

TRADE UNIONS AND EDUCATION

TED GNATENKO

Recently an Adelaide newspaper quoted Commissioner F.W. Brown as saying: 'No union is an island'.

I would confess that it would be a very rare occasion when I would have to agree with an arbitration commissioner, however, in this instance I have to acknowledge that he is dead right.

Among the forces who were instrumental and are going to be instrumental for the shape of our society the trade union movement occupies a unique position. This position bestows a tremendous amount of responsibilities on each and every one of its members. This, of course, takes into account more than half of the working people in Australia.

As a whole the trade unions have become islands within themselves, not because they wanted to be such, but because the members have failed to understand their role and responsibilities as union members, on the one hand, and citizens with voting rights, on the other.

If that were not the case, we would never have had a conservative government after the achievement of universal franchise.

COUNTER PUNCHING

As trade unionists we have accepted however tacitly, that managers were born to manage, owners were born to own and politicians are destined to rule on our behalf. Our traditional method of operation has been one of counter punching. We have had many outstanding industrial disputes, and we have witnessed a tremendous evolution of tactics employed during such disputes. Nevertheless, all of those things have come about as a result of opposition to something on which the bosses or the governments have made a decision in the first place. A classical example of this can be seen during the current economic crisis. In the event of sackings in some places workers would react in a very good fashion; they might decide on a work-in, as was recently the case with the threats of dismissals by General Motors, or they may implement overtime bans as well as moving unanimous resolutions condemning the boss. But very rarely, if at all, are attacks or challenges made upon the very system which is responsible for the unemployment of almost 400,000 Australian workers and deprivation of more than 1,000,000 others. And yet among its objectives the A.C.T.U. has: socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

DEFENCE ORGANISATIONS

This objective has never received the priority recognition it deserves, simply because the union movement has evolved primarily into defence organisations, with little or no time to challenge the status quo.

Is it because the ordinary working people do not desire a change? Of course not. Desire for change, and initiating concerted moves to get it, can only come about when the people have adequate knowledge and understanding of the relationship between the different components of our society, the role they play, and for whom.

THE MEDIA

Unfortunately this very important role of education has been almost exclusively the domain of the so-called popular press.

By and large, workers get their information from the newspapers, radio or television; they read interpretation of events chosen for them by the press barons.

The major task of the capitalist press is not to bring information to its readers but to mould their opinions.

A good example of this is the first general strike in this country, the Medibank strike. Almost half of Australia's wage earners went to work. They did so not because they were against the Medibank scheme, but because they believed that there are distinct differences between political and industrial issues. Where did they get such ideas from? Why did they form such an opinion?

They accepted the message of the newspaper proprietors. Although every media owner knows perfectly well that matters relating to wages and conditions (e.g. awards, workmen's compensation acts, long service leave, annual leave, hours of work, national wage case) are the product of state bodies, they use their newspapers, radio and television stations to spread the idea that industrial matters and general politics are quite separate realms. Acceptance of this view seriously weakens the working class as a political force.

ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE

Whilst the views expressed so far may appear to portray a fairly bleak picture, that was the assessment made by the national conference of my own organisation, almost a decade ago. Having reached this conclusion the members of the Amalgamated Metal Workers' and Shipwrights' Union did accept the challenge and began attempts to work towards overcoming the obstacles placed before us by the Establishment. Continuous efforts have been made and are being made to break away from the union being an island concept.

During the late sixties, education subcommittees were being formed in every state of the Commonwealth, with the purpose of conducting a planned and systematic approach to trade union education. At the initial stages the education program was financed through the support of our members by way of levies. Now up to 3% of the union contributions are allocated to provide education for the members of our organisation.

Every state with the exception of Tasmania, now employs a full-time education officer. These officers are recruited exclusively from within our own ranks.

A.M.W.S.U. EDUCATION PROGRAM

The education program within the A.M.W.S.U. can be divided into the following areas:

1. National schools.
2. Basic shop stewards schools.
3. Industry schools.

NATIONAL SCHOOLS

National schools are of one-week duration. They cater for union officers and rank-and-file members who hold a position of direct responsibility within the union. Our current program includes three such schools for the current year. If the present attendance is maintained, at least once every two years state councilors and union officials would have attended one such school. Attendance by union officials at these schools is mandatory.

The contents of this course are exclusively devoted to political economy. Listed below are the topics included in the national school held in Adelaide during November 1976.

1. A broad introduction to political economy.
2. The capitalist business cycle.
3. The Keynesian answer.
4. How politics and economics line up.
5. Breakdown of Keynesian policy under the impact of the multi-nationals.
6. Friedmanism: a weapon of the multi-nationals.
7. A study of the current world economy.
8. Distribution of wealth in Australia during Labor's term in office.
9. The politics and the strategies of the multi-nationals.
10. Socialist economics.

Up to date the success of these courses can be attributed to people like Professor Ted Wheelwright, Professor Bruce McFarlane, Dr. Bob Catley, Herb Thompson and others who have participated and conducted the school.

BASIC COURSE FOR SHOP STEWARDS

The A.M.W.S.U. has recognised that dedication and enthusiasm alone are no substitute for a methodical and concrete approach to solving matters on the shop floor. The shop steward requires knowledge and confidence to do his/her job properly. The following topics are included in the three-day basic course for shop stewards.

1. Your union and how it works.
2. Workshop structure.
3. Building shop committees.
4. Know your award.
5. Know your employer.
6. How to negotiate.
7. How to conduct a dispute.
8. Workmen's compensation.
9. Social welfare legislation.

INDUSTRY SCHOOLS

This type of school caters for members within one industry, e.g. auto industry, state government employees, manufacturing industry, and so on.

We endeavour to research the employer or employers; examine their viability, level of employment, natural attrition, technological change, profitability and distribution of profits, prospects for improvement of employment opportunities as well as wages and conditions.

In addition to the courses outlined above, members of our organisation take on active part in the programs conducted by the Trade Union Training Authority. The courses provided by T.U.T.A. have proved to be of immense value to those members who have attended so far.

The main problem which confronts us practically at every school is a shortage of research materials, on specific industries or employers. To do a comprehensive analysis of an industry is fairly time-consuming and, at the moment, we have not got the resources to do the job as well as we would like. To give you some indication of the magnitude of the problem, in South Australia we have one education officer to cater for the needs of 700 shop stewards; how many teachers would we need for 700 students?

This is an area in which students of political economy could prove to be of tremendous assistance if we all agree that LABOUR IS THE SOURCE OF ALL WEALTH. Such help is urgently needed now, if we desire to ensure that unions do not become islands within themselves.

A.M.W.S.U.
ADELAIDE

RADICAL EDUCATION DOSSIER (RED) is produced and published three times a year by the Radical Education Group (RED G). RED G is a group of socialist activists with concern for education. As a member of RED G, you:

- will receive a monthly newsletter
- can participate in study groups
- can benefit from support groups
- can use the varied resource centres being set up
- can attend all business meetings
- can participate in all group activities

-----Subscribe to RED-----

Complete, clip and mail this form to: 10 Reuss St, Glebe, NSW, 2037, making cheques payable to THE RADICAL EDUCATION GROUP

Please enter my subscription to Radical Education Dossier (3) issues)

Name

Address for Delivery

..... Postcode

Enclosed please find cheque, etc for \$2.40 (\$2.60 interstate; libraries \$5.00)

As well as Radical Education Dossier, I am also interested in membership of RED G.

Please send me details on the group's activities and my nearest contact.

YES

NO

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a license from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)