, our ranks are too passive) because we often have unanimous votes at our national conferences and

other decision-making gatherings. In truth, such decisions reflect the success of our consensus methods — the preparation and extensive consultation that precedes any major decision we take.

At the moment there's some discussion in the Charter movement on what sort of organisation the new party should be. In one paper issued in Sydney, Jennifer Wilkinson, one of the non-aligned people involved in the process from the beginning, outlines her view on what she calls a strategic model:

By strategic model we simply a view of politics where all discussion and action is seen to proceed towards the attainment of certain goals.

That seems like a good idea: We come together to achieve certain goals. We want socialism. How do we get it? Jennifer Wilkinson provides her answer:

This is not to suggest that strategy is not an essential part of any political organisation.

The problem arises however, because in focusing all our attention on our strategic aims we forget about forms of internal interaction and so the whole question of what developing a new political practice might mean.

She thinks the process, the movement, is everything, the ultimate aim nothing. There's nothing new about that idea. There've always been people who have thought our main concerns should be to have a good time, not to bruise any egos, to decide who's nice and who's brutal. This is the old view of the party as a gathering place of compatible personalities. Such a formation can never hold together, let alone achieve any political goals.

A political party is not a vehicle for having a good time or solving personal problems. Of course we all like to have a good time and we all need personal support, but that's not why we build a party. Jennifer Wilkinson continues:

Another problem inherent to the strategic model of politics is the assumption that effective action depends on a clear direction from above. This assumption is central to most mainstream management theory and was also central to the Leninist theory of the party.

*Was* also central! Leninism is finished, you see. It's just not fashionable in academic circles these days. That's the received wisdom. There's something wrong with Leninism, even if you've got only the foggiest notion of what Leninism is.

## The ALP style

But while Leninism comes in for plenty of stick, you very rarely hear such attacks on the ALP-style top-down structure: The media elects the prime minister and he makes the decisions.

The ALP style is also finding its way into the new party movement. The Illawarra

Workers Party is an ALP-style organisation. It was set up by former ALP members with an ALP-style constitution, rules etc. Its meetings consist mainly of people moving motions and amendments about policy questions, most of which no-one ever does anything about. The key question was who would be the parliamentary candidates. Once that was settled, everyone could go home again.

For our part, we're not about to simply toss the SWP constitution on the table as the organisational proposal for the new party. The SWP constitution is a product of a living movement, of a process of developing cadre, policies, ideas, the authority of the party and its leadership. In 1971-72, when we first tried to develop such a constitution, the leadership didn't have sufficient experience or authority, and we immediately suffered a split.

The development of organisation is a living process, and if the new party lives, it will evolve its own forms. It's unlikely those forms will bear any resemblance to even the most complicated flow chart available to modern management theorists.

Organisation is a matter of judgment. What's necessary to hold the thing together as it gets on the road? To begin with, the new party won't have all that's necessary in the way of organisational forms. It will just have the bare essentials.

Our view of what's necessary is by and large outlined in some documents introduced into the new party discussion by Dave Holmes and Maree Walk in Perth. These documents don't outline everything we'd like to see a party have, either in terms of organisation or program, but they do have the essentials. We hope these will allay comrades fears that the new party will be a hopeless swamp and that we're in danger of throwing away 15 years work in the SWP for no good reason. We think the forms we're proposing can provide the necessary minimum framework for ongoing political work.

Our proposals make a lot of concessions to individuals in the new party process and a number of concessions to existing parties. We must insist on some concessions to the existing parties and we think we have agreement with the CPA on this. We can't immediately throw the keys to our buildings on the table, any more than the CPA can hand over its assets.

It will take time to knit together the new party out of the various currents participating in the process. It will take time to develop trust and confidence and appropriate structures.

Meanwhile, we will want to retain some of our existing institutions. Not all of the institutions of the SWP will become outmoded or irrelevant in the context of a new party. No one else in this country has anything like our Marxist cadre school and we will want to keep that going in some form. We hope that people who don't have

backgrounds in the SWP or Resistance will want to attend it. We've already offered places to the CPA.

We will also want to continue to support some sort of publishing house for socialist literature, and of course Resistance will continue to function. It's by far the most successful left youth organisation in this country, and it's unlikely the new party will be in a position to pay close attention to youth work for some time.

These are all arrangements for the early stages of a new party. They would change over time, though no one is in a position to say at what pace.

There will also be concessions to individual activists. For us, the bottom line is that any decision taken in the party's name must be a majority decision, it must be decided democratically. Anyone who speaks or acts for the party must have the authority to do so. If they don't have that authority, they can't do it.

Getting agreement on that will be quite an achievement. The autonomists, the interactors, the good-timers don't want even that. They want a system of little committees that do whatever they want in the name of the party. We don't want that, because in the end that means you don't really have a party, just a system of interlocking cliques. The biggest problem will be to develop a party spirit.

Probably the things that other activists fear most about the SWP are our program and politics, and the fact that we are the only effectively coordinated nationwide socialist political force. Because of that, we know what's going on in the new party movement everywhere. But instead of thinking, "Great, here's something to build on", a lot of people fear our structure.

Some of the most outspoken activists seem more concerned about their own role than about making the new party work. Their main concern appears to be whether they'll be leaders. They seem totally ignorant of an inclusive approach to politics and team building such as we've used so successfully for 15 years. Whether consciously or not, their model is closer to the individual star system of the ALP machine and the trade union bureaucracy.

Of course, some activists fear that we won't dissolve, or that any dissolution will be fake. But right from the start we've made our intentions plain. We've said that Resistance won't dissolve, we will keep our assets, our school and a publishing house. That's all we want. As well, we'll elect a national committee that will make a decision, at an appropriate time, on whether the new party is a success and we should finally dissolve or whether it is a failure and we should withdraw.

One thing we will insist on is the right to tendency. In the Communist Party today, tendencies or factions are not permitted. I don't think we can join a party that doesn't permit factions.

But having said that, we will do our damndest to avoid functioning as a faction, because that would isolate us. It would limit the discussion. We know how useless factional struggles can be, as they institutionalise lines of division.

We're confident of the role of the individual people we've trained, and will continue to train. We think these people will influence events through their individual discussion and activity.

## 5. Our Role in the New Party

The party question is central for us, and our experience in the new party movement has shown us that we're quite vital for it. Our importance is both political and organisational. The experience and training of our cadres can be vital in limiting the difficulties and confusion of the formative process, and in maximising the potential of the new formation.

In recent years we haven't been given to making big statements about our own importance. This is partly because we were often wrong when we made them in the past, and partly because even when we were right they often sounded very self-important, and even messianic. We moved away from any such view of ourselves because we realised that we had made a lot of mistakes and we were a long way from having a finished program for socialist revolution.

Our understanding of that, and our realisation that we could learn a lot from others on the left, was an important step forward, and we're not about to go back to our old ways. But that shouldn't prevent us making a realistic estimation of our role when necessary.

We are essential to the success of the new party project. Our ability to think, discuss, learn, develop ideas, organise, win new people to socialism, is indispensable if the project is to produce a party really capable of changing the political situation. That's not to say we're the only indispensable element. We can't do it without others, but equally, they can't do it without us.

Because we've already played an important role in the new party movement, and we fully intend to continue doing so, it's important that we look at what sort of politics we want for the new party. We've made some initial stabs at that, and in the end we're saying we want continuity with our existing program. At the very least, we reject anything that would be inconsistent with that program.

### **SWP draft program**

When we adopted our present draft SWP program at our 1986 national conference, we made it very clear that a party program is never a finished document. It develops

over time and ultimately it only becomes a real program when it's taken up by the masses in the framework of a mass revolutionary movement. In the meantime, we keep developing our program.

We know that theoretical study, and particularly reading Lenin, has been important in the development of our program. Among the many people who will readily declare that they don't agree with Lenin's theory of the party, it's very rare to find any who've read *What is to be done?* Not only have they never read it, they've usually not even participated in a discussion about it.

So theoretical study is very important to the development of program. Discussion is also important, and even more important is experience — political activity. All of these elements are vital to the development of program.

### Program for a new party

One of the big illusions in the new party movement is that it's necessary to renew the socialist vision — that the cause of the crisis of working class politics is a failure of the old socialism.

According to this view, we only have to drill down a little and up will come a gusher of new ideas from below. Most of the time, this view is pure demagoguery, but it's also motivated by a rather desperate desire for a talisman — a wonderful new way of saying things, a wonderful new idea that can get us off the hook of having to put forward the old, socialist ideas.

Frankly, we don't think there will be any great programmatic breakthroughs in the initial stages of building this new party. As the party develops systematic and broadly based political activity, programmatic and theoretical insights will flow, but they won't come as a result of some stroke of genius on the part of a cosy circle of academics and modern management theorists.

That being said, we face some tactical problems in writing a program for the new party. We will use different language. (Or in some cases different jargon, because when people say "Let's not use jargon", they usually mean, "Let's use my jargon, not yours". So we hear a lot about empowerment rather than democracy, etc., etc.)

We're happy to experiment in the way we say things. Maybe we'll write several programs at different political and theoretical levels so discussion can proceed on a number of fronts.

Then there's another tactical question. How much will the new party say? Will it want to adopt positions on a range of international issues, for example. At this stage, we don't know. It's a tactical question when we raise each point.

Over time, just as the West German Greens have to figure out what Gorbachev's

doing, so will a new party here need to develop an international policy, which should include friendly relations with the socialist states.

Meanwhile, we will keep developing and discussing our own program. Our present draft program was written at an earlier stage of our development, and it's a little off the track on the relative weight of the trade unions in relation to the democratic movements that have developed over the past 20 years. There are probably other sections that need amending and updating.

### **Theoretical discussion**

While we don't think there will be any big political breakthroughs in the near future, that doesn't mean we'll stop learning. At present we're considering a new program for our cadre school, taking account of discussions in what's often called Western Marxism.

Many of the people who are attracted to the new party have been influenced by one or another aspect of Western Marxism. Often, though not always, the understanding of these ideas isn't very deep, and sometimes it's no deeper than an attachment to an attractive phrase or two. It's quite common to meet would-be theorists who have latched onto some mistaken or half-understood idea and have elevated it in a silly way. Antonio Gramsci has suffered terribly as a result of such a process.

We need to be more familiar with the discussions in Western Marxism if we're to be able to engage in dialogue with these people. The discussion ranges over many topics: the idea of hegemony, feminist theory, the relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis, the question of the state, economic debates, philosophical debates.

There are two things we need to do in regard to all of these discussions. Firstly, we need to prepare ourselves to hold the line on the basic ideas. Secondly, and just as importantly, we need to go looking for genuinely new insights.

This theoretical retooling could be particularly important in relation to the environmental movement. Sections of it can tend to run off on an anti-scientific, anti-technological bent. Similar views are also common in the women's movement and the peace movement.

## 6. Some immediate tasks of the SWP

As we've already noted, we've discussed and changed our organisational methods and procedures a great deal during the 1980s. There have been sound political reasons for that, particularly in the way the mass movement has evolved.

The changes have also been a result of our political evolution. They reflect the fact that we're trying to think things out and do the best we can in a difficult situation. These days, we're prepared to think for ourselves without too much worry about historical precedents or what someone overseas thinks we should or shouldn't do.

We discussed all this at some length in "Recent Experiences in Party Building". Flexibility is the main characteristic of our attitude towards organisation. Our organisational forms must be shaped to suit our political needs.

The way we discuss is a good example. Take the position we've just adopted in support of the Gorbachev reform movement. That marks a number of important changes from our position a few years ago.

We didn't rush into those changes by any means. Before our 1986 national conference we conducted a discussion on the Soviet Union in the pages of *Direct Action* and we had been discussing it before that. There were different views, but we didn't get overexcited. We took our time and eventually we got a united position.

Our experience in recent years has also changed the real practice of the party. In the mass movement we don't feel compelled to caucus intensively even before we go into very important meetings. Usually it's not a problem if we don't all put forward exactly the same point of view.

There can be exceptions. We *have* controlled our participation in the new party movement, not because we were attempting to control the movement but because we had too many comrades who wanted to get involved. We had to tell comrades not to go to meetings. Not everyone was happy about that, but if we hadn't done it, other people in the movement would have been very nervous.

### Some present problems

At present, we have a number of organisational problems, and we must address them

because they reflect political problems. Political difficulties usually express themselves organisationally.

Our immediate organisational problems flow from the fact that this is a transitional period. Partly because of the present political quiescence, and partly because we're so heavily involved in the new party movement, we haven't been so active in the mass movement recently.

We must begin now to prepare the forms for next year's activity in the mass movement and in the new party. We want to do more mass work, and we want to help Resistance to do more mass work.

That won't make life easier for us, because we'll be trying to carry out our political activity with a membership that's quite inexperienced in the case of the younger comrades and a bit tired in the case of some older comrades. Nevertheless, we must find the ways to develop our activity and to grow.

Today, enormous pressure is building up on our younger comrades. They're the most active in both the party and Resistance. They carry a lot of our mass work, our paper sales and our organisational work. We must try to relieve some of that pressure.

In addition, we must prepare for a smooth transition to the new party. This question has been on our agenda all of this year, and it has compounded many of our difficulties in relation to recruiting, activity in the mass movement, leadership at the local level, etc.

Earlier in the year we were less able to deal with these problems because we didn't know how much difference Resistance's activity in the student movement was about to make. Quite a number of people eventually joined the party as a result of that activity.

In any case, for most of 1987, the task of aligning our organisational needs with our activity in the new party movement remained in the too hard basket. We've thrown around a few ideas, but none of us has had any blinding flashes.

We've experimented in a number of branches. But perhaps because we've been in a difficult period, there has been a certain reluctance to rock the boat. Our doubts about the new party process have added to the pressures for a delay in consideration of our organisational needs.

But we can't afford to keep stalling indefinitely. By doing that we risk serious drift and confusion in the party, and perhaps more importantly, we make no effort to seize the initiative.

So we have to act, even if we're gambling a little. We need a new approach with which comrades can begin to work and experiment. Sometimes just a new way of doing things can help dispel the miasma of routinism. It can help us to start thinking

about organisational questions again. To a large degree, we need to go back to basics.

## Monthly branch meetings

One of our problems is that there's not much new under the sun. Over the years, we've tried just about everything. Since there's nothing new that we can try, we want to propose a second try at something we've done before.

We want to propose going back to monthly party branch meetings. In other words, the basic unit of the party should meet monthly, and probably on a weekend, when it would be possible to allocate three hours or so for a meeting.

The meeting could be followed by some other function, such as a social, a dinner, or a barbecue, so that we ensure that it is a big event that all the comrades want to attend.

The last time we tried monthly meetings was back in 1982. At that time, we found that the monthly schedule meant that the branch executives had to assume more authority, and that we were a more centralised party. But it also meant that we were able to free up comrades for other activities, particularly in the mass movement.

As well as monthly meetings, we also want to propose weekly public forums, at least in the larger branches. The smaller branches might want to consider a more appropriate schedule.

The forums might also make an appropriate focus for other meetings. Fractions, sales committees, etc. could meet in the couple of hours before the forum, and perhaps there could be a meal between the meetings and the forum. That way, we might be able to combine a reach-out with an internal organising evening.

We think the forums should be weekly simply because of the need for regularity. People get to know there is always something happening that evening at the Resistance Centre, and there's a meal so there's no need to go home after work etc.

We think our forums can possibly fill a gap on the left. At present there's very little in the way of meetings that can provide a framework for discussion and debate. Obviously, careful planning is needed, topics and speakers should be arranged well in advance.

Our forums should address theoretical questions as well as topical issues. The left is interested in discussing theory right now, because this is a period of propaganda and figuring out what to do next.

What has changed since the last time we tried this model? The political situation has changed a great deal. For starters, we've had four years of Labor's betrayals, and the development of the new party movement. As well, we're far more prominent on the left than we were previously. We're bigger, our premises are better.

When we turned back from our last experiment with monthly meetings, our need

was organisational consolidation. We achieved that, but recently the weekly form of organising has run out of steam. It doesn't meet our needs now. Some small branches have already dropped back from weekly meetings.

The other thing that has changed is the role of Resistance. It is an increasingly valuable training ground in revolutionary politics and mass work.

The forums can also serve as a pole of attraction for new party activists. It's tragic in Sydney at the moment to see people coming around the new party movement looking for politics, finding nothing and not coming back. Some people have tried to blame us for that, but we're not the problem.

We've talked to enough of the people who haven't come back to know that.

The new party is bound to have a monthly timetable at best, so we will need other ways of uniting people and promoting discussion. Now is the time to begin dealing with the organisational problems we will confront in the new party framework. There's no point waiting until they're dumped on us in a context where we won't have any easy way of having a discussion, proposing a solution and acting on it.

Above all else, we want to keep recruiting, whether it's in our present framework or that of the new party. The structure we're proposing is designed to ease the difficulties of recruiting right now.

Flowing from this is the understanding that basic recruitment, education and training must become central to the party's work again. We need a more intensive approach to this. We also want to put more work into our associate membership structure. We want more of our supporters to become associate members, hopefully as a step towards full membership.

We need to pay more attention to contacting work. We know this is a task in which we tend to fall behind, rather than putting it up front. One of the reasons for that is that we have put too much energy into the new party movement.

We did that for good reasons. We think the new party can help to unlock the political situation, and we want it sooner rather than later. But if we don't get it soon, we're going to have no alternative but to put more energy into building the party we've got.

We're not going to end up with a weakened party because some people take a long time to make up their minds, or can't handle the idea of moving out of their own little circles. We can't keep sacrificing the SWP and Resistance for a new party that's some indefinite distance down a very long road.

## The role of Direct Action

Of course, the monthly structure creates some new problems for us, or at least exacerbates existing ones. The most serious of these are *Direct Action* sales and party

finances. If we're not bringing the comrades together for a meeting every week, we can very easily find ourselves selling fewer papers and collecting less money.

At present *Direct Action* sales are low. We're still shooting for the 2500-3000 mark, which has been our target for at least five years. In any case, our sales are low while we're meeting weekly. Meeting frequency is obviously not the problem. Our sales are low because we've let our consciousness slip.

No doubt there's also a certain feeling that *Direct Action* might not be so relevant any more, since the new party will probably have a new paper. We know consciousness has slipped on the paper because we don't push it at forums, we don't try to involve non-members in distributing it.

One reason our sales have slipped is that we don't want to make our branch meetings boring, so we don't present many sales reports or finance reports. We also don't think it's very useful to get up and say: "Comrades, you must sell the paper because it's a norm of membership."

But there are ways of using sales organisation so we feel good about it. We can feel good about the paper if we use it to reach out, as it was designed to do. We can feel good about it if we use sales as a mechanism to bind in new people. We should do that at all of our functions: branch meetings, forums, introductory classes, provisional members' classes — wherever we're meeting new people.

When we have an introductory class, the person giving it could have a bundle of *Direct Actions* and maybe spend the first 15-20 minutes discussing an article. That's the role the paper should play, but it's a long time since we used it that way.

The same applies to Resistance, which has done better on sales. But even there, perhaps there should be some discussion on the sales effort, because if Resistance goes ahead with plans for its own publication, it will need to raise consciousness on the role of *Direct Action*.

At every fraction, at every committee, the paper must be there. That's how we'll organise sales in the new framework. We'll find the ways of doing it if the consciousness is there.

We certainly can't accept the present level of sales because it leads to financial problems. It means people don't find out about the party and don't come and join it. It leads to demoralisation.

The low sales reflect a problem of spirit and confidence, not of objective circumstances. In Sydney, the average sales rate is still 6.1 per hour. It has always been around that mark.

## Some financial tasks

With the finances, the problem is more tricky, and more urgent. It's related to the sales, of course, and we want to put the price of *Direct Action* up to a dollar at the beginning of next year.

The finances are a one-to-one problem. We've stopped giving a lot of finance reports to branch meetings because they don't work. Usually the wrong people are at the meeting to hear the report, or the wrong people feel guilty, and anyhow guilt isn't very useful.

Financial crises are nothing new for us. I'd be hard pressed to name a time when we didn't have one. But there are degrees of difficulty. We do have a long-term problem. Our income is declining. While we are bigger than we've ever been before, we're able to do less. We have a smaller apparatus, we travel less, we publish less, we have more difficulty preparing a conference or a National Committee plenum.

We know why we are getting less money. There are three main factors:

- Firstly comrades are poorer. There's no doubt about that, nor is there any doubt that many are going to get poorer still. The capitalist economic crisis is hurting us, too.
- Secondly, many of the younger comrades are not working yet. They're students, most of whom will probably get fairly well-paid jobs eventually. But meanwhile we've got a gap.
- Thirdly, there's a layer of comrades who've got older and tired, and while they're not necessarily living poorer, they've got other things they want to do with their money. That's also rather inevitable.

We're going to be grappling with these factors for some time to come. We're never going to really beat them, but we must keep them under control. We must continually ask comrades to sail as close to the wind as they can financially, to think about the party's finances, not to waste money, to get better jobs rather than worse jobs (all other things being equal), to get jobs sooner rather than later. In other words, as with the sales, we must raise the general level of consciousness.

We don't know how successful we'll be, but we do know that if we don't try our darnedest, we'll do a lot worse than we can afford to. We must launch a campaign to increase pledges, to meet fund drive quotas, and to make sure dues are collected regularly.

We can assure comrades the financial crisis is not due to any mismanagement. We've got the most scientific financial management we've ever had. It's all computerised. We've made cuts. It's difficult to keep comrades on full-time for the party because we pay too little, and too infrequently. The comrades work very long

hours and as often as not they don't get paid, or they don't get paid when they should.

We're not the only ones with these problems. We know others on the left also have them, and we also know that the new party will have such problems.

Our immediate crisis could be solved if the branches actually sent in what they've agreed to send in. It's not a huge amount of money, but for us it's enough to make life very difficult.

We know how the debt builds up: Comrades say, "I can't pay my dues", so it doesn't come into the branch, and the branch can't send it to the national office. When it's broken down, the branch debt is all money that comrades owe to the branch for their sales, for dues, for pledges.

If we get that in, we will prevent our financial crisis getting any bigger. Of course that doesn't allow us to plan any new projects, any expansion. But a drive on those basic financial tasks is imperative for the party today. If we don't do well in this area, we'll have to look at further cuts.

The other thing we're always looking for is very big donations — when comrades come into an inheritance, win the lottery, or whatever. Such donations have enabled us to buy our buildings in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. We've built up these assets from 1980 on, right through the period of economic crisis, so all's not gloom and doom on the financial front. Our achievements have been considerable. The big donations we've had have been put to very effective use, and in general we make all of our resources go a very long way.

## 7. Preparing for the Future

We can succeed in our organisational campaigns if comrades feel confident about our overall political perspectives, including our involvement in the new party movement. This is a period of preparation for the future.

We want to be in a position to preserve some of the things we've built. That means we must be able to continue raising money. If we can't do that, we'll have to sell off assets. Our Marxist cadres will want to maintain a commitment to the institutions that are essential to the development of Marxism in this country.

In 1988, Resistance will run a big fund drive, probably for about \$80,000. Resistance wants to present itself more publicly. It is the most viable socialist youth organisation in this country.

As well, we'll probably establish a socialist education and publication fund, which will maintain our cadre school, our publishing operations, and make donations to the Resistance Centres and Resistance.

The Resistance Centres will seek pledges and other funding to maintain their operations. We hope this shake-up will make comrades consider once again what they can contribute financially.

### Pressures on the party

In the new party movement we've discovered once again that a lot of people who don't know much about the SWP are very concerned about us. We should consider where this concern comes from. Is it really a result of something we've done, or something that people think we've done? Some of those who'll talk to us about it blame our "methods of work". Yet as far as we can tell, everyone on the left uses methods of work quite similar to ours, though the precise combinations of tactics and strategies will always vary.

In most cases that's not the problem at all. We're not claiming our methods of work are perfect. There are things we'd do differently if we had our time again. We have been sectarian at times, we've made mistakes. But often the criticisms are not of our mistakes, but of our strengths.

Our major point of difference with our critics is probably that we don't think socialism has failed, and that we don't wait eagerly for the latest copy of *Marxism Today* so we can be up to date on the very latest in international revisionism.

As we move in new party circles, we feel a considerable amount of pressure bearing down on us, and that pressure will probably increase. This is really the pressure of official society — of anti-communism — refracted through those who are just beginning to think about politics and are still afraid of socialism, or through the timid, the half-hearted and the terminally confused, who ultimately don't want to pose revolutionary solutions.

Some of this pressure can be fairly subtle, and some can be more open. But basically we're under attack for our strengths, and we're not about to retreat on those.

If our critics pick out genuine errors, we'll listen and we'll make corrections, but to date most of the fire has been directed against the fact that we are a party team that functions rationally. We coordinate our work, we act together. We have a party team that sticks together.

So we get attempts to rule us out of court: "Socialism has failed, and Leninism has especially failed." And we get attempts to divide us: "So and so is a really nasty leader of the SWP, but such and such is much nicer." It's true, some of us might be nice and some mightn't be (that's a matter of taste, I guess), but that's another story. The point is we're a team. If you want to deal with the SWP you deal with all of it.

## Our political method

In fact, our critics probably don't really know our weaknesses, they only fear our strengths. The SWP doesn't have a cult of the party leadership, or of individuals, but we do have a political method. I think it's worth refreshing our memories about that method, because drifting from it can get us in trouble.

If we have differences, we resolve them. We try for consensus if we can, but if we have differences, we resolve them and we move on. We're always concerned about what's happening today, not what happened yesterday. We don't hold grudges, and we're inclusive.

Of course, we examine our past practices and policies for lessons, and we're always thinking about how to train people, how cadres evolve. But, by and large, the most important thing is what's happening today.

That's why we have decision-making structures, and that's why comrades accept decisions and carry them out. It's not a perfect method, but we haven't discovered a better one, and we don't think anyone else has.

Our method can be tested to its limits in times of difficulty. When we're under

enormous pressure from outside, and it's obvious comrades are tired, we can become cautious about what we say. We don't make too many finance reports, or tell people they have to do this or that.

Sometimes such decisions are correct. We didn't take any action when a comrade in Melbourne decided unilaterally to run on another left party's ticket. We let it pass.

But there is a bottom line. We must know when our flexibility, our caution, crosses the line into weakness and threatens our basic methods of operation, threatens to introduce different methods, petty-bourgeois methods that rely on gossip, avoidance of frank discussion, cutting people down in private.

Our Leninist method works. It preserve cadre, it helps them to develop, it helps them to work as a team. Our party discipline is essentially voluntary, and if people don't act in a disciplined way it can hurt the party. Such behaviour also hurts the comrades who act that way. It damages their relations with other people. That's a pretty silly thing to do — to hurt yourself, to damage your ability to work in a team.

That's something we've seen confirmed repeatedly. As leaders we have to know when we damage comrades by letting them get offside with others. We need to understand all this when we're under pressure such as that bearing down on us at the moment, when we're in a milieu where anything goes, where a different method of politics prevails.

## Psychological bullets

Another problem we face is the fear that we're simply going into a swamp, and that all the relations we've had between each other, and our ability to build, our commitment, our pride in our party, will all disappear. That's the nub of the problem of party building, in the new party as well as the old. How do we inspire a high level of activism and commitment?

One way we'll do it is through Resistance. Youth will lead and set an example. Resistance will remain an activist organisation. It will continue to show what should and can be done.

We're also going to have to do it by individual example in a difficult environment. There is, and will continue to be, pressure on us to drop out, to give up. We've had casualties recently, we've always had casualties.

When someone drops out of the party, we have to get it in perspective. Sometimes it's because we did something wrong, but more often it's not. It's because of the environment in which we operate. If we were in El Salvador or the Philippines and we got to a meeting and a comrade wasn't there, we'd probably know they'd been shot. It's easy to understand why you have casualties when you're in the frontline of

revolutionary struggle, but when you're in the backwaters, you also have casualties.

These are casualties of the political and social environment. The bullet usually doesn't pass through the body, it passes through the psyche. It gets there just the same.

The environment can also lead us to fight each other, to blame each other for difficulties. This is always a danger when we're going through a difficult period.

If we're conscious of what's happening to us, we can avoid most of these problems, we can step back and examine what's really involved. If there are political differences that are leading us to fight each other, let's have them out and think out what to do next. Meanwhile, we have to re-emphasise that building a party, being loyal to a party, having party spirit, is not something to be ashamed of.

## **Dedication & commitment**

We sometimes hear people say they detest fanatics. That's not the spirit that we want. Our comrades need a high level of dedication and commitment to keep building a party in a hostile environment, and when the going gets really tough, a touch of fanaticism might also be necessary. That doesn't mean we're mindless about our commitment. Ours is always a thinking commitment. We encourage and train comrades to think about politics, to understand what's going on.

We encourage comrades to have a clear view of the world, and not simply to accept views that are shoved down their throats by the bourgeois media. One reason so many workers have lost their jobs without a fight recently is that the limit of their horizon is the golden handshake. We encourage a different view, a far broader view of this society and its place in the world, and if that sometimes looks like fanaticism to those with a more limited view, that's too bad. We'll explain our views, but we're not about to give them up because they frighten a few liberals. We need people who aren't afraid to fight to change the world.

Today, we know a lot more about how to do that, and that gives us a better understanding of difficulties. We're no longer living under the illusion that we're almost at the end of a long detour, and we're on the verge of a great leap forward.

We know we're going to be in a new party, and we think that will be a breakthrough. But things will still be difficult. We'll still be living in an advanced capitalist country with a very strong imperialist bourgeoisie, which commands enormous resources and a very complex propaganda network. Even a new party will still be isolated.

We quite clearly understand the difficulties facing revolutionaries in the advanced capitalist countries, but we reject any tendencies towards cynicism and soul sickness because of that. Our confidence in our ability to build a party is based on hard reality

internationally and historically.

Actually, we think there are good reasons for comrades to be excited about our ideas and our abilities. Conviction isn't a dirty word for us, because our views are not based on faith, but on a materialist understanding of the world.

We don't often talk about morality, or conviction, or courage because we're a rather practical, hard-headed party, and perhaps we've witnessed a little too much demagoguery on these matters. We've seen too many politicians get up and lie. So we prove our points with science and facts.

But we do also need to be able to appeal to people's moral convictions and emotions. What we say must be based on our understanding, but nevertheless we should be aware of what moves people. We're really talking about setting standards for ourselves, for our own behaviour.

The alternative to that approach is a completely different framework: Elevation of individual lifestyles, self-development, life plans, individual creativity — the things that are widely regarded as the ultimate values in the middle-class inner-city milieu in which most of us live. In these circles the big questions are, what will we learn that will make us different, unique, wonderful human beings, and — how much will it cost? That's always the bottom line.

Our view is fundamentally different. It's a collective view. Can collective effort enable us to achieve things that we've got no hope of doing alone, and can it enable us to make choices that the existing system tries to deny us?

We think building a party can make that possible, and we can feel good about that. We're not interested in being petty bourgeois consumers of the latest fads and fashions, with perhaps slightly better lifestyles than the rest. Those who settle for that become part of the problem on a world scale.

Being part of the revolutionary movement opens up different choices. It opens the way to a different type of involvement with people. The more you put into the revolutionary movement the more you get out of it, the more you're really able to change as you understand the world.

In any case, while the inner-city middle class might be permitted some little choices about their lives, there are no individual solutions for the working class. The golden handshake doesn't last very long. What happens in two years' time when you can't find a job, you're on the dole, and the handshake's just a memory?

Just as there are very few individual solutions for workers, there aren't many for comrades either. We're part of the working class, and there are only class solutions.

A problem we face is that over time our initial anger, our desire to fight back, can burn itself out. We get tired, we wear out. It's an inevitable process, but I don't think

it's really a question of age. We're all subject to it, whether we're young or old, whatever job we're doing. We're subject to an environment that tells us we can't win, that we don't really matter, we should give up, consume.

As I said, in this country people are not firing bullets at us. They can't actually hurt us physically. We can only hurt ourselves, by giving in. But by being conscious of the sort of bullets they're firing at us, and the multitude of ways they can do that, we can hurl back our defiance in their faces.

I think our slogan of the day should be the same as that of the Nicaraguan fighters: *No pasaran!* ■

## Appendix

# Jim Percy (1948-92)

Jim Percy, national president of the Democratic Socialist Party, died quietly as a result of cancer, at his home in Sydney on October 12. He was 43 years old and had devoted 27 years of his life to revolutionary socialist politics.

Like so many of his generation, Jim came into radical politics through the struggle against the imperialist war in Vietnam. In 1965, as a 17-year-old secondary student in Sydney he joined the Vietnam Action Campaign and went on to play a major role in building the mass movement against Washington's aggression. In 1970-71 he was one of the coordinators of the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign.

Jim came early to the fundamental political convictions which guided him for the rest of his life. He passionately believed that only a socialist revolution could save humanity from the horrors of capitalism and lay the basis for a brighter future. The key means to this end was the construction of a mass-based, revolutionary workers party.

Trotskyism, with its rejection of the Stalinist perversion of socialism, seemed to sum up these perspectives and Jim wholeheartedly embraced it.

In 1967 Jim was one of the founders of Resistance, then a broad radical youth organisation based primarily in Sydney and very active in the growing antiwar movement. In 1969-70, a political struggle within Resistance led to the development of the current that is today represented by the Democratic Socialist Party and Resistance.

## **Internationalism**

Internationalism was at the heart of Jim's politics. He understood that, without intimate contact with the world revolutionary process, it would be impossible to develop a serious socialist party in this country. He attached great importance to work in solidarity with progressive struggles overseas.

Jim also saw collaboration with revolutionaries in other countries as a major aspect of the party's internationalism. Through the 1970s and early '80s, the primary framework for this was the Trotskyist Fourth International. The small DSP devoted considerable resources to supporting the international movement to which it belonged.

Jim participated in the 1974, 1979 and 1985 World Congresses of the Fourth International and served on its leading bodies for many years. In 1978-79 Jim was based at the Fourth International centre in Paris, travelling extensively in Europe, Asia and North America.

During the political disputes in the Fourth International in the 1970s he played a leading role in international debates, but he also was instrumental in healing divisions between supporters of the Fourth International in Australia — in advance of similar initiatives elsewhere.

In the early 1980s, Jim led the DSP in a major rethinking of its political ideas and approach. The party turned away from Trotskyism and in 1985 ended its affiliation to the Fourth International. While maintaining cordial relations with the Fourth International, the DSP sought to establish collaboration with a far broader range of progressive forces internationally. Jim played a major role in this process and over the years the party has developed an impressive range of contacts with groups and individuals around the world.

## New developments

During the 1980s Jim led the way in turning the party's attention to building a left political alternative to the Labor Party and attempting to overcome the divisions on the left. The DSP participated in a range of united front activities and tested to the full the possibilities of unity with various other forces on the left.

In September 1970 the first issue of the socialist newspaper *Direct Action* was published. It was the party's main public face for 20 years. Jim edited the paper in its early years. At the end of 1990 *Direct Action* ceased publication, and the DSP and Resistance committed themselves to a broad new publishing project, *Green Left Weekly*.

Jim was one of the prime movers in this ambitious initiative, which aimed to synthesise environmental and socialist politics. The first issue of *Green Left Weekly* appeared in February 1991. Since then, with the active support of members of the DSP and Resistance, the newspaper has been growing in readership, sponsorship and respect within the broad left and progressive movement in this country and also internationally.

As the Gorbachev reform process began in the Soviet Union in 1985, Jim followed these developments very closely. He had high hopes that democratic socialist forms

would emerge in the USSR and eastern Europe. He played a crucial role in establishing the party's collaboration with anti-Stalinist revolutionary forces in Moscow and in a number of Eastern European countries.

In his last years, Jim felt deeply the defeat embodied in the destruction of the remaining gains of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, but he drew hope from the fact that the bankruptcy of Stalinism had finally been exposed. He was looking forward to a new resurgence of revolutionary socialist forces around the world and regretted that his worsening illness would cut short his chances of experiencing this.

As part of preparing the party and the Australian left for the changes taking place internationally, Jim helped initiate two successful Socialist Scholars Conferences in Australia, in 1990 and 1991.

## Leading the party

The building of the Democratic Socialist Party was Jim's life work. The present stage of development of the DSP is the result of the devotion, self-sacrifice and struggle of thousands of people over more than two decades. In this great collective effort, Jim was the acknowledged and outstanding leader. For 20 years, from its founding in 1972 until January this year, Jim was the national secretary of the DSP.

He had a remarkably sure touch in assessing political situations and working out what to do next — the key question in practical politics — and in weighing up people, their strengths and weaknesses. The survival, development and renewal of the party over such a long period in a very testing political environment are above all a tribute to Jim's gifts as a political leader.

Over the years Jim grew in maturity as a leader. By the time of his death, he had become an accomplished revolutionary politician. He combined an unshakeable commitment to the socialist cause with a consummate realism and considerable tactical flexibility.

For all his formidable talents, or perhaps because of them, Jim was always a team player. He never tired of stressing that leadership must be a collective effort, as opposed to leadership by ego-driven stars or self-appointed cliques. Furthermore, leadership in a revolutionary party cannot be an exclusive and self-perpetuating club: it must be inclusive, continually testing people and drawing in new elements.

Every member of the party should aim to be a leader, able to reach out and inspire others in the struggle for a better world. Jim had a rare talent for finding roles for comrades which both met the needs of the organisation and also gave the individuals concerned a chance to test themselves and to learn and grow.

Jim's ideas in this field were not new — they came above all from Lenin and

Trotsky — but he developed and applied them with great skill over a long period.

Right from the start, the political education of its membership has been a major priority for the DSP. This concentration on developing the understanding and abilities of all members has been essential to the party's survival. In 1980 Jim proposed that the party undertake an ambitious initiative in this regard and establish a permanent Marxist school.

The project was a great success and for over a decade the school was a major feature of the DSP's internal life. Several hundred comrades, some from overseas, passed through this unique residential academy in suburban Sydney and went through its full-time four-month courses or shorter one-month intensive sessions. Jim usually led those course units which dealt with the Marxist theory of the party.

One aspect of the development of the party with which Jim was permanently concerned was women's liberation. The DSP has been successful in interrelating the struggle for socialism and the struggle for women's liberation, without subordinating either one to the other. This is reflected in both the composition of the party and its leadership as well as in Resistance.

The DSP has always been a young party. Jim considered that perhaps the major part of rebuilding and renewing the socialist movement was to win new layers of young people. He never lost the ability to reach out to the next generation and inspire them to take up the revolutionary challenge and commitment.

One of the hallmarks of Jim's leadership was an abiding concern with comrades' well-being. Campaigning for socialism in a rich country like Australia has its rigours, and he was at pains to ensure that the party did all it could to fortify its members in the struggle. Jim strongly argued to comrades that although the road might be arduous it was essential to try to find enjoyment and happiness along the way.

## **Exemplary life**

Trotsky once wrote that "Revolutionaries may either be educated or ignorant people, either intelligent or dull, but there can be no revolutionaries without the will that breaks obstacles, without devotion, without the spirit of sacrifice." Jim was neither ignorant nor dull, but he was certainly possessed of formidable willpower and drive, not to speak of a tremendous commitment to the cause. These qualities are essential for leadership in the socialist movement, and Jim had them in abundance.

Jim was possessed of great personal charm. His confidence and enthusiasm were infectious. Time and again he demonstrated that precious ability to impart this to those around him, to lift them out of themselves and inspire them to give of their very best.

Jim was very human and certainly not without his faults. But he was aware of many of his shortcomings and worked to overcome them, not without effect.

After some months of undiagnosed illness, early this year Jim was told that he had cancer. The prognosis turned out to be a grim one. Nevertheless, Jim approached the treatment of his condition with characteristic will and intelligence. He developed a real interest in non-traditional medicine and questions of diet and health and was keen to spread this knowledge in the party.

Jim was greatly moved and heartened by the many expressions of support and sympathy he received, not only from his comrades in the DSP and Resistance, but also from a wide range of people in the broader radical movement, in Australia and overseas. Their concern was a measure of the respect in which he was held and the great number of people he had helped, influenced and worked with over more than a quarter of a century of political involvement.

Jim faced his last fight bravely, and there were indeed some real grounds for hope, but in the end the cancer proved to be too firmly entrenched.

Jim's death leaves those who knew and worked with him with a profound sense of loss. It seems not possible that someone who was so intensely alive is no longer with us. But he leaves behind the precious legacy of his ideas and an exemplary life of struggle. Jim lives on in the party he guided and did so much to build and in the struggle for the socialist future of humanity. ■

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This volume of writings and speeches by Jim Percy, one of the founders of the Democratic Socialist Perspective and its longtime central leader until his death in 1992, spans the years 1980 to 1987.

This was a period of considerable ferment in Australian and world politics. In 1978 and 1979 anti-imperialist revolutions took place in Afghanistan, Iran, Grenada and Nicaragua. At home, the March 1983 federal elections resulted in the ouster of the Fraser government and the beginning of more than a decade of ALP rule under Hawke and Keating. Labour's general neoliberal orientation and the experience of the ALP-ACTU's wage-restraining Accord produced significant disillusionment.

Through this period the DSP (or Socialist Workers Party as it was then) remained a small cadre organisation but it was extremely active and reacted with considerable dynamism to the political openings that presented themselves.

It also engaged in some significant rethinking — on Trotskyism and the Fourth International, its international connections, the Labor Party, and how to build a mass socialist party.

This collection provides a fascinating insight into the thinking of a talented and committed revolutionary leader and the problems of building a militant socialist organisation in a developed capitalist country.

*Resistance books*