

**Socialism,
Revolution
& the
Working Class**

**Graham Matthews
& Dave Holmes**

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Class in Australia Today

By Graham Matthews

According to Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* published in 1848, the history of all hitherto existing societies has been the history of class struggles.

Certainly, many would agree that this was the fundamental division of society in Marx and Engels' day, at the early stages of the industrial revolution, when the masses toiled for long hours in the factories and mines, while the rich capitalists rode in polished carriages, waited on hand and foot by a staff of butlers, maids and cooks.

But is this the case today, particularly in a country like Australia, where the majority of the population would describe themselves as "middle class", where we can all go to the same beach together, and barrack for the same national cricket team against the Poms, and where the son of a Dulwich Hill garage owner can become prime minister for the Liberal Party? Is this society still fundamentally divided by class and driven by class struggle?

Appearances can sometimes be deceiving. This is where a Marxist analysis can be useful, to search beneath the veneer of our liberal-democratic society, and look at what actually makes it tick, at who creates the wealth in this society, who owns it and in whose interest political power is exercised.

What is social class?

Many sociologists — those who can see no further than the capitalist system — will tend to define class as a matter of income, as a way of categorising society by simply looking at what people earn, or a matter of status or how they are looked upon by society. A Marxist analysis however, looks to a more fundamental explanation of class, rooted in a person's relation to the productive process, specifically to the means

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of production — the sum total of a society's productive capacity that goes to producing things that are sold on the market — commodities.

In order to define a person's class, Marxists ask what level of control that person wields over the means of production. Another way of saying this, is asking whether you own part of the means of production or not, and if you are an owner, then how much?

Do you own a TV station, a string of factories or a chain of newspapers, for instance — or perhaps you own a significant stake in all three? Perhaps you own a major transport company, are managing director of an international mining corporation, or the CEO of Coles-Myer? If so, you are part of the capitalist class, the class which owns and controls the vast amount of productive capital in this society. In 1998, the capitalist class comprised around 5% of families in Australia. They owned 76% of share and similar investments, 46% of bank deposits, 46% of rental properties and 29% of private business equity.

Marxists don't base conceptions of class on income. Income can be deceptive for the most wealthy, where income tax minimisation schemes, such as payment in share options, can cut the taxable income of the wealthy significantly — to the point where they are only really paying 13% on their actual income, according to a front-page article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on December 20.

So where do you and I fit in? Most likely, you are part of the majority of the Australian population — someone who gets up in the morning and goes to work, whether at a factory, a mine, a government department or a KFC. You do the work you are assigned, a small cog in a larger wheel. At the end of the week, you receive a wage or a salary. You are part of the working class, some two-thirds of the Australian population, whose only productive asset is their ability to work (whether as a nurse, a carpenter, teacher or labourer) — their labour power — which they must sell to an individual capitalist, or the state, in order to receive a wage and make ends meet.

Of course society is not quite that simple. There are also intermediate layers, people who own small farms, or a small business, who primarily rely on their own labour power, or that of their family, and maybe a couple of employees. As a social layer, this petty bourgeoisie is continually being driven into bankruptcy by large capital, only to appear in some other sector of the economy in some other form.

So while the deregulation of hours for shopping giants Coles and Woolworths has driven many small shops to the wall, the rise of the technology industry has spawned a whole range of new, individual contractors. Some individual professionals are also petty-bourgeois — some doctors or lawyers who own their own small practice, for instance.

Why is class so important?

Liberal sociologists tell us that class is just one of the ways that we can divide society, alongside ethnicity, gender, religion or social outlook. Class is just one among many ways to categorise people — no more important than any other. They will also tend to define class descriptively, arguing that the term “working class” really only applies to those who work blue-collar jobs, or those who are trade union members, or excluding anyone who has been to university. By weighting the dice in this way, they can easily come to the conclusion that the working class in a country like Australia is getting smaller, almost ceasing to exist, and that we are all middle class now.

And it's true that the nature of the working class in a country like Australia has changed over the last 50 years or so. According to ABS statistics, in 2003 over 65% of the workforce were employed in white-collar jobs of one sort or another — from teachers to nurses to bank tellers and public servants. Blue-collar occupations, which comprised over half of the workforce in 1947, are now only one-third of it. The decline in the manufacturing industry in Australia has had a massive impact. In 1966, over 26% of working-people worked in manufacturing. By 2002 it had fallen to just 12%.¹

But the vast majority of people who work white-collar jobs are also members of the working class. In many cases, their control over their own work is even less than that of blue-collar workers, and often their wages are lower also.

Of course there are exceptions. Some small sections of salaried people receive such large incomes, often including significant perks, as well as shares and other property, that they should be considered a part of the capitalist class, or at least its intimate ally. The likes of judges, for instance, or permanent heads of government departments, or CEOs of major companies fall into this category. Then there are also salaried people, the nature of whose jobs places them outside the working class. Socialists see police and prison officers in this category for instance. Their role in society — as agents of state repression — puts them outside the working class.

But that still leaves around two-thirds of the population, who, when defined by their relation to the means of production, are members of the working class. Objectively these people own no stake in production other than their ability to labour — whether with their hands or their brain. They are forced to sell this ability to capitalists (or the state), and in return receive a wage. The capitalists provide them with the tools of their trade, the materials they work on or sell and take the profit for themselves.

Marxists call this exploitation. Workers receive only a portion — in most cases a very small portion — of the wealth they create, in the form of wages. The majority of that wealth — also called surplus value — is expropriated by the capitalist class.

What do Marxists mean by ruling class?

Power relationships don't begin and end at the office or factory gate. While every adult citizen of Australia formally has equal rights under the law — the right to vote, the right to protest, the right to petition government, and the right to run for office, it's a fact that some people's rights carry more weight than others. As Anatole France put it: "The law ... in its majestic equalitarianism, forbids the rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg on the streets and to steal bread." The fact is that those who own wealth — capital — in this society carry more social weight, more power, than the rest of us.

When you or I disagree with what the government is doing, we might swear at the TV. If we're a little more adventurous, we might write a letter to the newspaper, which may or may not get published. Better still, we might join a demonstration, even join a political party like the Socialist Alliance, and by joining with others, make our voice a little stronger.

But when Rupert Murdoch disagrees with what a government is doing, governments take fright. The weight of daily newspapers in every state capital city buys a lot of power. So when Murdoch, or shock-jock Allen Jones, or the CEOs of Qantas or Coles-Myer speak, politicians listen.

In fact, the capitalist class doesn't often have to tell politicians or governments what they want. Because the politicians generally know their place. Almost all of them rely on the patronage of one section of capital or another for their position and they're unlikely to want to risk losing capital's political and financial support. And then there is always the state — that faceless body of police, soldiers, judges, screws and bureaucrats — which implements the law in a way that invariably seems to protect the interests of those with the most to protect.

Class & class struggle

The existence of class struggle is an inevitable result of the division of society into classes. By their very nature, the existence of classes leads to class struggle. The division of society into classes appeared in human history at a point when the production of a stable social surplus — in other words, the ability to produce more wealth than would normally be consumed by the society in simply staying alive — became commonplace. This started around 15,000 years ago with the development of agriculture. The surplus was not enough to guarantee everyone a better existence, and so there emerged a struggle over who was to get it.

The division of society into classes means that one class is exploiting the labour of another and therefore appropriating the social surplus created by the productive class

for themselves. This was more open and obvious in precapitalist class formations, such as slavery — where the slave was owned entirely by the slaveowner — or in feudalism — where the serf was compelled to work for free on the lord's lands in return for the right to cultivate a small plot. In capitalism the exploitation is more hidden. Surplus value — the value a worker creates in excess of their wage — is extracted at the point of production, seamlessly.

In this way the employment contract can seem an equal one — workers bring their labour power, employers bring their capital, and both go away appropriately paid. This is how high school economics explains it. As we've seen, however, the worker produces far more value in a working day than they are paid for — this is surplus value, which is expropriated by the capitalist, by virtue of their ownership of the means of production — the factory, the raw materials — and the finished product that is sold.

But the division between what portion of social production goes to one class or the other is not fixed. And so, throughout history, we have seen a continual struggle between classes, over which one will have the larger share of the wealth. Much of the standard of living that workers in Australia enjoy, as well as our civil rights, were won through this struggle — class struggle.

Class struggle is endemic to class society. As Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.²

The state

Where you have class struggle, unless there is to be continual civil war, you need an institution that arbitrates disputes between classes, sets the laws and enforces them. This role is played by the state. And the state is there to defend the interest of the most powerful class in any society, the class with the greatest wealth, who can exert the greatest power — the ruling class. Under capitalism, as Marx and Engels point out in the *Manifesto*: “The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”

Far from being neutral or above class conflict, the role of the state under capitalism is to ensure the smooth reproduction of capitalism from one generation to the next,

protecting the property of the propertied classes, maintaining a military to defend and extend the interests of the ruling class overseas, a judiciary to enforce the laws that protect property, a police force to keep us into line if we start to question too much, and prison-officers — screws — to keep us in jail if we step out of line just a bit too far.

But the state only works at the level of repression in the last instance. Capitalism and capitalist relations seem to reproduce themselves as though naturally in this society, as though they were common sense and there were no alternative. And it's a vital role of the state to make sure that things happen that way. And so the school system, the courts, the bureaucracy and the parliament, all enforce and bolster this idea, discouraging any idea of stepping outside of the free and democratic system that we have.

Ideology

The idea that capitalism is eternal, that inequality is natural, and that competition is necessary, are central ideas that govern mass behaviour under capitalism. Capitalist ideology — by which we mean the system of ideas that presents capitalism, parliamentary democracy, social inequality, and respect for power as natural and common sense — is crucial to the smooth running of capitalism in an everyday sense. We get up, go to work, respect the boss, respect police, popes and politicians, because that's what we've been taught to do. Institutions as basic as the family, the church, school, and other social institutions, set up and reinforce these ideas in our heads from cradle to grave. It's only a minority of working people, *during normal times*, who will fundamentally challenge these ideas, grasp the really exploitative nature of the system and struggle to change it.

Limits to democracy

Nevertheless, part of liberal capitalist ideology is the idea that we live in a democratic society, and while democracy under capitalism is rather limited, it is real. We are permitted to vote once every three or four years. We are permitted to protest in between times. We are even permitted to establish our own parties, and to run on whatever policies we might choose, and of course, the candidate with the most support gets elected, and the party with the most candidates elected forms government.

However wealth intrudes even here, to have its voice heard louder than you or I. For while Lachlan Murdoch and I each have only one vote on election day, Lachlan Murdoch, or the CEO of BHP-Billiton, can have a greater impact on the result of an election than you or I, both by giving money — serious money — to the political party whose policies they support most, or by using their newspapers, TV stations or radio

stations, to present their preferred candidates as the best, most sympathetic, or most in the “national interest” and thereby secure them greater exposure and more votes.

This is the way the capitalist class — the ruling class — make sure that whichever government gets elected, it serves their general interests.

And what about the workplace, or the school or university, where most of us spend the better part of our waking lives, or else stuck in traffic going to and from? How much democracy is there? Try asking your boss for a vote on how much the workers should get paid against how much profit the company makes — and see how far you get.

Of course, limited as they are, democratic and civil rights are not illusory, and must be defended at all costs. In certain circumstances, socialists can use this democratic space to advantage, at least in getting a greater hearing for our politics, but in some cases in winning elections, and being able to offer a pole of attraction, and make an argument to masses of people from the parliamentary platform.

Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks in Russia, understood this. Even in the limited franchise of the Russian parliament — the Duma — after the defeat of the 1905 revolution, Lenin insisted that the Bolsheviks stand candidates, and that those that were elected use their parliamentary seats as a platform from which to educate the mass of people on what the government was really doing and so build support for socialism. The Scottish Socialist Party is another example of how socialists can effectively use parliament to build support for socialism.

In Australia, the Greens dominate the electoral space to the left of Labor at the present time and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future, until and unless they attain some share of power and come under pressure to either implement their radical policies or bend to the will of capital. Either way, the openings will then be larger for socialists.

Nevertheless, it is still important to pose a serious socialist alternative in elections. The small vote that socialists attract at the present time indicates a solid and conscious base of support for socialism in many cases, and in some cases, socialists can be elected to particular positions, as in the case of Steve Jolly, who was elected councillor for Yarra City in Melbourne in 2004 local elections, and went on to win a very respectable 6% of the vote in the recent state elections.

Nevertheless, with so much wealth behind the parties that support capitalism and against a socialist electoral alternative, any notion of electing a majority of socialists to a state or federal parliament and wielding power is an unlikely one, to say the least. And even if a majority of socialists were elected to parliament, the permanent and unelected portions of the state — the police, judiciary bureaucracy and army — defend

capitalist property and would attempt to frustrate a socialist parliamentary project by any means necessary. As Karl Marx said in *The Civil War in France*, written about the Paris Commune of 1871:

But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.

The centralised state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature — organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labor — originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle class society as a mighty weapon in its struggle against feudalism.³

The state is set up and staffed by the capitalist class at its highest echelons. It will not sit idly by and simply accept its own democratic displacement. The history of coups against left-wing governments is an example of this capitalist self-defence when democracy makes the wrong decision.

How can the working class change society?

So if the capitalist system, with its state that defends capitalist relations, tilts the playing field against the working class; if we can't use the capitalist state to fundamentally change society, and if the power of the most concentrated, most wealthy and strongest ruling class in history is arrayed against us, how can we hope to change the world? Is socialism just a utopian idea after all? Were Marx and Engels just starry-eyed dreamers? Should we just accept a little amelioration of the system around the edges?

Well, if we believed that, I doubt we would be here on a Saturday afternoon in early January. But if we can't change the system *through* the system, how can the working class change society?

The answer comes from the very place that the working class occupies in production. We own nothing but our ability to labour, which we are forced to sell to capital in order to receive a wage. The other side of this equation though, is that all industry requires workers in order to keep running. If we stop work, the economy stops work. Individually we are weak, but together we are powerful.

This is the basis to the revolutionary potential of the working class. It is the first ascendant class in history that represents the vast majority in society, who cannot liberate itself, without overturning the whole system at the same time.

As Marx and Engels put it, again in the *Communist Manifesto*:

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their

own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property.

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.⁴

Unfortunately though, matters are however, not quite that simple. While the working class retains the potential for revolutionary action, the unity needed to carry that through, particularly the unity behind a revolutionary leadership, remains elusive.

This has impelled some socialists to give up on the working class as a whole in countries like Australia — imperialist countries whose wealth helps them dominate the globe. They argue that the working class, while a class in itself, inasmuch as it exists as an objective social category, will not become a class for itself, a revolutionary class able to cause society to be “sprung into the air”. They argue that the divisions that rend the working class in an imperialist country, particularly differences of race and national origin, are simply too great to overcome.

What prevents working class unity?

Certainly it would be foolish for socialists to ignore the material and ideological phenomena that have tended to divide the working class in a country like Australia. They are not problems that can be leapt over in our attempt to forge revolutionary unity. They must be contended with and ultimately overcome.

Primary among the divisions in the working class in an imperialist country like Australia is the existence of a more privileged strata of the working class — what Engels and Lenin called the aristocracy of labour — a section of the working class, which because of its strategic position in the workforce, is systematically bribed by the capitalist class, using a part of the wealth it accumulates as a result of monopoly production.

From around the end of the 19th century, the economies of countries like Australia came to be dominated by monopoly capital. The emergence of new industries such as the oil industry or the highly industrialised mining industry, which required massive amounts of capital to get under way, changed the nature of the economy. Their sheer size excluded all but the largest capital from playing a part. This huge capital merged with financial capital, making massive industrial /financial concerns, which dominated the economy. Today the Macquarie Bank is an example of one such concern.

By their dominance of whole sectors of the economy, these firms could severely restrict competition, and so command monopoly profits — far higher than the average return on capital. In many cases, this capital was also exported to less developed countries, where natural resources and cheap labour were ruthlessly exploited. Think of Australian capital's continuing domination of PNG or Fiji, for instance.

A portion of monopoly super-profits was used by the monopolists to systematically bribe a section of the working class into support for the system. A far higher standard of living was guaranteed, but only for a minority. This minority — usually the most organised in the most strategic industries — then became the social base for class-collaboration in imperialist countries, a section of the working class that identified its interests closely with those of the ruling class, which while it sought to maximise its wages and conditions (often at the expense of other, less-organised workers), identified with the so-called “national interest”, which means the interest capital as a whole, and has been won to restricting its horizons to remain within a capitalist framework.

Traditionally, the aristocracy of labour in Australia has been composed of well-organised, white, Anglo men. Women, migrants and of course indigenous Australians, generally fall outside of its ranks, and are confined to less-organised, poorer paid, often part-time or casual jobs.

Statistically this division of the working class is not difficult to identify. From the 1940s, when migrants from southern Europe were forced in large numbers into the dirtiest, lowest-paid jobs that many Anglo-Australians would not take up, to the 1970s and beyond, where Vietnamese migrants were funnelled into the sweatshops of clothing manufacturers, or the dead-end process jobs on the factory floor. In New Zealand, the contrast is black-and-white. The majority of the low-paid industrial workforce is Maori or Pacific Islander, while most of the supervisory staff, and of course the bosses, are white.

Today, some workers on 457 visas are brought to Australia to perform jobs for low wages, often in appalling conditions. As they are not migrants, only guest workers, they have no legal rights and so can be superexploited, and threatened with deportation if they complain or seek union organisation. Some unions, notably the MUA in WA and the AMWU in Victoria are attempting to smash these wage-cutting stunts by employers, by offering individual workers their protection and finding them work covered by awards or enterprise agreements. Other unions, however, have been sucked into the capitalist framework of seeing such vulnerable workers as competition and simply wanting to stop their entry or send them back to poverty.

Indigenous workers could legally be paid less than non-indigenous workers until the late 1960s. After the passing of legislation requiring equal pay, many Aboriginal

stock-workers on cattle stations in the north of Australia lost their jobs. Today, unemployment among indigenous Australians remains over 20%, rising to over 40% if work-for-the-dole schemes are not included.⁵ Indigenous people are also massively over-represented in all state and territory prisons.

Both the government and the Labor opposition have also systematically used Australian chauvinism to try to weld at least a portion of the white Australian working class to its white Australian bosses, at the expense of unity with migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The not-so-subtle shift of both parties away from multiculturalism — which was itself a way to try to forge national unity, based on common identification with Australian capitalism — to “integration” (not very different from the white-Australia policy of “assimilation”), is a further attempt to cut across class identification by emphasising national difference and encouraging white workers to see those migrants who do not “integrate” as the enemy, as a threat to social harmony.

Ideological justifications follow the material differences. Racism, Australian national chauvinism, sexism and homophobia often manage to divide the working class against itself during ordinary times.

How do socialists struggle for working class unity?

Faced with these divisions in the working class, socialists attempt to emphasise the commonality of workers as against what sets them apart. Socialists emphasise the class unity of workers against their national or racial differences.

And these are lessons that workers do learn through struggle. Significant battles in the car industry, or in the steel industry in the 1970s, in the Redfern Mail exchange in the 80s, and in Brisbane at Steal Line Doors in the '90s,⁶ are just a few examples of successful struggles led by migrant workers, where solidarity was successfully built, cutting across national or racial lines. Historically there has also been significant trade union support for Aboriginal land rights struggles — the Gurindgi in the Northern Territory among the most famous.

Socialists prioritise these struggles, which draw working people together and cut across national, racial or gender divisions to unite working people in struggle. By turning the most conscious against the least conscious, nationalism, racism, sexism and homophobia in the working class can be broken down, and unity formed.

That is not to say that socialists do not confront discrimination in the working class movement. We also champion the rights of the most oppressed — democratic rights to equality — throughout the working-class movement. The only way that unity can be forged is by breaking down the petty divisions in the working class, and winning all

workers to their fundamental unity as workers against the boss. Any attempt to ignore backward attitudes, or attempts to suppress, or outlaw them, simply lets them fester and grow stronger, all the while undermining working-class unity.

What is the situation of the class struggle in Australia today?

In Australia today, the class struggle is in greater relief than at any time in decades. The Coalition government is mounting a concerted attack on the rights of organised labour, through such Orwellian-named legislation as Work Choices and the Building Construction Industry Improvement (BCCI) Act. It is attacking civil rights through so-called anti-terrorism legislation and continues to attack solidarity between workers using the Trade Practices Act.

The organised labour movement has responded to the attacks — at least the most direct attacks on the right to organise, made law in Work Choices and the BCCI Act. The ACTU campaign to date has centred on a series of national mobilisations against Work Choices, along with radio and television advertising and the strong suggestion that electing a Labor government would solve the problem.

The ACTU was reluctant to organise these mobilisations initially, but was pushed to do so by more militant sections of the union movement. The politics of the four national mobilisations held since June 30, 2005 has been consistently pro-Labor, prioritising a strategy of mobilising working people to campaign for the election of the Labor Party, which has promised to scrap the worst of the laws if elected. The ACTU has attempted to limit the scope of the “fight” to a few large mobilisations and the struggle at the ballot box. Nevertheless, the mobilisations, both before and after the passage of the legislation, have been important confidence builders for the organised labour movement in their struggle to resist the implementation of the laws.

The November 30 rallies last year against Work Choices mobilised up to 270,000 workers according to ACTU figures. Numbers at the rallies on November 30 were below those of the June 28 rally and particularly November 15 last year.

The mood on many of the rallies was quite mixed. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that rally-goers in Sydney thought the protest was smaller, and there was a certain cynicism about the ALP electoral focus, particularly ACTU secretary Greg Combet’s stunt at the MCG, which consisted of the not-so-subtle shift from the slogan “Your Rights at Work — Worth Fighting For” to “Your Rights at Work — Worth Voting For”.

The ABC radio *PM* program, ran a vox pop from one protestor at Melbourne who said: “If it’s a Labor Party, by definition your interests should be the interests of the labour movement. And I just don’t think Kim Beazley has demonstrated that in

any way. I mean, he's so far right that we might as well have two Liberal leaders in this country. We need some people to stand up for the working class." I don't imagine that Kevin Rudd and the "fork in the road" was quite what he was looking for.

Why was November 30 smaller?

The ACTU put the smaller size of the rallies down to intimidation by the Howard government and threats from bosses. And with the new laws in place, it *does* make it more difficult for the union movement to *easily* mobilise its membership. Fines of \$6000 can be levied against individual workers, rising to \$33,000 for unions for any industrial action outside of an enterprise bargaining period. Without being willing to defy those laws (and few were), unions are left with limited room — asking workers to take leave, or sickies or sending a delegation.

And even where unions did call strikes, this was often in coded messages, sending a confused message to workers.

A federal public servant, Greg McCarron, was forced to appeal to a full bench of the Federal Court for the right to use his leave entitlements to attend the rally. In Wollongong, Blue Scope Steel workers were forced to attend one-on-one meetings with managers and warned off attending the rally.

There were exceptions however. The building industry in Melbourne was shut down for the day — although numbers of building workers at the protest would indicate that not all workers actively participated in the protest, but took a day off instead.

When Amcor Flexibles in Melbourne threatened the work force with \$6000 fines, they shut the plant down for 24 hours to attend the rally. The same workers already face \$6000 fines for industrial action in 2006.

In Adelaide Rod Quantock who was chairing the rally, pilloried the ACTU's new slogan, and talked up the success of the French workers earlier in the year. In WA there was a broad and inclusive "rev-up" rally organised under the auspices of the blue-collar unions, which dwarfed the "official" rally that it marched to.

Generally, unions did not give clear leadership to their members on what to do, leaving it up to individual workplaces or even individual workers to decide if, and how to get to the rallies.

The ACTU campaign which prioritises the vote over other action will also tend to demobilise workers, particularly those not enamoured with the ALP. Why go to a rather passive rally just to hear Labor party speakers?

There were also fewer marches following the telecast than in 2005.

Politics of the speeches

At the November 30 rally in Melbourne, ACTU secretary Greg Combet attempted a seamless transition from the “fight” for our rights at work to the “vote” for our rights at work. “A new campaign starts today,” he said. “Your rights at work are not just worth fighting for — they are worth voting for.” While not explicitly calling for a vote for Labor at the federal election as the only means of defeating Work Choices, Combet did say that, “The Labor Party’s position on the IR laws is extremely important because Labor is the alternative national government . . . A very clear choice is emerging between Labor and the government on industrial relations.”

In his speech, Combet used the failure of the state governments’ High Court challenge against Work Choices to argue that the only practical strategy left for the union movement was electoral. “Let’s be very clear about the real implication of the High Court decision,” he said. “It has confirmed that the only way to get rid of John Howard’s industrial relations laws is to vote against the government. John Howard is not prepared to repeal the laws, so we must elect a government that will.”

Combet’s call was backed up by state union leaders right around the country. And of course, there was also the stunt at the MCG with the word “fight” being rolled-up to uncover the word “vote” — the ACTU’s not-so-hidden agenda. While the electoral question has always been a central part of the ACTU’s campaign message, it completely dwarfed everything else on November 30.

Unions NSW secretary John Robertson put out a press release backing comments that he made at the Sydney rally that the only way around boss intimidation was to hold rallies on Sundays in future and make them more family affairs. The next planned event from Unions NSW will be a rally — probably more like a picnic again — likely at Homebush Park on Sunday, April 22, the weekend before the ALP national conference, to maintain explicit pressure on the ALP. This seemed to be a strategy backed by Combet, who when asked about the loss of productivity from the rally on November 30, merely answered that they had to take account of the availability of the MCG.

What assessment should socialists make of the campaign?

1. It was important that the rally was a mass action held on a workday and nationally. The two largest national rallies held last year were trade union rallies on a weekday, despite intimidation and threats — albeit that the global warming rally in Sydney probably eclipsed the turnout to both rallies here.

These mobilisations have been matched with ongoing resistance — with some success — at the industrial level in those particular unionised shops where bosses are attacking.

Workers' resistance is reinforced by community action, of the kind of Union Solidarity in Victoria, which organises supportive community members to picket workplaces in dispute, limiting workers and unions' exposure to penalties under Work Choices. Workers Solidarity in Sydney and the Peel Community Group in WA have played similar roles. This "on the ground" resistance takes strength from the broader mass campaign, and would be unlikely to be able to sustain itself without it.

This resistance, including the numbers mobilising for the rallies, is occurring despite the misleadership of the ACTU, which is still at least partially forced to mobilise workers — albeit in rather distorted and increasingly ALP-electoralist Sky Channel-type rallies.

Of course, in non-unionised and casualised areas, bosses are making easy gains with the new laws, reflected in the overall drop in actual real wages as penalty rates, overtime and leave loading are lost in quite a number of areas across the board.

2. In spite of the Labor Party domination of most of the platforms at November 30, and at most of the previous rallies, the socialist message was well received. Socialist Alliance leaflets, placards and slogans were well picked-up by rallies, and the newspaper *Green Left Weekly* was well received.

3. We need to call for a further rally, with a national stoppage/strike on a working day for early in 2007, to rebuild momentum and confidence in the campaign. We should specifically campaign against the ACTU-ALP's attempt to re-route the campaign into a passive "vote Labor" exercise. An important part of this will be the continuation of mass action, met with an industrial campaign, and pressure to call workers out, rather than rely on delegations, flexitime and the like. We also need to demand the calling of mass delegates' meetings across the country to steer the campaign, and take it out of the hands of trade union officials.

4. We should campaign for broad and independent platforms for subsequent rallies — platforms that are not Labor election campaign pitches. Specifically we should campaign to involve the Greens and socialists on the platform, but also have the whole tenor of the speeches more aimed toward struggle — including political — against the laws.

The SA and WA platforms on November 30 went some way towards this.

5. In NSW, we should build the April 22 Sunday picnic, while arguing that this is not enough. We should not counterpose the building of April 22 to a further mass industrial action, but nor should we accept the argument that April 22 replaces such an action.

6. There is a growing cynicism about the ACTU's "vote ALP" campaign. This uneasiness is not universal but it is strong amongst an important component of the movement that we should continue to orient to. This sentiment only gives greater

purchase to the Socialist Alliance to present a fighting alternative to militants. The room for the SA message is therefore still there and, relative to the size of the rallies, probably growing.

7. For the federal election, we should be clear that a Labor government, if at least partly elected on the basis of a union campaign of action and rallies, and forced by the union movement to repeal at least the most obnoxious of Howard's anti-worker laws, would be preferable to the return of the Liberals, although we need to continue to make the point that Labor's promises do not go far enough and that only a mobilised movement can hope to keep them to account.

The protests do exert mass pressure on the ALP and raise expectations of a Labor government. The ALP would certainly prefer to be elected without such expectations being built.

8. A Liberal victory in the 2007 federal election is likely to open the floodgates to attacks on workers. The bosses cannot be happy with the partial gains that they have made from Work Choices etc. to date, and are certain to mount a more concerted campaign against *organised* sections of the working class with the new laws, once a further election victory is attained. The obvious comparison is with the Thatcher government in Britain, which launched its major attacks against the National Union of Miners in 1984, only after winning a second term after its anti-union legislation became law.

As socialists in an imperialist, privileged and stable country like Australia, our role is to fight for the maximum unity of working people in struggle for their own interests. This doesn't mean that we obediently fall in behind the official labour movement, much less the ALP.

The prospect of a Liberal win is being billed as an absolute disaster for the trade union movement by Labor Party supporters. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* on January 17, former Labor leader Kim Beazley claimed that a Liberal victory would mean the entrenching of Howard's anti-worker laws and the destruction of the union movement in under a decade. "If the Labor Party is not able to get in there and change these industrial laws, the whole character of working Australia will change substantially, and to the Labor Party's detriment," Beazley said. These comments chime in with similar threats from union and political figures, desperate to channel the campaign against Work Choices into a campaign to re-elect the ALP at all costs.

While the prospect of a Howard election victory is a challenging one for the trade union movement, there must be a "plan B". Unions cannot afford to rely on an election victory to solve their industrial problems. Thirteen years of Labor government from 1983 to 1996, the disaster of the Prices and Incomes Accord, union deregistrations,

enterprise bargaining and falling real wages show that whichever party is elected federally, the only practical course for the union movement is to continue the political and industrial struggle for workers' rights. Anything less would leave workers at the mercy of politicians' good will.

We must campaign for a real struggle and a genuine fight in defence of gains long won and in search of further victories.

The working class is the only force in this society with the potential to change the world. The role of socialists and the role of struggle is to win that class to an understanding of its role — to win it from merely being a class-in-itself, a class that exists, to being a class-for-itself, a class whose social power can bring down the old order and begin the task of building socialism. ■

The Socialist Revolution & the Revolutionary Party

By Dave Holmes

Socialism the only solution

Today humanity faces a global crisis stemming from the incredible rapacity of the capitalist system. In the first place, there is catastrophic climate change which threatens to end life on our planet, then there is endemic war and conflict, mass poverty in the Third World and neo-liberalism's ever more ruthless assault on working people everywhere.

Capitalism will destroy the human race. It is absolutely clear that the bourgeoisie will continue to put the drive for corporate profit ahead of everything, even our own future as a species. It is incapable of changing. Even when it recognises the danger it cannot stop doing what it does. If capitalism is not overthrown, humanity is most likely doomed.

The only way out is the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. And the only means to do this is anti-imperialist revolutions in the Third World and proletarian socialist revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries.

We reject in advance any argument that the crisis of global warming and climate change is so critical that it stands above politics or that there is no time to build a mass socialist party or that we can't wait for socialism to replace capitalism. We don't propose waiting for anything — we are campaigning all the time and are trying to drive the struggle forward right now. But the basic point still stands: the capitalist class is leading humanity to absolute disaster and its class position means it cannot and will not do anything else. What is necessary is to assemble and organise the forces capable

This is the text of a talk presented to the January 2007 Marxist Summer School. *Dave Holmes* is a member of the Socialist Alliance.

of prising its mad grip from the steering wheel and carrying out a drastic change of course.

Beyond utopianism

Can this be done? Is the working class — on which Marxist socialism places such hopes — up to the challenge?

Ever since class society came into existence it has faced the resistance of the oppressed. There have been an endless series of revolts and uprisings — whether by slaves, peasants, artisans or modern proletarians. The dream of a society where there is no inequality, no division into rich and poor — i.e., of a classless society — is a persistent one.

But before Marxism, socialism was utopian and could only be utopian. It lacked a clear analysis of the problem and it lacked a realistic path to get to the promised land. At bottom, this was due to the immaturity of social conditions. The development of modern industrial capitalism and the emergence of the modern working class made it possible for socialism to go beyond utopianism.

Toward the end of the 1840s, in the midst of the industrial revolution which was transforming Europe, Marx and Engels laid the foundation stones of scientific socialism. In the *Communist Manifesto* they explain that ever since the end of primitive communist society, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” They showed that capitalist society and economy is inherently rent by fundamental contradictions which make it potentially unstable and susceptible to revolution.

On the one hand, humanity’s productive forces have objectively been socialised — a common economic infrastructure has been created for all humanity. This is the material basis for a society without social antagonisms and everything that goes with that — classes, the oppression of women, the state, commodity production and money. But because it rests on private ownership of the means of production, the whole operation of this great edifice depends on the wishes of a handful of capitalist magnates who are motivated solely by their own insatiable thirst for profit.

But capitalism is always shadowed by its nemesis — its gravedigger — in the form of the modern working class. Bourgeoisie and proletariat — the two always go together. The working class is essential for the operation of the social means of production but itself owns none of it. Its conditions of life make it cooperative and collectivist in outlook. Its objective interest is to collectively appropriate these means of production and establish a classless society. This makes it revolutionary — at least potentially. It is the sole authentically revolutionary class. It has no interest in setting up a new system of class oppression but can only end its alienation by destroying the whole edifice of

class domination. (The “dictatorship of the proletariat” established by the working class after it takes power is a transitory phenomenon which will give way to the classless, communist society of the future.)

Is the working class up to it?

Ever since its birth these basic ideas of Marxism have come under attack. Reformists have denied the need for revolution and instead held out the fantasy of the gradual civilising of capitalism. (The actual development, of course, has gone 100% the other way.) Other critics have argued that a socialist revolution is impossible or undesirable or that it will only lead to a Stalinist police state.

On the other hand, some revolutionaries have denied that the working class is capable of fulfilling the role assigned to it by Marx and Engels. They have argued that it is too integrated into the system, that it is corrupted by high living standards and so on. They have looked to various other social groups (students, the lumpenproletariat, Third World peasants and so on) to play the role of revolutionary agent.

During the height of the long postwar boom (which only ended in 1975), such views were quite common. The working class had supposedly been corrupted by the good times. Such pessimistic analyses were decisively refuted by the tremendous 1968 revolt of the French students and workers. But for the want of a sufficiently large revolutionary leadership, this upsurge clearly had the power to overthrow the capitalist system in France.

Now, as the good times are long gone for most, as neo-liberal austerity and “labour market reform” bite ever more deeply, as casualisation and outsourcing change the face of the workplace, some people have concluded that it’s impossible for workers to organise to fight for their interests. These arguments are as false and one-sided as the others.

Stan Goff rejects Marxism

In the United States, the well-known leftist Stan Goff — he was the keynote speaker at the last Asia-Pacific International Solidarity Conference in Sydney — has recently caused a minor stir by announcing his “definitive rejection of Marxism in its current organisational forms, be they called Marxist-Leninist or Trotskyist or Maoist”. It’s not quite clear what he means by this. But the following argumentation is clear enough:

The last thing [he says] a metropolitan industrial working class is going to do is embrace a project that threatens the only stability it knows. Boeing workers are not going to oppose the military-industrial complex. Prison guards are not going to oppose prisons. Agribusiness workers are not going to oppose processed foods. Auto workers

are not going to oppose cars.¹

The implicit assumption Goff makes here is that short-term, immediate interests — to keep one’s job and be able to feed oneself and one’s family — will always override long-term objective interests — to end one’s oppression and alienation by establishing a classless society. Although it is undeniable that there is a real-life tension between the two this assumption is completely false. Every time workers go on strike they are sacrificing something immediate for something more long-term. And when we consider great struggles like the May-June 1968 days in France, the falsity of Goff’s argument becomes even more apparent.

As for his argument that, for instance, “Agribusiness workers are not going to oppose processed foods”, this is completely false also. Who says the struggle is going to be posed in that way? For a start, most of the field workers are migrants and guestworkers (so-called “illegal aliens”). And they can certainly be interested in a struggle for better and safer conditions in the fields and the plants. And when a struggle develops for the overthrow of the whole rotten system, who says they will not be attracted to it?

Anyway, Goff continues:

Our experience is that this class in the US, with occasional exceptions, fights for its privileges within that class — male, national, and white. Moreover, the collapse of the current system faces this working class with catastrophe, beginning with the fact that it is thoroughly dependent on military spending to hold back that catastrophe. I can only conclude that an imperial working class is not and never will be the midwife of anything except reaction.²

One could have a whole discussion on this but here are a few initial comments. Firstly, this analysis is at odds with the often stormy and heroic history of labour in the United States — white male workers included (just think of the rise of the CIO in the 1930s). Secondly, the US working class today encompasses a lot more than white male workers. In fact, some of the most militant and successful struggles in recent years have involved low-paid migrant workers (in Southern California in particular). Thirdly, it is always a big mistake to make hasty conclusions based on a very specific period, especially at a time when the contradictions of the world capitalist system are becoming truly explosive. The working class has been shaken out of passivity before and it would seem premature to say it will never happen again.

At bottom, doubts about the revolutionary potential of the working class stem from the enormous difficulties and protracted nature of the revolutionary process. We have no desire to minimise the problems facing the socialist project or to project an easy and unconvincing optimism. However, with the collapse of the Stalinist system

in the Soviet Union and the ever-deepening neo-liberal attack on the working class, so many of the things which enabled the ruling class — at least in the West — to reconcile the bulk of the working class to the system are disappearing or being eroded (anti-communism, the welfare state and rising living standards, and a sense of security and optimism about the future). In their place insecurity, discontent and anger are growing. Apprehension about climate change is a new and potentially explosive element here.

We should hold on to our basic ideas. They will be more relevant than ever in the period into which we are entering. The objective conditions are being created in which the socialist movement can grow and attract a significant working-class following and position itself to mount a serious challenge to the system as the crisis deepens.

Peculiarities of the socialist revolution

I want to briefly look at some of the key Marxist ideas about the socialist revolution and the role of the working class. The socialist revolution is unlike anything ever before seen in history.

When the rising bourgeoisie fought for dominance against the feudal-absolutist system, it was already a wealthy possessing class. It owned substantial means of production and exploited wage labour. It had its own intellectuals and control of universities and municipalities. It was the dominant force in parliament (as in England in 1640 or France in 1789).

But for all the drama of the struggle in many countries (England, France and the United States) and as historically important as the bourgeois revolutions were — especially when the necessary mobilisation of the masses radicalised the whole process — the gap between the contending classes was infinitely less than that between working class and capitalists.

In the period of the bourgeois revolutions, two sections of the possessing classes fought for mastery. The object of the struggle was state power which would ensure the supremacy of the capitalist mode of production and the capitalist way of exploiting the subordinate classes. In many cases, former feudalists would become capitalists. And in many countries there was no revolution — the whole thing was settled from above, by compromise (as in Germany).

But the working-class revolution is something radically different. The oppressed class — the class at the very bottom of the social heap — struggles for state power in order to construct a socialist society where all forms of oppression and exploitation are eliminated. The victory of the socialist revolution means the start of a process of transition which will eliminate the whole miserable system where a tiny minority of bourgeois plutocrats own society's means of production and use this to keep the vast

toiling majority in bondage.

While the socialist revolution sets up a dictatorship of the working class, this will be a temporary phenomenon and in time classes and all the junk that goes with it — the state and all violence and money-commodity economy — will wither away. As Engels put it, as society reaches full communism, the real history of humanity can begin — a history of free, highly cultured human beings living in a collectivist and solidaristic society.

One final point here: the realities of the socialist revolution put a tremendous premium on consciousness. The capitalist class and its enormous apparatus of material and ideological control means that the masses will have to be much more aware of what they are fighting for than ever before. Today it's simply not possible to accidentally stumble across the finishing line.

Furthermore, the revolutionary victory will not end the struggle. After the bourgeoisie triumphed over feudalism and established its own regime, the market spread more or less automatically into every corner of the country and every part of the economy. But a socialist society and economy will have to be built consciously — and for a long time. There will be real dangers of backsliding and the regeneration of bureaucracy and privilege. (We need only look at the vicissitudes of the Cuban Revolution to see how all these things play out.) Of course, the weight of these dangers will vary in the different countries.

'No other weapon but organisation'

Under capitalism, the working class owns only its petty, personal property (clothes, a car, perhaps a house, etc.). It doesn't own any part of the economy — the mines, factories, offices, supermarkets, banks etc. — these belong to the capitalists — so in order to live workers have to go and work for the bosses and pay tribute to them (the famous “surplus value” discovered by Marx).

Their labour is “free” only compared to the past (i.e., to slavery and serfdom). Workers can choose their employer but they cannot avoid working for one or another member of the capitalist class. In the essence of the matter they are slaves of the capitalist class as a whole. This is why Marx termed capitalism a system of “wage slavery”. The great mass of workers can never escape their proletarian, propertyless condition. Only by making a socialist revolution can the workers collectively become owners of the means of production which they operate.

Under capitalism, the working class is a ground-down, deeply divided mass — it is simply fodder for exploitation by the bosses in the workplace. Workers are forced to compete against each other for jobs. They are divided by nationality, ethnic background

or skin colour; by skill and type of work (blue collar, white collar, etc.); by their wage and general conditions of work; and by age and gender. These divisions are skilfully exploited by the capitalist class to keep the workers disunited and turned in on each other.

And, of course, through the all-pervasive mass media workers are constantly inundated with petty-bourgeois consumerist propaganda, a fantasy view of what is actually desirable and possible for them.

The only antidote to this extreme heterogeneity is a conscious struggle for organisation and unity in order to fight for a new society. And the highest form of this unity is a mass revolutionary Marxist party.

Here is how Lenin put it in his famous 1904 polemic “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back”:

In its struggle for power the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation. Disunited by the rule of anarchic competition in the bourgeois world, ground down by forced labour for capital, constantly thrust back to the “lower depths” of utter destitution, savagery, and degeneration, the proletariat can, and inevitably will, become an invincible force only through its ideological unification on the principles of Marxism being reinforced by the material unity of organisation, which welds millions of toilers into an army of the working class.³

(As an aside, there are probably not many comrades here who remember May Days in Melbourne and Sydney in the 1970s. We used to carry huge red-and-black portraits in the march. They were absolutely enormous, about eight feet high and each one was mounted on horizontal poles with guy ropes and carried by four comrades — pharaoh-like — on their shoulders. The overall effect was extremely impressive. Anyway, one of these displays consisted of a picture of Lenin above this quote: “In its struggle for power the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation.” I don’t know what the bystanders made of this but it always did it for me.)

From a class in itself to a class for itself

Trotsky makes similar points to Lenin in his 1932 article “What Next”, a sustained attack on the policies of the Stalinised German Communist Party in the face of the rise of Nazism.

The interests of the class cannot be formulated otherwise than in the shape of a program; the program cannot be defended otherwise than by creating the party.

The class, taken by itself, is only material for exploitation. The proletariat assumes an independent role only at that moment when from a social class *in itself* it becomes a political class *for itself*. This cannot take place otherwise than through the medium of

a party. The party is that historical organ by means of which the class becomes class conscious ...

The progress of a class toward class consciousness, that is, the building of a revolutionary party which leads the proletariat is a complex and a contradictory process. The class itself is not homogeneous. Its different sections arrive at class consciousness by different paths and at different times. The bourgeoisie participates actively in this process. Within the working class, it creates its own institutions, or utilises those already existing, in order to oppose certain strata of workers to others. Within the proletariat several parties are active at the same time. Therefore, for the greater part of its historical journey, it remains split politically. The problem of the united front — which arises during certain periods most sharply — originates therein.

The historical interests of the proletariat find their expression in the Communist Party — when its policies are correct. The task of the Communist Party consists in winning over the majority of the proletariat; and only thus is the socialist revolution made possible.⁴

The party is the brain of the class

In a 1921 article written for the French communists, Trotsky looked at the lessons of the Paris Commune of 1871. “We can thumb the whole history of the Commune, page by page,” he wrote, “and we will find in it one single lesson: a strong party leadership is needed.”⁵

The workers’ party — the real one — is not a machine for parliamentary manoeuvres; it is the accumulated and organised experience of the proletariat. It is only with the aid of the party, which rests upon the whole history of its past, which foresees theoretically the path of development, all its stages, and which extracts from it the necessary formula of action, that the proletariat frees itself of always recommencing its history: its hesitations, its lack of decision, its mistakes.

The proletariat of Paris did not have such a party ...

... If the centralised party of revolutionary action had been found at the head of the proletariat of France in September 1870 [when the regime of Napoleon III collapsed], the whole history of France and with it the whole history of humanity would have taken another direction.⁶

When the Commune was proclaimed on March 18, 1871, it was not because the masses had seized power. Rather, its enemies had abandoned the city and fled down the road to Versailles. At this moment, the forces of the bourgeoisie could have been crushed quite easily. Its main leaders could have been arrested; the ranks of the army retreating out of Paris were already disaffected with their officers and could have been

disintegrated by agitation. But none of this was done. As Trotsky explains:

... There was no organisation of a centralised party, having a rounded view of things and special organs for realising its decisions.⁷

And so it went on at every critical point in the brief history of the Commune. The contrast with the ruthless struggle for victory waged by the Bolsheviks in Russia half a century later could not be clearer.

Leadership: theirs & ours

In regard to leadership, things stand very differently for the capitalist class. Relatively, it has a great depth of possibilities. It usually has not one but several political parties which can look after its interests— just look at the Coalition and the ALP in this country, both completely dedicated to ensuring that the wheels of capitalist exploitation turn smoothly and that any rumblings from below are held in check. It has business associations (like the Business Council of Australia), it has the military, intelligence and police chiefs and whole echelons of officials and advisers in the state bureaucracy. There are even wealthy establishment families that specialise in providing political advisers to the bourgeoisie over many generations (e.g., the Downers and Spenders).

Of course, even the capitalist class can have its crises when it is divided or none of its various leadership teams can see a clear way forward (as in the United States today in regard to its failed intervention in Iraq).

But the working class is in a fundamentally different situation. For a start, most ordinary working people are preoccupied with simply surviving — working around eight hours a day (if not actually more), travelling to and from work, looking after their families, etc. It is very hard for them to be politically active on any sustained basis. Moreover, talented individuals are constantly being sucked out of the class — into the ranks of the middle-class professions, into the ALP and reformist trade union bureaucracy (even into the Coalition parties) and into various forms of service to the ruling class.

That is the reason why we attach so much importance to the question of building a Marxist political party. This is the only way the inherent disadvantages of the proletarian situation can be overcome. Working-class leadership is at an absolute premium. There is no possibility of having an A team and a B team; there will only be one revolutionary leadership of the class. The challenge is to build it. As Trotsky points out, this is an immensely difficult task but we know from history that it is not impossible. Furthermore, capitalism itself creates the conditions under which this problem can be resolved.

What is needed is a mass socialist workers party

When we say that a mass socialist party is necessary to lead a revolution, what do we mean? At the end of World War II the Communist Party of Australia had some 16,000 members. (This was already a sharp drop from its 1943 peak of around 23,000.) In Melbourne, one would imagine, it probably had 3000-5000 members. Compared to our small size today it would have been simply enormous! Its cadre would have been everywhere throughout the union movement, on the campuses, in the communities, in cultural circles, etc.

When I'm selling at Barkly Square on Saturday mornings, one of my occasional customers is an old leftie, a former wharfie who was close to the Communist Party (but not a member). He is now in his late 70s or early 80s. His constant lament to me is how much the left movement has declined. He always tells me how in the 1940s and '50s you could not go into a pub in Brunswick or the inner city without being asked to buy the CPA paper *Tribune*. All I can say to him is that we are still struggling, the capitalist system has some unprecedented problems and that we are confident that the socialist movement will again grow into a mass force.

But even this impressive level of development of the CPA was nowhere near enough (let's put aside the party's Stalinist politics). The ALP was undoubtedly many, many times larger and still had the bulk of the working class in its grip. It seems to me that a party capable of successfully leading a revolutionary process in this country would need scores of thousands and probably several hundred thousand members. Perhaps, as in Russia in 1917, it will only acquire a truly mass base in the course of the decisive revolutionary crisis itself.

But even to do this, it is necessary to have an initial cadre base qualitatively greater than what we have at present, otherwise any crisis will simply wash over us. (This is what happened in France during the May-June 1968 revolt despite the heroic efforts of the Trotskyist Ligue Communiste — they were simply too small.)

From one point of view, our whole history has been a struggle to assemble an initial cadre force and get to a point where we can get into large-scale politics and put some real flesh on our revolutionary skeleton. Today, we are a few hundred strong, the next step is get to (say) 500 members, then to double in size and then to become a few thousand and so on. We would still be very small but qualitatively new possibilities would open before us ...

A complicated & tortuous process

The struggle to build an independent working-class political party in a given country is an extremely complicated and tortuous process. There is no general formula applicable

in all cases. A brief look at the history of the international labour movement makes this very clear.

Communist League

At the very beginning of the birth of modern scientific socialism, the *Communist Manifesto* was the result of the efforts of Marx and Engels to gather an international grouping around these ideas. They won over a number of leaders of the League of the Just and got agreement to transform this formerly conspiratorial society into an open political party with a clear program and democratic rules. On this basis they then joined the organisation. As a result of its “extreme makeover”, at its second congress in November 1847 the Communist League (as it was now called) commissioned Marx and Engels to draw up a manifesto for the organisation and the result has entered into history — the most influential political document ever written.

The Communist League was not an association of national political parties. Rather, it brought together small groups of revolutionaries in a number of Western European countries. And when the Europe-wide revolutionary storm of 1848-49 broke, the Communist League didn't really function as a cohesive organisation, even in Germany (although its members there — especially Marx and Engels — exercised a great influence). The organisation did not long survive the defeat of the revolution.

First International

The next big step in international working-class organisation was the formation of the International Working Men's Association (the First International). As Ernest Mandel explains in his *Introduction to Marxism*:

After the years of reaction which followed the defeat of the 1848 revolution, it was mainly trade union and mutual aid organisations of the working class which developed in most countries, with the exception of Germany, where the agitation for universal suffrage enabled Lassalle to constitute a workers political party: the General Association of German Workers [in 1863].

It was through the founding of the First International in 1864 that Marx and his little group of followers really fused with the elementary workers movement of the epoch, and prepared the establishment of socialist parties in most European countries. However paradoxical it may seem, it was not national workers parties that assembled together to constitute the First International. It was the constitution of the First International that allowed the grouping on a national level of local and syndicalist groups adhering to the First International.

When the International broke up after the defeat of the Paris Commune, the

vanguard workers remained conscious of the need for organisation on a national level. After a few early defeats, the socialist parties based on the elementary workers movement of the period were definitively constituted in the 1870s and '80s. The only important exceptions were Great Britain and the USA, where the socialist parties at this time remained marginal to the already strong trade union movement.⁸

Second International

In 1889 the Second International was founded. It became the accepted international organisation of the working-class vanguard. At its congresses the main problems facing the workers movement were debated and decisions codified in resolutions. During the period from its inception to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the European socialist parties and trade unions grew significantly in size and influence.

However, with the development of imperialism, revisionism and opportunism also began to develop in the social-democratic parties. The social basis for this was the trade union bureaucracy and the full-time apparatus of the parties who had long since adapted in practice to the capitalist system. Things came to a head when the leaderships of almost all the parties supported their respective governments in the war. It was left to small left-wing minorities to uphold the principles of revolutionary socialism.

Third International

Following the Russian Revolution, the Communist International (also known as the Comintern or Third International) was founded. It brought together the main revolutionary parties and groups that had opposed the war and which supported the new Soviet regime.

The process was begun of clarifying key questions facing the movement and educating the new communist parties that were being established in the various countries. The first four congresses of the Comintern between 1919 and 1922 played a tremendous role in this regard. The Second Congress, for instance, adopted the famous 21 conditions which set out the necessary political conditions for admission of parties to the Comintern. This was an attempt to exclude reformist and centrist forces and drive them out of the CPs. And the Third Congress adopted a united-front policy in regard to the still powerful social-democratic and centrist parties in the various countries.

The CPs were built by a process of splits and fusions in the various countries over a number of years. In some cases the left-wing forces split from social-democracy (in France the whole party came over after expelling its right wing); in others (like Britain) small socialist groups unified and there were other variants.

The communist parties were organised very differently to the old socialist formations. Here is how James P. Cannon describes the early US Communist Party:

It was composed of thousands of courageous and devoted revolutionists willing to make sacrifices and take risks for the movement. In spite of all their mistakes, they built a party the like of which had never been seen in this country before; that is, a party founded on a Marxist program, with a professional leadership and disciplined ranks ...

They learned to take program seriously. They learned to do away forever with the idea that a revolutionary movement, aiming at power, can be led by people who practice socialism as an avocation. The leader typical of the old Socialist Party was a lawyer practising law, or a preacher practising preaching, or a writer, or a professional man of one kind or another, who condescended to come around and make a speech once in a while. The full-time functionaries were merely hacks who did the dirty work and had no real influence in the party. The gap between the rank and file workers, with their revolutionary impulses and desires, and the petty-bourgeois dabblers at the top was tremendous. The early Communist Party broke away from all that, and was able to do it easily because not one of the old type leaders came over wholeheartedly to the support of the Russian Revolution. The party had to throw up new leaders out of the ranks, and from the very beginning the principle was laid down that these leaders must be professional workers for the party, must put their whole time and their whole lives at the disposal of the party. If one is thinking of a party that aims to lead the workers in a real struggle for power, then no other type of leadership is worth considering.⁹

You can also get a real sense of the differences between the old social-democratic parties and the new CPs by looking at the theses adopted in 1921 by the Third Congress of the Comintern on “The Organisational Structure of the Communist Parties, the Methods and Content of Their Work”. (We have published this resolution in a photocopied pamphlet edition.) In fact, these theses are very much a manual on how to gradually transform those parties which had come from the old tradition into parties with a much more active, involved and politically educated membership. (This process, of course, was quite different to the later “Bolshevisation” campaigns which really served to stifle the independent life of the CPs and subordinate them to the developing Soviet bureaucracy.)

Trotskyist movement

While Trotsky’s project of a Fourth International never assumed mass form, the various Trotskyist organisations did amass some rich and varied experiences (both

positive and negative) in trying to build themselves from small nuclei into larger formations.

Of course, the most instructive are those of the US Trotskyists under the leadership of James P. Cannon, whose early years are chronicled so brilliantly and instructively in his wonderful *History of American Trotskyism*. The heroic initial accumulation of cadres, the fusion with another militant proletarian organisation, the successful entry into the Socialist Party, then the split with the revisionist Burnham-Shachtman group — all these episodes (and there are many more) illustrate different tactics for building the revolutionary party in particular conditions.

In Australia ...

In Australia our party-building situation is quite specific. If you date it from the 1970 split with Bob Gould in the original Resistance and the formation of the Socialist Youth Alliance, our current has existed for 36 years. Over this time our numbers have never exceeded 350 members but gradually — through constant and unflagging effort — our strategic position has strengthened considerably. Over the years, our main historic rivals have fallen away — the Communist Party and the smaller Trotskyist groups (the Healyites and the ISO, although Socialist Alternative remains an ongoing concern for us).

The establishment in 1991 of *Green Left Weekly* — a non-party paper underwritten by the DSP — has been absolutely vital. It has proven to be an ideal transitional vehicle which has enabled us to greatly magnify our message, win widespread respect and attract a significant layer of people around us. And generally we have been able to successfully work around any limitations that its independent form imposes on us.

Socialist Alliance has played a similar role as a transitional vehicle and is ideally suited to exploit the growing disillusion with the ALP and the general progressive discontent looking for a left expression.

The burning problem for us remains that of growing, of putting flesh on our bones, recruiting new comrades and giving younger comrades the experiences and training to enable them to assume key positions of responsibility in the party (especially as organisers and branch secretaries and on the national leadership) and in the broader movement. We have to ensure our survival as well as further strengthen our influence on the left. As I said before, we simply remain too small. In our current situation, another 50 active, politically integrated comrades would make an enormous difference, let alone a further 100.

Our tradition

We have always been an outward-looking movement seeking to link up with others whenever there was a basis for it. This was especially evident in the 1980s. This was the period in which we moved away from Trotskyism and revised our line on the Labor Party. We explored every possibility of linking up with other socialists — the Communist Party in 1986-87 when they moved away from their previous line of complete support for the ALP-ACTU wage-freeze accord, and the Socialist Party (today's CPA) in 1988-89. And when the precursor movement to today's Green Party started up in the early 1990s, we attempted to be part of it.

For various reasons, nothing concrete came of all these efforts. However, we gained valuable experience and showed that we, at least, were dead serious about working realistically for unity of the left and progressive forces.

Socialist Alliance

The Socialist Alliance project is wholly in the spirit of these earlier efforts. Of course, the project has gone through a real evolution since its formation in 2001. Apart from ourselves, all the other left groups who originally affiliated have now left or withdrawn from any meaningful involvement. But, as the October conference in Geelong demonstrated, Socialist Alliance remains an indispensable vehicle for our collaboration with some key industrial militants and some important indigenous activists. It also provides a home for a layer of leftists disgusted with the neo-liberal evolution of the ALP and for whom the middle-class Greens cannot be a real alternative.

The general point to grasp here is that the transitional vehicle of a broad but militant socialist organisation is essential for us to attempt to relate to the large numbers of people turning away from social-democracy as the capitalist crisis bites deeper and deeper. Under its own banner, the DSP directly cannot intercept more than a handful of these people. Potentially, at least, Socialist Alliance can attract thousands. That is the difference.

And through Socialist Alliance, we can interest many more people in the Marxist ideas of the DSP. That is the clear record so far.

A particle of the fate of humanity

Comrades, as everyone knows, 2006 was a very hard and difficult year for our party, even an unprecedented one. But we came through it in relatively good order, with some very definite successes to our credit.

That said, however, being a socialist in Australia today remains a grind. There is a constant pressure to fall in a heap. The unending neo-liberal vileness coming from all bourgeois rostrums and the ceaseless consumerist message being pumped out by the

media seems to numb so many people and it can certainly affect our morale. We can come to feel that it's all hopeless, that we are irrelevant, that we'll never make the sort of progress we need and so on and so on.

Then, more concretely, there is the Howard factor. We meet so many people who are in despair, who think Howard's seemingly permanent dominance of federal politics shows that the Australian masses are a write-off, they are forever right-wing, racist or whatever. And on top of this we have the endless rightward gallop of the Labor Party. With his appalling positions on logging and welfare, for instance, Kevin Rudd seems determined to show anyone who was even slightly encouraged by Beazley's demise, just how comprehensively the ALP has embraced the various neo-liberal nostrums.

The necessary antidotes to this permanent ideological pressure on us are no mystery — Marxist theoretical conviction, historical perspective, a clear analysis of what is going on and why, avoiding impressionism and panic, and activity and collaboration with others in the framework of the party.

Actually, this is a good time to be an active socialist. We are necessary, perhaps as never before. However grim things look, the future of the human race is not preordained. It will be determined in the course of the struggle. What we do — what all those around the world who think like us do — will decide what happens.

If you're upset about the way things are going — then do something. Get active in the socialist movement, get involved — or get more involved. You'll feel better and — far more importantly — what you do will make a difference.

Of course, the revolutionary movement is not for those who want an easy and stress-free life. On the contrary, there is an endless amount of work to be done and far too few comrades to do it. But, on the other hand, nothing in this world is more worthwhile or more satisfying than participating in the struggle for the communist future of humanity.

Tensions are inevitable whenever people work together under pressure but the amazing thing, really, is not the occasional frictions but how harmoniously we all work together most of the time. We are lucky: we get to see people at their very best, freely collaborating to advance a great emancipatory project.

For millions of people around the world, Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez is rehabilitating the idea of socialism as the only answer to the madness into which capitalism and imperialism are plunging the planet. We fully understand the need to connect with this. But what this should mean for us — above everything else — is that here, in Australia, we need to re-dedicate ourselves to the struggle and persevere with our efforts to build the socialist movement in this country.

I'd like to conclude with a passage from James P. Cannon. He wrote these words

on November 26, 1944 from Sandstone Prison in Minnesota. He was one of 18 leaders and militants of the Socialist Workers Party who were jailed for their unyielding opposition to the imperialist war being waged by the US rulers.

People cannot live without perspectives, without hope for the future. Those who hope to organise a great movement of the masses must never forget this, never fail to inspire them with confidence that the future will be better than the present if only they strive to make it so.

The greatest power of Marxism derives from the fact that it gives a rational basis to the impulse of the masses to make a better world, a scientific assurance that the irresistible laws of social evolution are working on their side; that the idea of socialism, of the good society of the free and equal, is not a utopian fantasy but the projection of future reality. When this idea takes hold of the people it will truly be the greatest power in the world.

It seems to me somewhat undignified, somewhat lacking in the sense of proportion, for one who has grasped this idea to be deterred or turned aside by such trifles as concern for one's personal fate. *No importa*, as they say in Spanish — “it does not matter”. What matters, as [Trotsky] expressed it, is “the consciousness that one participates in the building of a better future, that one carries on [one's] shoulders a particle of the fate of [humanity], and that one's life will not have been lived in vain”.

... Much of the propaganda of the past has been too matter-of-fact; the conception of the role of the party too limited; the self-assumed obligations of the individual too paltry, too narrowly calculated. The world will be changed by people who believe in the boundless power of the ideas of the party and who set no limits to the demands which the party may make upon them.¹⁰

Notes

Class in Australia Today

- 1 Kuhn ed., *Class and Struggle in Australia* (Pearson Longman: Frenchs Forest, 2005), p. 58.
- 2 Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto and Its Relevance for Today* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 1998), pp. 45-46.
- 3 Marx, *The Class Struggles in France* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 2003), p. 254.
- 4 Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto and Its Relevance for Today*, pp. 54-55.
- 5 Khun ed., *Class and Struggle in Australia*, p. 147.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

The Socialist Revolution & the Revolutionary Party

- 1 <http://stangoff.com/?p=423>.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7 (Progress publishers: Moscow, 1977), p. 412.
- 4 Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1971), p. 163.
- 5 Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky on the Paris Commune* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1970), p. 61.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 8 Mandel, *Introduction to Marxism* (Pluto Press: London, 1982), pp. 81-82.
- 9 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, (Pioneer Publishers: New York, 1944), Ch. I, pp. 13-14.
- 10 Cannon, *Letters from Prison* (Merit Publishers: New York, 1968), Letter 136, p. 236.

Is Australia still a class society? Graham Matthews discusses this question from a Marxist standpoint and shows that in neo-liberal, 21st-century Australia the class struggle is still the motor force of history and politics. He looks at the tasks faced by socialists to make the working class aware of its historic role of replacing this rotten exploitative system with a socialist society.

Dave Holmes looks at the crisis posed by catastrophic climate change and argues that only a struggle to change the system and replace capitalism with socialism will save humanity. He puts the case that the working class remains the fundamental agency of revolutionary social change and looks at the arduous and complicated process of trying to build a mass-based socialist party which can lead the struggle for a new society.

Resistance books