

Correspondence and Ads

Journal of Australian Political Economy

The Editors,

The exchange of views in JAPE 12/13 was a useful contribution to the Australian debate on left and socialist strategy. I'm sure the Journal's readership welcomed your decision to organise the issue. It is therefore all the more unfortunate that the issue was to some extent marred by a lapse in normal editorial practice. I refer to the deletion of important sections of my article, "Alternative Strategies: Left Nationalism and Revolutionary Marxism", without consulting me. I would like to take this opportunity to present to JAPE readers an argument, from my final draft, which provided the framework for the whole article. This argument was arbitrarily removed from the published version. The matter is of immediate interest and not just one of setting the record straight, in view of responses on the left to the prospect of the next Federal elections.

In the introduction to the article I wrote that there have been three alternatives posed to the ALP's traditional right-wing reformism, since 1975 (not two, as the published version states). The most important of these (deleted from the JAPE version) was the development of political apathy, combined with a continuing level of industrial militancy (Alec Kahn's "The Fraser Years" in International Socialism 11, 1981, presents the evidence in some detail). The disarmament demonstrations of 1982 have been the first indications that a new, mass political movement could be built, since the fall of the Whitlam Government and the decline of the anti-uranium movement. At the same time there has been no sign in terms, for example, of substantial membership growth or large rallies, that the ALP is generating much enthusiasm in the working class. Nevertheless the Fraser years have not seen any significant weakening of trade union organisation. The Industrial Relations Bureau was a flop, attempts to legitimise scabbing -- Krutulis, Biggs etc -- and to curtail civil liberties in Queensland and Western Australia have failed. During 1981, the Transport Workers' Union and the Australian Telecommunications Employees' Association smashed wage indexation. To the Government's embarrassment, its rhetoric about the resources boom was the backdrop to the most important wages push since 1973-74. The advent of the recession and "no-further-claims" deals have led to a fall in the level of industrial struggle, since late 1981. But the maintenance of trade union organisation and the, somewhat slower, pace of struggle is still encouraging.

This, the most widespread response to the crisis, in the working class, does not challenge the capitalist system. But it does provide opportunities for advocates of the other two, less influential responses -- an Alternative Economic Strategy and a revolutionary marxist approach -- to win support for their anti-capitalist politics. The point is that the AES and marxist approach have to be judged on their ability to relate to and build the struggles that are going on. The body of my article seeks to demonstrate that the AES is incapable of doing this.

Events since the argument and the whole article were written have, I believe, confirmed their major conclusions. Rather than building on the struggles that are still taking place, many advocates of an AES have given in to the difficulties presented by the economic downturn. It is more difficult to fight the boss now, but it's not impossible, nor is it impossible to generalise such struggles. The tendency to back down is well illustrated in the Amalgamated Metal Workers' and Shipwrights' Union's pamphlet Australia on the Rack: "To make up those losses we would need to claim far more from the employers to get the necessary 'after tax' take-home pay ... It is certainly not possible for the majority, including the majority of metalworkers" p13. Previous AMWSU publications stressed the responsibility of employers -- even if undue emphasis was placed on multinational corporations -- for the crisis. The latest pamphlet focuses on the Fraser Government's responsibility for Australia's problems and claims that a different Government could solve them and bring back full employment, p. 26. Attention is distracted from the struggles still going on in the workplace and street to the task of electing a Labor Government. It is no coincidence that faces of eight Shadow Ministers grace the pages of Australia on the Rack. Its only suggestions for action are publicity campaigns, petitions, letters and telegrams to politicians, union leaders and churches.

Incomes policy/social contract is merging as the most important operational component of earlier AESs. The abstract nature of AESs, which I tried to highlight in my article, has opened the way to a growing convergence between the pronouncements of left nationalists in the unions and Labor Party and their more right-wing counterparts. The "social wage campaign" has successfully blurred the difference between a fightback against the cuts and a deal with a Labor Government to restrain wages.

My article sought to demonstrate that an AES is not a road forward for the Australian working class. In terms of the fundamental criterion for judging any strategy (mention of which was excised from the published version) -- its ability to build on the best aspects of current struggles -- the AES has failed. The differences between the politics behind an AES, left nationalism, and the timid, right-wing policies of the Labor Party in 1982 have shrunk. The real "alternative strategy" remains revolutionary marxism, whose starting and end points are the class struggle.

Yours sincerely,

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