

rethinking SOCIALISM

EDDIE WEBSTER reviews *Participating in management: union organising on a new terrain* (by Andy Banks and Jack Metzgar, Labour Research Review, Midwest Centre for Labour Research, Chicago, Illinois, 1990) and *Age of Democracy: the politics of post-Fordism* (by John Mathews, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989).

There was much that divided revolutionaries and reformists a century ago, but what they all shared in common was a vision that an alternative to capitalism was both desirable and possible. They disagreed about how to achieve this goal, but the destination was not in doubt.

The present crisis within the left arises from the collapse of that vision in both its evolutionary and revolutionary form. It is no longer simply capitalism that is in crisis; socialism is now also in a deep crisis. "At the beginning of this century socialists could believe, and could ask others to believe," writes Anthony Wright, "that socialism is always and everywhere synonymous with democracy and freedom.

"This is no longer possible today. We know that capitalism and democracy can be combined (not that they necessarily are), as yet we do not know this of socialism."

We also know that the living conditions of workers have been highest when the capitalist economy has been growing (although again this is not necessarily the case: the South African boom of the sixties shows that capitalist growth does not necessarily improve the living conditions of workers).

In fact the left in Europe and America has relied on the *expansion* of capitalism (not upon its crises) for its own advance. This has led Gavin Kitching in his book *Rethinking socialism* to the heretical view that "socialists have an interest not in capitalism's collapse in the current crisis, but in its surmounting that crisis and in its continuing development."

Two recent publications from respected labour-linked intellectuals provide further support for this heretical position. The first is by two Americans, Andy Banks and Jack Metzgar and the second



Eddie Webster: "need to rethink the socialist tradition"

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is by an Australian, John Mathews. They both argue that a new model of unionism is needed to meet the new challenges facing the labour movement.

Worker participation in management

Breaking with the American left's opposition to any form of 'worker participation', Banks and Metzgar propose in the *Labour Research Review* what they call "a union-empowered model of worker participation in management." They argue strongly that unions should become involved in - and in fact take control of - participation programmes.

Many union members are part of worker participation programmes, they note. But only a few unions actively promote the concept, and most accept management's definition of what participation is. Banks and Metzgar argue that unions need to challenge management's de-

finition: there is a difference between "a vague promise of co-operation by management" and a process of participation "that strengthens the union as an institution," they write.

Extending collective bargaining - or subverting it?

The management approach, which they call 'co-operationism', is largely a way of winning over workers to management goals, weakening unions and taking advantage of workers' knowledge for company goals. On the other hand, *genuine* participation of workers in management is the key to developing an organising model for the union of the future, they argue. Unions should use participation to *extend* collective bargaining, rather than allowing management to use participation to *subvert* collective bargaining.

Workers often have first-

hand knowledge to correct managements' mistakes. Workers can use their superior understanding of the production process, Banks and Metzgar argue, to organise themselves and solve problems in the workplace for their own ends.

But, they insist, unions must exclude management from shop councils (supervisors now dominate many participation projects). They call this approach the 'organising model' of trade unionism. This 'organising model' of worker participation must cover major management decisions such as investment, in addition to the usual shop-floor problems.

Current research by Leger and Mothibeli supports the belief that workers have valuable knowledge about the production process which is usually ignored by management. Through careful interviews among underground gold miners, they have demonstrated that these men have a body of 'working knowledge' about rock-falls. British miners call this working knowledge, 'pit sense': workers have a sense when the rocks are going to fall.

While this certainly shows the potential for greater participation of workers in underground safety, management has not shown any willingness to enter into *genuine* participation over safety issues. Instead they bypass this knowledge and ignore the potential for par-

ticipation that exists at shaft level.

While it is true that management has historically governed the work-place in South Africa in a coercive way (what has been called racial despotism), this racist and coercive system of control is now under challenge.

In a study by Judy Maller of worker participation, she concludes that in SA only Volkswagen has begun to enter into any serious sharing of decision-making. Her reasons for arguing this echo the 'organising model of trade unionism' put forward by Banks and Metzgar: Volkswagen has recognised the power of organised labour on the shopfloor and it has begun the difficult and dangerous task of making decisions jointly.

A new model of unionism

The second book is more wide ranging and ambitious than the first. In *Age of Democracy* John Mathews argues that we need a new model of unionism to come to terms with economic and industrial restructuring. Unions must abandon the old model of abstentionism, he says, and lead, with other social movements, the democratisation of economic and industrial life.

Unions, he says, must move beyond their current *defensive collectivism*, and seek to establish a new agenda for industry and the workplace. This means :

Unions must become the



Workers at a union meeting: John Mathews suggests in his book that a model of unionism is necessary which will 'come to terms with economic and industrial restructuring'.

Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin

principal promoters of high technology and efficiency in industry so that they can marginalise the New Right employers who will be retarding productivity in the name of 'managerial prerogatives'.

- Unions must unleash the energy, creativity and imagination of their members, in a sustained drive for more productive and more democratic workplace structures.
- Unions must concentrate their energies on the broad economic issues.
- Unions must prepare the ground very carefully before they use collective action.
- Unions should concentrate their bargaining on non-wage issues that affect economic performance and work experience, and settle wage issues through central political negotiation.
- Unions need to influence

the pattern of investment, so that they can respond to the concerns of social movements regarding environmental, peace and gender issues.

Social contracts

Mathews calls this model of unionism, 'political unionism', because it calls for conscious intervention at the political level and it sets itself conscious social goals, such as low unemployment, low inflation, and social development. The means for achieving this, he says, are the 'social contracts' which can be negotiated between the trade union movement and social democratic political parties.

In the case of Australia, the Australian Congress of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Australian Labour Party (ALP) negotiated an Accord in 1983.

To back up this new

model of political unionism, Mathews proposes "a new mobilising vision" of "post-Fordist associative democracy". Although it sounds very jargonistic, the central ideas are easy to grasp, relevant and sensible. He argues that we need to extend our notion of democracy from the political arena to the industrial and economic arenas.

Importantly, he says, the state must be seen as the institution which supports and co-ordinates the process of change, rather than the institution which 'delivers' social transformation. That is why he speaks of *associative* democracy - the emphasis is on *associations* of workers and citizens as the agents of democratisation. Associations such as trade unions should be involved in transforming the economy from within, rather than the state regulating it from without.

Rejection of Leninism

Underlying Mathews' vision is a clear rejection of Leninism and the Bolshevik epoch. This, he says, was a wrong turning of enormous magnitude because it led dedicated socialists into a dead-end - the single-minded but futile concentration on the conquest of state power, while neglecting all the immediate social and economic issues that urgently need attention.

Bolshevism also led to a defensive anti-communism among social-democratic and labour parties. The split be-

tween communist and social-democratic parties within the western labour movement, he believes, is now breaking down, making way for a new vision - associative democracy guided by the social democratic movement in the 1990s.

He draws a crucial lesson from the past. If the economy is healthy (ie there is continuing growth and profitability) the labour movement will be far more likely to succeed in constructing a new social order than if the economy plunges into recession.

Where he differs from the 'New Right' is that he believes that only the organised social movements, rather than capital and the state, have the ability to reconstruct the economy. In order to accomplish this, the labour movement should lead the social movements by forging alliances at both the political and membership level.

Socialism not very helpful

How relevant is the idea of socialism to Mathews' vision? He addresses this question in his most recent book, *A culture of power - Rethinking labour movement goals for the 1990s*. Socialism, he says, is not very helpful in meeting the challenge of the 'New Right' because it has a bad image.

Socialism is linked to economic depression rather than growth, to despots such as Pol Pot in Cambodia, to greater state power in the economy, to higher taxation.

All of these, he says, are certainly undesirable images, or policies which the labour movement does not necessarily want to follow.

Besides, he says, it is unclear what the term 'socialism' means. Is it a moral and ethical vision, or is there such a thing as a socialist economics? Much of the recent work on "feasible socialism", he says, turns out to be, on closer inspection, the description of a *democratised capitalism*. If democratisation of the capitalist economy is the goal, then it would be better stated as such, and not confused with early, romantic notions of socialism.

His final criticism of the term socialism is that it is not helpful in formulating goals because it does not generate a programme. What is needed is an alternative vision that moves beyond socialism - what he calls "post-socialism".

Relevant to SA?

There is much that is relevant for the South African labour movement in Mathews' arguments, particularly in the light of the current debate on the 'social contract'. However two points of qualification must be mentioned.

Firstly, he believes that his "new paradigm" is only relevant in countries that have "an advanced democracy with a high level of technology and industry, and strong labour and social movements". Our labour

movement is still struggling for the basic rights of political democracy which Mathews argues the Australian movement needs to move beyond. Half our population is unemployed, illiterate and living in poverty; these basic needs must be the priority in any strategy for labour in the 1990's.

Secondly, unlike the South African labour movement, the Australian labour movement has declined in size from 51% of employed workers in 1976, to 42% in 1988 - as it has in other 'advanced' countries.

The Australian labour movement has also never expressed socialist goals. The dominant strand in our movement has from its beginnings been closely associated with socialism. This continues in the present, both through the alliance between COSATU and the SACP, and through COSATU's own programmes.

However, it would be too easy to dismiss Mathews' argument as inappropriate for the South African left. The central point behind Mathews' challenge is the recognition that no country can avoid the effects of global economic restructuring. Those countries that have tried have only slipped deeper into decline, diminishing the chances of any gains for labour.

Unless, he is suggesting, labour takes the initiative and develops a national economic strategy, the 'New Right' will be able to impose

its narrow sectional vision on the country.

Social contracts can fail

But the 'social contract' strategy for national economic development is not a simple solution. 'Social contracts' can fail, as they did in Britain in the 1970's. In that case the Labour Party government entered into an agreement with the Trade Union Congress (TUC) to control prices, redistribute income, improve housing, freeze rents and expand social services, in return for a voluntary wage freeze.

The agreement eventually collapsed when left-wing unions argued that the government had not delivered its side of the bargain. The failure of this social contract prepared the way for the triumph of the 'New Right' when Thatcher came to power in the 1979 election.

The same applies to any 'social contract' with a future democratic government in South Africa. Unless the government can show visible benefits, a 'social contract' will fail as it did in Britain in the seventies. ANC economist Tito Mboweni said at a recent management conference, that if five years after liberation there is no significant progress towards meeting South Africa's housing shortage, heads will roll.

But clearly the housing shortage cannot be resolved by a future government on its own. A resolution of this problem, as with many other social problems, depends as

well on the strength of grass-roots social movements such as labour. A 'social contract' will only work if these organisations have the power to back up their proposals and compel the employers and the new government to accept them.

These two books suggest that the labour movement in South Africa faces an opportunity and a threat. The opportunity is to build a new vision of the future, in which labour plays a leading role in social transformation. The threat is that capital will enter into a partnership with labour at the expense of the majority of the working people.

But the labour movement will not be in a position to take advantage of this opportunity unless it takes seriously the challenges from writers such as Mathews and Banks and Metzgar. The time is overdue for the left in South Africa to rethink the socialist tradition. ☆

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