

Socialist Responses to the 'Resources Boom' Conference: Discussion

The 'Socialist Responses to the "Resources Boom" conference', held in Canberra last October, played an important role in sparking off many of the debates and discussions featured in this issue. The conference was explicitly oriented to the development of strategy responses by the labour movement to the structural and other social changes accompanying the "resources boom". In this respect, the conference was both unusual and especially valuable.

Major concerns, raised in conference papers and discussions, included for example, the question of whether a 'resources boom' was actually occurring. This was not a source of disagreement at the Conference; the consensus was that although the amount of new investment was uncertain and it may not be enough to constitute a 'true' boom, there was no doubt that most investment that was occurring in Australia was going into natural resource-based activities and that consequently the overall structure of economic activity was in the process of being fundamentally changed. To this was added what actually constituted a more serious divergence of views, namely, over whether a "boom" of any sort was wanted. This seemed to spring very largely from different and almost competing definitions of socialism. In particular, there was a divergence between those who emphasised the role of the state, particularly at the national level, and those whose main focus was self-management and local community initiative.

Another clearcut disagreement to emerge concerned the type of policy response which a federal Labor government should pursue. Broadly speaking, one point of view suggested that the flow of private investment into resource based activities should be allowed to proceed and that policy should concentrate on the use of taxation measures and other instruments of macro-economic management to redistribute the benefits. The alternative stressed the importance of direct intervention in the process of new industry establishment, for example by bargaining over matters like control of technology and levels of employment and by taking public equity in certain projects and industries, such as aluminium. Closely related to this particular argument was disagreement over whether or not the manufacturing sector as a whole will inevitably be disadvantaged by the "boom".

Some people at the conference saw wage gains as the principal means by which the benefits would or could be redistributed and accordingly regarded workplace struggle as the most important or even only focus of political activity. However, the more widespread view was that expressed by Stewart West (federal Opposition spokesperson on the environment) in opening the Conference. He commented that a period of bitterness and polarisation was likely because of high wage claims agreed to by companies during the construction phase of major resource projects, and argued for a comprehensive prices and incomes policy. West acknowledged that the most important components of a comprehensive policy, controls on non-wage incomes and taxation reform, would be very difficult to achieve.

One consistent theme in discussions was the need for new forms of public ownership and, more generally, new approaches to the problem of controlling large enterprises. There seemed to be widespread support for the view that this control would have to be exercised by government, but that a mass movement based on political action in the workplace was essential to bolster the resolve of any ALP government in tackling this problem.

One session of the Conference was devoted to discussing the role and modes of action of local action groups. The question was posed: Can such groups effect real change by themselves or is the result of their efforts merely a small redistribution of costs and benefits? Some people saw a potential conflict within local action groups themselves between short term and long term goals. While recognising that such groups can be most important in politicising those who take part and in persuading bystanders that ordinary citizens are not necessarily totally powerless, the danger of disillusionment was acknowledged.

Mary Owen (from the Working Women's Centre, Melbourne) spoke on the broader question of the impact of industry restructuring and the Fraser Government's policies upon women and their families. Wider questions relating to the gender implications of socialist strategy were canvassed in the subsequent discussion. In the first instance, there was broad nodding agreement on the part of the predominantly male audience that socialism must start at home. This was expressed as follows:

Until men demonstrate the principles of socialism by sharing equally with their partners the unpaid work, the monetary rewards for labour, the decision-making and the responsibility for children and other, unable to take care of themselves, the rhetoric of socialism will have a hollow ring.

Secondly, there was some general examination of that old socialist-feminist chestnut, namely, the relationship between capitalist production and domestic labour. Or to put the problem another way, is domestic labour an aspect of capital? The question of the views of capitalists themselves was also discussed.

One final key issue which pervaded much of the discussion at the Conference was specifically, 'nationalism' and the internationalisation of capital. Some people questioned whether in Australia today nationalism is necessarily progressive and expressed concern that it might lend itself to xenophobia.

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