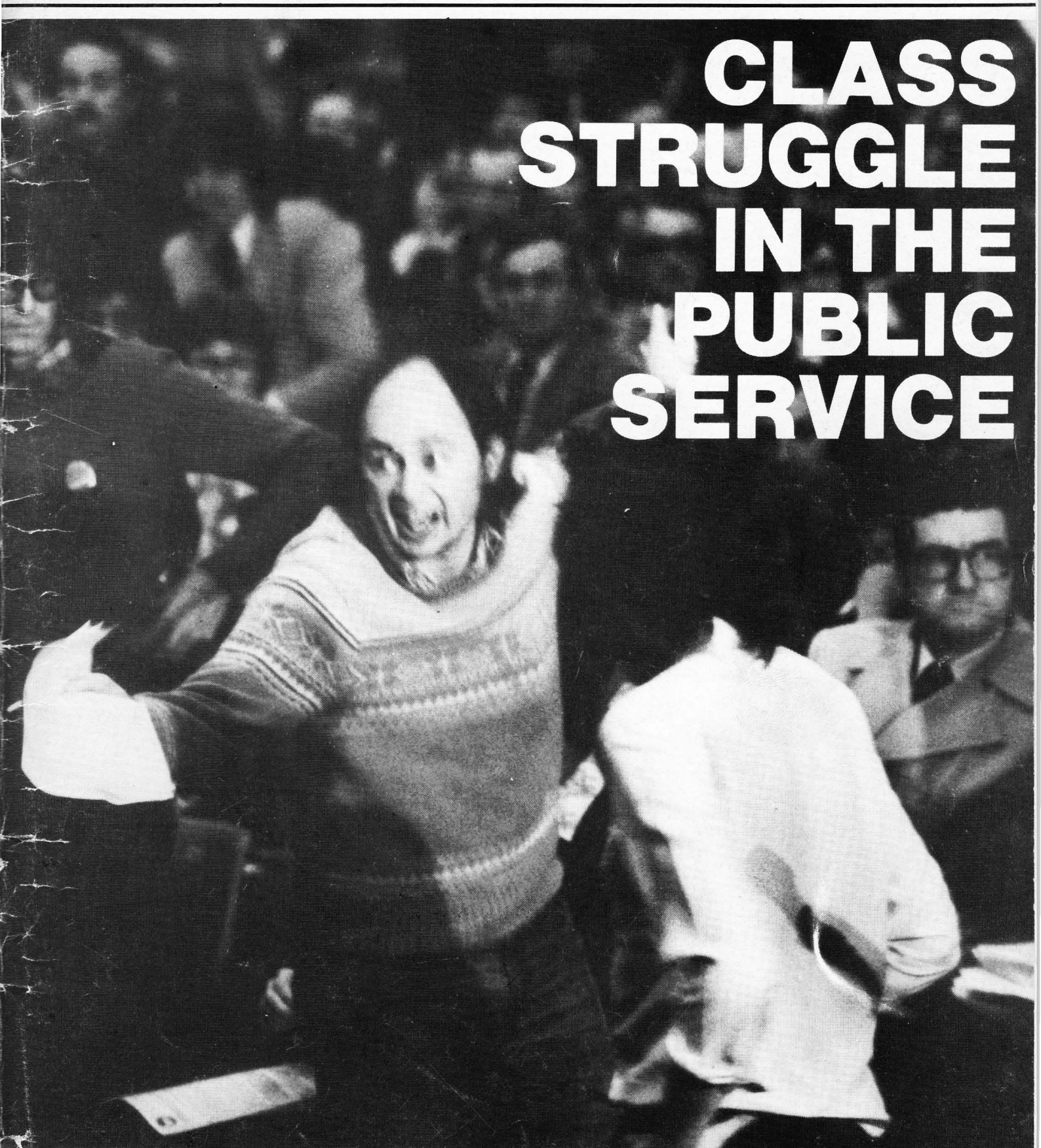


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EMPLOYMENT

CLASS STRUGGLE WITHIN THE STATE

Thin Cats and Socialism

by Rick Kuhn

SINCE World War II, more and more workers have been employed in clerical jobs. While blue collar workers remain central to revolutionary strategy, the level of organisation and class consciousness of clerical workers is becoming increasingly important.

Public Servants in particular have burst into the news. Not only are their unions more active, but within the unions organisations of militants have

emerged, committed to radicalising their fellow workers. This article examines the increasing militancy of public servants, the changes in their unions, and the development of rank and file organisation.¹

In looking at public service bureaucracies, I have used the same tools to examine the organisation of work in the public sector as a marxist would use for private sector bureaucracies. This approach assumes that in both cases, the objectives of the organisation and its leadership are the same: to get the most work out of the labour power they buy for the least outlay in wages.

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IN most of the private sector and part of the public sector (Qantas, electricity authorities and other bodies which actually provide commodities for sale) this means maximising the extraction of surplus value. In most of the public sector, and "unproductive" parts of the private sector (banking, insurance, retailing, etc.) it means minimising expenditure out of the fund of surplus value.

That is, the laws of motion of the capitalist system apply to the state sector when it is viewed as a labour process.²

The basic orientation of top bureaucrats is similar to that of controllers of capitalist organisations: insuring continuing investment, expansion and profit. The criteria on which their performance is judged are essentially the "economy and efficiency" of their organisations and compliance with standard practices — analagous to the maximisation of profit within the constraints of the law. Instead of the stock-exchange, and large or institutional shareholders, the performance of senior bureaucrats is judged by the Public Service Board, the Auditor General and Cabinet.

For capital, the expansion of state activity is a (sometimes unavoidable) drain on surplus value. Capital and its representatives try to limit this drain; this brings them into conflict with the working class, which attempts to improve its wages and conditions. This class struggle is the impetus for change in the public service labour process.³

In normal times the public service hierarchy, known as the "career service", is maintained by recruitment at base grade (at the bottom of one of the three or four job ladders). Theoretically it is possible to rise from the very lowest position to the very highest. Internal labour markets or hierarchies are useful to employers because they help to create an identification by workers with "their" firm and may make it difficult for workers with specific skills to find jobs elsewhere.⁴

Further, attenuated hierarchies

make it difficult to identify who the class enemy is, who actually "gives the orders". In the Public Service, the related ideology of state neutrality and subservience to elected government makes it even harder for workers to see power relationships clearly. The benefits of long service, in terms of super-annuation, and the ability of the employer to legislate specific conditions of employment, reinforces the public service career hierarchy.⁵

The Growth of White Collar Work and the Evolution of the Unions

SINCE World War II the proportion of the workforce engaged in clerical jobs has grown dramatically, from 13.7% to 17.1%.⁶ This was already an important area of employment for women as early as 1946, but by 1976 over one third of working women were employed there.⁷ One significant reason for the relatively rapid growth of clerical employment until recently, has been the much lower rate of technological change in the office, as compared to the water front, shop floor or pit face.⁸

The growth of the government sector of the job market has made a large contribution to the expansion of clerical work. World War II led to a leap in the proportion of the workforce employed by the government. Since the early 1950's about 20% of all workers have been public servants.⁹ This expansion in employment laid the preconditions for a growth in white collar militancy.

Postwar

DURING World War II the internal labour market of the

Commonwealth public service was severely disrupted by the recruitment of large numbers of workers at all levels.

After the war (as before it) the leaders of public service associations saw them as professional organisations, with an underlying common interest with the employer in virtually all matters. They happily participated with management in the Joint Classification Committees, Promotions Appeals Committees and Joint Council, set up by the Labor government. The Classification Committees re-established the structure of the Public Service hierarchy disorganised during the war; their procedures, established by the Public Service Board, were never challenged by the associations. Joint Council was made up of senior representatives of associations and senior manager, and worked along consensus lines.

When disputes arose, the principal arguments from the associations were on the basis of the superior professional status of their members. One of the major issues of the period was the recruitment of outsiders to senior positions.

The Commonwealth Public Service Clerical Association (now the ACOA) used to reprint articles from the Institute of Public Affairs, a policy analysis group which played a significant part in the formation of the Liberal Party.¹⁰ The commitment of the associations to the "national interest" is shown by resolutions which two of them carried in 1948 and 1949, prohibiting Communists from holding any union office — it is doubtful that there were any secret, let alone open Communists holding office in any case.

The major factional groupings before World War II were along sectarian lines. Catholic and Masonic cliques were represented inside the unions. The sectarian groups were essentially a means of advancing one's career, rather than being political organisations. Neither the Masonic nor the Catholic secret societies were committed to changing

the way in which the unions operated. The advent of the Promotions Appeals Committees soon after the war largely rendered their sectarian politics irrelevant.¹¹

Ruling Class Offensive

DURING the late 1940's and early 1950's a series of attacks on the working class laid the preconditions for Australia's participation in the global post-war boom.¹² The ruling class offensive included: the start of the "cold war"; the disruption of union organisation by the Industrial

Groups; the defeat of the coal strike by Chifley; the fall of the Labor government later in 1949 and the Labor split of 1954. Taken together, the attacks put workers on the defensive, allowing employers to force up the rate of surplus value. For an entire period until the late 1960's, workers' ability to respond to ruling class initiatives was reduced.

The introduction of "scientific management" into the Commonwealth and State public services during this period can be seen in the context of the ruling class offensive.¹³ The massive growth in the Commonwealth public service required a new approach to labour management. The old ideologies of

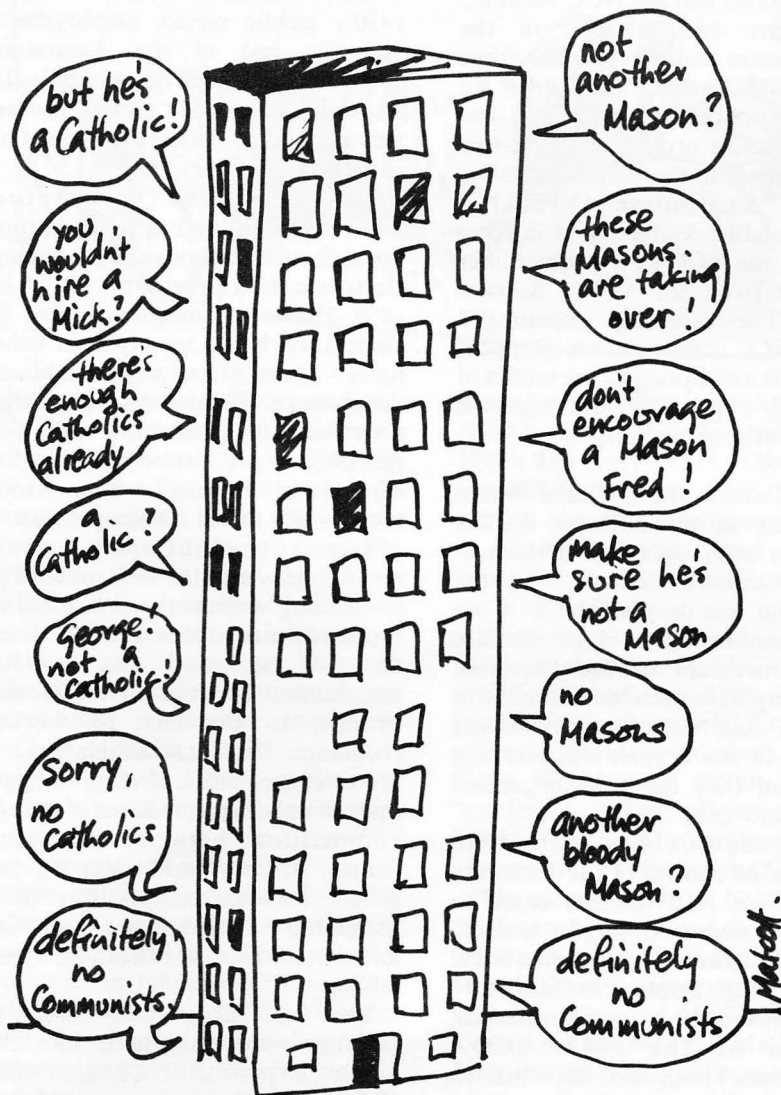
upward mobility (embodied in the "Career Service"), responsibility to the government of the day, and time honoured practices of intimidation and victimisation were no longer sufficient to control the mass of employees or restrict a wage bill much greater than before the war.

The first steps in introducing scientific management into the Commonwealth service were taken under Chifley.¹⁴ (Such techniques were, in principle, hardly new. Since its inception, capitalism has survived by undermining workers' control of the labour process by simplifying jobs and arrogating decision making powers to management.)

Initially scientific management was only the province of so-called "Section 17" teams, named after the part of the Public Service Act which sanctioned their activity. They operated under the label of "Organisation and Methods (O & M)". These teams were concerned with the "measurement" and simplification of work, the introduction of new office machinery and the organisation of functions within Departments.¹⁵ By 1955, 15 out of 25 Commonwealth departments had O & M branches or sections. By the 1960's all departments had them. At present these functions go under the name of Management Advisory Services.

The fall of the Labor government saw far more direct attempts to increase productivity and weaken union organisation both in the private and public sector. The recession of the early 1950's was the most severe between the end of the war and the 1970's. It was in large part a government-induced phenomenon. The resultant unemployment, when coupled with the activities of the Industrial Groups, weakened union organisation and made the long boom possible.

In the public service, the incoming Menzies government imposed a staff ceiling which entailed a cut of 10,000 jobs. This cut was proportionally far more severe than retrenchments in other areas, and aggravated the



Ruling Class Offensive: Cont.

overall level of unemployment. The cut mainly affected temporaries and helped to re-establish the public service's internal labour market.

The predecessor of the Australian Public Service Association, covering temporary and permanent Fourth Division staff, suffered a dramatic down turn in membership; the cuts were an excellent opportunity to weed active unionists out of the Fourth Division. 1948 levels of membership were not recovered until the mid-1960's. The predecessor of the Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association (ACOA), which covered mainly permanent staff in the Third Division, was not much affected. The Commonwealth service only returned to previous levels of employment in 1958.

Neither union came near to mounting an effective campaign against the ceilings. The ACOA, together with other blue and white collar public employee unions, did mount large rallies in capital cities. But it also continued to participate in Joint Council and Promotions Appeals Committees.

The 1950's saw the emergence of the factions which still dominate the ACOA and a number of other public service unions. They were specifically related to the split in the ALP and the activities of the industrial groups. The development of factions associated with the Labor Party and the National Civic Council itself indicated a trend toward militancy in the unions. Conflicts now tended to be over the implications of the factions' political orientations rather than religious affiliation. Politics, rather than patronage, came to the fore.

The differences between the factions should not be seen as a conflict between a program of effective militant unionism and one of class collaboration. Both have placed uncritical faith in Arbitration,

secret negotiation with management and the neutrality of the whole state apparatus. Moreover the primary aim of both factions is to gain and hold onto official union positions; neither have baulked at disguising their political beliefs nor taking inconsistent positions in order to gain votes. In practice the main differences have been a somewhat greater preparedness on the part of the ALP aligned groups to make concessions to the rank and file of the ACOA rather than to management. And of the two, the NCC factions usually operate in a more clandestine fashion.

There has been some continuity between the old "professionalist" union leaders and the NCC factions. The latter have drawn on the conservatism and professional ethos of the old leaders, and added an explicit political orientation and more effective organisation. At this very moment in the Victorian Public Service Association (VPSA) a professionalist leadership is moving towards the NCC as it comes under pressure from the VPSA Reform Group. The leadership, encouraged by a NCC "Association Support Group" is attempting to use tactics of expelling opponents, and legalistic evasion of responsibility.

The factions have had different influences in the different ACOA branches and coalesced in them at different times. In Victoria, where the ALP split was deepest, the NCC'ers have been strongest. Since the late 1950's members of the Victorian leadership have been identified with the DLP and NCC. From 1968 their control of the branch was virtually total and they faced no organised opposition until 1976.

While the NCC was beginning to organise its control of the Victorian branch, an ALP faction came to dominate the next largest branch, NSW. The leading figure in the NSW branch, ALP member Ned McGrath, had moved the anti-communist motion at the 1947 ACOA conference. The current NSW branch secretary, Barry Cotter, is a direct

successor of McGrath, via Don Thompson who became secretary due to McGrath's influence, and Wattie Peck who followed him. The ALP split meant that the dominant cliques in NSW and Victoria, which initially had similar political orientations, developed in different directions. The NSW leadership faced sporadic, but ineffectual NCC challenges from the 1960's.

The Boom Years

FROM the late 1950's to the mid-1970's, public service employment, like the rest of the Australian economy, expanded quite rapidly. In response, the public service moved toward the introduction of computing facilities.

The Cabinet "instructed departments to reduce expenditure through such methods as introducing electronic data procession . . ." in 1958. Previously machinery used in clerical work had merely been hand tools—typewriters, ledger machines, dictaphones. Computer technology provided a means, not only for speeding up production, but also for eliminating human labour from whole steps of the labour process.

The introduction of new technologies and the new means for controlling work embodied in them, is one of the most important methods that the capitalist class has for maintaining its hold on the labour process, in the face of worker resistance. That is, accumulation is a direct consequence of class struggle (as well as being a mediated effect via competition between capitalist firms). Since World War II the clerical labour process has been increasingly subject to accumulation and the substitution of dead for living labour.

The first large scale computer facilities were introduced into the bigger Departments (Tax, PMG, Defence) during the early 1960's,



after costing and feasibility studies.¹⁷ The first computer for administrative purposes was installed in 1962. By 1972, 38 Departments or instrumentalities under the Public Service Act had major computer systems. Computers cut down substantially on the need for clerical staff involved in the maintenance of extensive records systems. They may also permit the development of new functions, previously impossible because of staffing limits.

During the 1960's, while the Australian and world economies continued to expand, computerisation did not lead to a net loss in public service jobs. In fact a relative shortage of labour during the boom years was the main reason for the decision taken in 1966 to allow married women to hold permanent jobs. Previously women lost their permanent status if they married.

After a period of slow membership

growth in the 1950's, both APSA and ACOA grew rapidly during the 1960's and early 1970's as the public service itself grew. Public service growth was disproportionately large in Canberra, as head offices expanded or were transferred there from Melbourne.

It seems that the old sectarian Catholic clique in the ACT branch of ACOA had, by 1968, become transformed into an NCC aligned grouping; their election was hailed by *News Weekly* as a victory for the "moderate team". However, the leader of the old Masonic faction was also apparently allied to the NCC'ers.

The strength of the NCC in the ACT can be attributed to two main factors. Both the ACT and Victorian branches had a conservative bias, in that Departmental head offices are located in Canberra and Melbourne. They are top-heavy, with more senior officers than other cities.

With the transfer of head offices to Canberra the bias is growing there and declining in Melbourne. Secondly, this link between Canberra and Melbourne has also been a conduit down which NCC policies and members have probably slid. Since 1970, NCC and ALP centre groups have alternated in having preponderant control of the ACT branch, with each triennial election.

The boom years saw some further developments towards more militant unionism. In 1950, the ACT branch of ACOA was taken to task by the Association's Federal Executive when it publicly criticised the government and Public Service Board in its Annual Report. Until the 1960's, ACOA did not "go public" in its disputes with the employer if recourse to Arbitration was available. But during the 1960-61 wages dispute the Association, along with other public service

unions, mounted a publicity campaign. The Chairman of the Public Service Board compared this to "the industrial picket line type of action".¹⁸ Only in July and August 1970 did the ACOA mount its first nationally co-ordinated campaign of industrial action, involving a series of stopwork meetings over a pay claim.

It was only during the 1960's that the Branches of ACOA started employing their own full-time staff. The 1970's have seen a rapid growth in the number of staff employed by public service unions — organisers, advocates, research officers as well as elected Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries.

Whitlamania

THE election of the Whitlam government in 1972 seemed to usher in a period of milk and honey in the Commonwealth public service. The new government initially used the public service as a pacesetter for the private sector — introducing paternity leave, paid and extended maternity leave and an additional week of annual leave. The size of the public service continued to expand quite rapidly and the prospects of promotion remained good. Exciting new areas of work, such as the Department of Urban and Regional Development were created. The extension of equal pay to women in the service was completed in July 1973.

The threat that only unionists would benefit from the extra week's annual leave led to a staggering expansion of the Commonwealth public service unions: the APSA grew by 84.6% in 1972/3 and 42.3% in 1973/4, and ACOA grew by 16.9% and 16.8% in those years. But there was no upsurge in union activity comparable with the wages push going on elsewhere between 1973 and 1975. Labor rule meant that public servants did not have to fight for

improvements to their wages and conditions during those years. The last Labor (Hayden) budget presaged a drying up of the milk and honey, whether the government was Labor or Liberal.

Economic Crisis and the Fraser Offensive

WHILE November 11 1975 saw a dramatic turnabout in government policy, the underlying causes of the new policies were the same as those for the slow-down and reversal of the Labor government's reforms.

The Labor and conservative governments of the early seventies had used staff ceilings to restrict growth; Fraser now used them to actually cut the numbers of public servants. The "restraint" of the Hayden budget has been transformed into severe cuts in government spending. The number of staff under the Public Service Act was trimmed by 4.2% in 1975/76 and a further 1.7% the following year. There was growth during 1977/78 and levels were static in 1978/79. Staff ceilings have also been applied in a number of State public services during 1978 and 1979. The most draconian were in Victoria where recruitment was frozen in 1979; the NSW government has also got into the act.

Staff ceiling have been the most dramatic expression of the current ruling class offensive inside the public services. However other, complimentary measures have been taken. The pressure of the crisis has revived "scientific management" in the Commonwealth service. The aim is to minimise the outlay of surplus value on essential state activities and to eliminate expenditure which is inessential to the ruling class — hence cuts in the real level of social security payments, especially the dole, and cuts in health and education funding.

During the 1960's and early 1970's

scientific management practices continued in the departments, but the Public Service Board's interventionist role lapsed. In 1975, as a consequence of the crisis, the PSB's scientific management activities were reintroduced in the form of Staff Utilisation Reviews (SUR's) and Joint Management Review (JMR's).

These Reviews use productivity indicators as an important tool. The indicators are "scientific" standards for the amount of work an individual or group should do in a given period. The basis for these indicators is arbitrary, essentially amounting to the reviewer's judgement of "normal" or "average" output. Once established, workers are expected to conform to the standards. During 1977 staff savings attributed to JMR's in the Department of Business and Consumer Affairs, for example, amounted to 45 jobs; in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme an anticipated 80 jobs; and in Internal Audit areas an anticipated 150-200 jobs.

The consequences of SUR's and JUR's are not massive in terms to total numbers of jobs abolished. But SUR's and JUR's, together with efficiency audits and changes to Departmental management advisory services have a more significant impact on the day to day management of Departments. They are designed to encourage junior and middle management to be more concerned with productivity, efficiency and out-put.

The Department of Social Security has mounted a large work measurement project to determine "standard times for each task that is of sufficient importance to be mounted separately".¹⁹ The name of the project, "Productivity Control System", throws some light on its main function — to increase control over the workers in the second largest government Department, and to make them work harder.

The process of accumulation in the public service accelerated during the mid and late 1970's. Automation has been used increasingly to displace



workers and discipline those remaining. In the context of staff ceilings the "microprocessor revolution" has been a godsend to senior management. With the cheap new silicon chip technology, out-put can be maintained or increased despite staff cuts, through investment in computer technology hundreds or thousands of times cheaper than the equivalent 10 years ago.

The Commonwealth public service acquired its first world-processor (computerised type-writer with its own memory) in 1977. By 1979 it had 190 key stations (keyboards, some of which may share the same computer) at 34 sites.²⁰ In certain areas word processors have the potential to replace four typists. Computerisation and miniaturisation (using microfiche) of file storage and retrieval is set to cut a swathe through registry staffs.

The Public Service Board anticipates that its MANDATA personnel system will eventually result in a net saving of 700 jobs across the Commonwealth public service. A new generation of computers in the Australian Bureau of Statistics has cut the number of staff in computer operations itself by 100. Before computers were introduced into the Taxation Office it had an annual staff growth rate of 3.6%; since then it has been 1.3%.²¹ Automation threatens the jobs of clerks, clerical assistants and technical officers as well as those of typists. Management also has greater opportunities for controlling the pace of work of those who retain their jobs.

Governments have also saved, money by cutting wages and conditions. State and Commonwealth public servants have been particularly affected by the

introduction of wage indexation. Wage rates are set by the various public service boards; there are no over-award payments, in contrast to the private sector.

Since taking office the Fraser government has abolished paternity leave for public servants, cut maternity leave, introduced the CEEP Act which provides for summary dismissal of public servants by Ministers, and the CERR Act which streamlines procedures for redundancies. The last measures have had a considerable impact on public service unionists because they have a significance within public service ideology — they threaten the "career service".

The measures Fraser has taken in the public sector act as pacesetters for private industry. They provide a lead to private employers and depress the overall level of wages and conditions.

The changes in the public service labour process, including mechanisation, have made many public service jobs much more like jobs in industry. The public service (and banks, insurance companies, etc. as well) can now be accurately described as paper factories, with long production lines involving hundreds of detail labourers. At the same time, especially since the collapse of the long boom during the 1970's and the attempts to cut the state's consumption of surplus value (so far moderately successful), the wages and conditions of most public servants can no longer be considered privileged.

Since World War II, the changes in the nature of public service work have been gradually transforming public service unions. The late 1970's saw an acceleration of the process for a number of them, notably the ACOA and VPSA. The most advanced of the public service unions are now beginning to resemble large and active blue collar unions in their preparedness to take industrial action, and in the level of job organisation. (Others, including the Public Service Associations of Tasmania and Queensland, are still run by unchallenged leaders who see

Fraser's Offensive: Cont.

them as professional bodies, asserting a common interest with the employer in virtually all matters.)

While the radicalisation of private sector unions associated with the wages push of 1973-75 largely passed the public service unions by, the Fraser period has seen them develop an increased militancy. The deepening economic crisis and the change in government made it clear that the Commonwealth government would take initiatives to erode its employees' conditions and wages rather than improve them. The behaviour of the Labor government towards the end of its term, and the ALP's move to the right in opposition, made the possibility of a repeat of the Whitlam largess seem unlikely to many public servants, even if the ALP were returned to office.

Increasingly public servants are realising that they can only rely on their own strength. Claims by governments, arbitration, and even some union officials to represent their interests are being regarded sceptically.

ACOA members have become more willing to take industrial action, begun to elect more left-wing union officials, and to organise "rank and file" groups.

While the leadership of the union has been moving leftwards in a fitful fashion since World War II, the late 1970's saw dramatic changes. The establishment of the ACOA Reform Group (ARG) in Victoria in 1976 brought the first challenge in many years to the NCC in their stronghold. In the 1976 triennial elections, a member of the ARG won the Federal Vice-President position; in the 1979 elections the ARG gained the positions of Secretary, President and Vice-President of the Victorian Branch, though they did not win control of Branch Council, the main policy making body.

The 1979 elections also saw NCC'ers defeated in Tasmania, the installation of an ALP-associated Branch Secretary in the Northern Territory and the confirmation of ALP associated leaders in NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. NCC'ers defeated the incumbent ALP leadership in the ACT for the positions of Secretary, Assistant Secretary and President, but the Branch Council has moved left. In the Victorian Public Service Association, a candidate of the VPSA Reform Group (VRG) gained 47% of the vote in an election for General President.

A dispute developed in late 1977 and early 1978 over outside recruitment, without appeal rights for public servants, into the Commonwealth Employment Service. Bans were placed on processing outside applications, and stand-downs resulted. It was out of this dispute and the sell-out by Federal officials, that the Government Employees Action Group emerged in Sydney.

In mid-1979, the ACOA and APSA initiated its most serious co-ordinated campaign of industrial action, involving stop work meetings, strikes and bans on ministerial correspondence over the CERR Act.

The NSW PSA conducted a successful wage campaign late in 1979, which included strike action and rallies. Its leadership is associated with the "left", Steering Committee faction of the NSW Labor Party.

During early 1979, the Public Servants' Action Group (PSAG) in Canberra and Government Employees Rank and File Activists (GERAFA) in Brisbane were set up. Both groups were inspired by the example of GEAG and the ARG. After their defeat in the 1979 Branch elections, the "progressive" ALP group in Canberra set up their version of the ARG in Canberra.

The radicalisation of public servants from 1975 was the foundation on which these "rank and file" groups were built; the entry of ex-student radicals into the public

service provided the scaffolding. The ex-students brought socialist ideas and the experience of organising large numbers of the people to the various groups.

The changes described above have occurred in the labour processes of all public services, and there has been some radicalisation in many unions. For example the South Australian Public Service Association is engaged in building an office floor organisation. However the most interesting developments for revolutionary socialists have taken place in the VPSA and ACOA. Today the Australian working class lacks both cohesive organisations of active unionists and also a revolutionary party. The opposition groupings which have emerged in the public service an opportunity for significant steps toward both.

Politics in the Public Service Unions

BOTH the NCC and ALP factions in the ACOA have their own, limited organisations.

The former have small, secret closed coteries — the existence of which is usually denied. The ALP'ers have generally resorted to more diffuse and ad hoc forms of organisation, which take shape before elections: an electoral machine congeals around current or aspirant "left" bureaucrats. Both factions also have caucuses for meetings at various levels of the union. Neither group usually has any ongoing organisation of significant numbers of union members — only a core of "leaders" and a loose network of contacts who are expected to distribute literature and deliver the vote.

In the ACT Branch of ACOA during the lead up to the 1979 Branch elections, the "progressive" (ALP



ACOA members stop work and meet in Sydney, 1979.

aligned) group organised a "preselection" of candidates, by a hand-picked electorate of "left" ACOA members. The group controlled the branch office and generally 'had the numbers' on Branch Council. But their only regular form of organisation in non-election periods, was a pre-branch council caucus. Policies were elaborated by self-appointed committees which reported to candidates, who exercised a veto power. The NSW Branch leadership still operates through a similar Branch Council caucus. The procedures adopted in most other branches, and other public service unions are even less formal than this.

The operations of the NCC factions are more secretive and presumably more closed. They are more inclined to engage in patently undemocratic manoeuvres to retain their control of the unions: In Victoria the NCC associated faction entrenched its control of the ACOA

branch by setting up new, small sections in the areas where they had strongest support. They isolated and vilified all opposition and indulged in fanciful and inaccurate red-baiting.

The present character of ACOA and the various currents in it was apparent in the union's 1979 campaign against the CERR Act.²² It became apparent early in 1979 that the government was going to reintroduce legislation designed to streamline procedures for redundancies and sackings in the Commonwealth Public Service — the Commonwealth Employees Redeployment and Retirement (CERR) Bill. As a result of union pressure in 1977, the government had withdrawn similar legislation, saying it would be "redrafted".

For over a year public service union officials ignored the possibility of CERR. To ordinary union members, the prospect of the legislation came like a bolt from the blue in April 1979.

In the ACT, at a locality meeting, PSAG successfully moved a motion for a stoppage if CERR went through the House of Representatives. The motion was subsequently carried at a Branch General Meeting on May 9 without opposition from Branch officials. Similar motions were soon successful in other Branches. During the week beginning 28 May stoppages and/or meetings were held in a number of ACOA Branches. No meetings were called to coincide with stoppages in the ACT and Queensland. The most left-wing of the ACT "progressive" officials opposed holding a meeting. The only picketing of office blocks that occurred was organised by PSAG, GEAG and GERAFA. In the ACT members of the NCC faction criticised and attempted to sabotage the stoppage. In Victoria they did hold a mass meeting and supported a stoppage, though no attempt was made to provide for membership control of the campaign there.

In some branches ALP officials called representatives meetings to provide for greater membership involvement in the campaign. This practice was most consistently followed in NSW. However, the meetings increasingly became opportunities for Branch and Federal officials to harangue militants, rather than a means for militants to direct union strategy. At a reps. meeting the NSW Branch Secretary, Barry Cotter, an ALP'er, admitted that he had ignored a call from a mass meeting for a 24 hour strike once the Act was passed, once he got to the Federal Executive.

Faced with the enthusiasm of the union membership for taking strike action against CERR, Federal and Branch Officials elaborated their own strategy. They were to re-establish control by recourse to arbitration. The level of industrial action was to be scaled down to bans on ministerial correspondence, by a small section of the union membership. The fact that there was a less than 100% response to strikes and stopwork meetings, (though the turnout was impressive, given the inexperience of the membership and the lack of pickets) was used as an argument for scaling down activity.

The danger of enthusing and mobilising large numbers, through strike committees and picketing was avoided. One further national stopwork meeting was called, overlapping with lunch-time, to endorse the officials' draft determination for the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission.

The draft determination conceded the Public Service Board the right to make public servants redundant and to sack them for other reasons — so long as adequate warning, procedures, appeal rights and marginally better redundancy pay were granted. NCCers and ALP'ers backed the draft determination. The ACOA Reform Group (Vic.), influenced by Ann Forward, who is Vice Federal President, decided not to oppose it. Just before Christmas the Arbitration Commission handed down a decision. It was essentially a

kick in the teeth for the unions, though a limited form of union preference was granted. ACOA officials are portraying it as a success thus putting another obstacle in the way of the fight against CERR. The NCC associated officials in the ACT are keen to co-operate with the Public Service Board in drawing up a final determination, so that the Act can be made operational as soon as possible, to allow people to take advantage of its early retirement provisions. The ACOA's Federal Executive has decided to participate in consultative arrangements provided for in the Act, while retaining the right to oppose some of its provisions. The Federal Executive has not expressed opposition to redundancies *per se*.²³

The ACOA Reform Group (ARG) was set up in early 1976 to provide a left-wing alternative to the Victorian NCC associated leadership. Members of the ARG range from revolutionary socialists to right wing reformists. The right-wing reformists, including Ann Forward have dominated the group to 1980. The ARG has developed a large, quite effective and democratic organisation. It has regular, monthly meetings of over 40 people, clearly established policy formulation and pre-selection procedures and internal structures. It also has hundreds of contacts; in some areas its members have organised militant and effective section committees.

The founding of the ARG marked a turning point in the history of public service clerical unions. It demonstrated that the forms of organisation appropriate for socialists' activity in other unions — the "rank and file strategy" was also applicable there. Further it indicated that the whole working class, not just blue collar workers, are capable of shaping their own futures in a militant way and potentially in a socialist direction.

Militant Unionism?

THE ARG looks like a strikingly different organisation from the election machines of the NCC and ALP'ers elsewhere. Unlike the NCC cliques it is open and public; unlike the ALP'ers' organisations it has a continuing existence and established democratic procedures. For a white collar union and especially a public service one, the ARG was a massive step forward.

But the ARG is not a rank and file organisation.

A rank and file organisation, which can develop workers' class consciousness and capacity for independent and radical action has two fundamental features:

1. A militant, if not specifically socialist perspective on the role of trade unions.
2. A commitment to changing the union primarily through organising ordinary members, rather than by converting union officials or capturing their positions. An emphasis on the rank and file's capacity for defending their own interests.

In practice these characteristics mean that a rank and file organisation seeks to radicalise unions by providing a focus for left-wing activity within them. This focus is the "militant minority" of already radicalised and organised rank and file members. The aim is, of course, to turn this militant minority into a majority on the basis of radical politics. This situation is not yet on the agenda in any Australian union, let alone those in the public service.

The development of the ARG was conditioned on the growing radicalisation of the ACOA membership and the entrenched NCC leadership in Victoria. The only way to oust Magner and co. was through a large relatively tight-knit organisation. Like a genuine rank and file organisation, the ARG is a thoroughly democratic body, involving militant unionists, with

extensive links with the union membership. But there has been a contradiction in the ARG's policies and activities. It has been dominated by its conservative wing, which regards winning elections, especially for full-time union positions as its fundamental goal, while at the same time having a formal rank and file orientation.²⁴ Both the left and right of the group recognise the need to build the organisation on the office floor — especially since its failure to win a majority on Branch Council in the 1979 Branch elections. For the right, the ideal form of local organisation is one which will deliver the vote and implement the initiatives of the ARG leadership.

The Department of Social Security Section Committee is a model — all of its members are associated with the RG/and a majority with its right wing. In the last elections they delivered the vote, but at the same time quashed attempts by left ARG members to mobilise unionists against the new 'Work Test' on recipients of the dole. An examination of *Alternative Viewpoint*, the ARG's sporadic newsletter, reveals a preoccupation with national issues at the expense of coverage of local struggles and encouragement of local initiatives. This imbalance partly explains the ARG's inability to gain a majority on Branch Council.

The recognition of the need for office-floor organisation and some local activity has, however, provided scope for the left to mobilise ACOA members. There have been ARG contingents on anti-uranium demonstrations²⁵ and strong organisations have been built in some areas, notably Telecom and Statistics.²⁶

The reformist right's obsession with elections has meant that it is prepared to sacrifice the ARG's militancy in order to win votes. Policies should be based on the "aspirations of all ACOA members"²⁹ rather than oriented to union militants. Thus policies supporting abortion and rejecting staff participation schemes were

rejected during the run up to the 1979 Branch elections.

Ann Forward and, now, other ARG officials clearly see themselves as part of a national ALP faction in the ACOA. Uncritical support was given to the ALP faction's ticket, which included Forward, in the 1977 Federal elections. The ARG Executive was not prepared to reject the draft determination on CERR, prepared by the ALP dominated Federal Executive.

Early in 1980, the left of the ARG gained a majority on the group's executive.

This was not because of any great radicalisation of ARG members. The newly elected officials of the Victorian Branch, who had dominated the ARG, decided that they did not want to participate formally in the group's activities. It is unlikely that they will now abide by ARG decisions with which they disagree. Now that they have realised their dream of election, and no longer share the same conditions of work as ordinary union members, they are likely to shift even further from the ARG's circumscribed rank and file orientation. The future of the ARG now depends on whether the leftists on its executive are willing to break with the officials, by initiating wholehearted rank and file policies; or whether they will become mesmerised by the chimeral influence they can exert over the "Reform Group" union officials.

The ARG has demonstrated that a relatively large organisation of militants is possible in the ACOA. Its example has also prompted the formation of "action groups" in other Branches — GEAG, PSAG and GERAFA — and the VRG in the Victorian Public Service Association. The CERR campaign of mid-1979 provided the action groups in ACOA with their first Branch-wide experience, as opposed to work in individual Departments. It also clearly differentiated them from the ALP factions and union officials.

The VPSA Reform Group (VRG) started life as the State Public Servants Against Uranium Mining (SPSAUM), in July 1978, after an

attempt to set up a general rank and file group failed to draw support. SPSAUM built up a network of contacts and a membership of around 20 in its work on the uranium issue. It produced leaflets and was able to mobilise numbers of public servants for anti-uranium demonstrations. In January 1979 SPSAUM members called a "VPSA Activists Conference," which founded the VRG.

The VRG has initiated campaigns against a proposal for an undemocratic union restructure by VPSA officials, the elections for VPSA General President, staff ceilings and mileage rates for the use of private cars on official business.²⁸ The group has reinvigorated union organisation in a number of Departments and built an impressive base at the office-floor level.

The action groups, like the ARG, include both rank and file electoralist tendencies (although the balance of forces substantially shifted to the former in PSAG and GERAFA during late 1979 and early 1980 respectively). However the potential for growth and influence, realised by the ARG does not exist for the action groups. The leaderships of the NSW and Queensland Branches are dominated by ALP rather than NCC officials. In the ACT the "progressive" group (union officials and aspirant union officials) have tried to set up a wider electoral organisation on the model of the ARG.

Thus the action groups cannot be built around policies of democratic unionism, a left (but not *too* left) position on bread and butter issues and non-controversial social issues, and opposition to NCC'ers. Since the current officials and the "progressives" group are already pushing this approach, there is no point setting up action groups around it. The only role that such organisations could play would be that of gadflies to the left of the ALP officials. In order to grow, in order to shift the policies of the public service unions to the left, the action groups need to adopt fully-fledged and explicit rank and file politics.



State Public Servants Against Uranium Mining was formed in 1978 amongst members of the Victorian Public Service Association. Here they are marching in Hiroshima Day, 1978. Members of SPSAUM later went on to organise the VPSA Reform Group.

The Militant Minority

THE action groups have not yet developed the characteristics of rank and file organisations: they do not yet have well developed and entrenched policies based on a rank and file orientation, nor do they have large numbers of militant members. The main obstacles to building strong rank and file organisations are the action groups' current lack of members and experience and the appeal of electoralism. In the action groups electoralism and a reliance on union officials are justified by some of the following arguments:

1. A frequent argument emphasizes the importance of getting motions through meetings, Branch Councils etc. or getting "progressive" individuals into union office and

hence stresses a need to compromise. Motions and election policies should be designed to appear reasonable to a majority of those with a vote, in order to stand a chance of getting up. Thus PSAG at one stage refrained from criticizing the ACOA's strategy of going to arbitration to defeat the CERR Act and from suggesting that the campaign should continue while the case was in the Commission, on the grounds that this would not be acceptable to most members. Arguments were mounted against having a pro-abortion policy (unsuccessfully) in PSAG and (successfully) in the ARG on the grounds that it would alienate too many people and jeopardize credibility. This despite the fact that more than 70% of people support abortion.

The "getting the numbers" approach places more importance on gaining (short term) mechanical victories instead of building a climate of greater militancy in the union.

There's no point in winning motions or elections if it is not on the basis of what the group really thinks about the issue(s). It is far more useful to lose a motion and win a few people to a radical approach than to win by watering down a militant position to the "moderate" lowest common denominator.

Of course, winning motions and elections on the basis of rank and file politics is the goal of rank and file organisations. But given current conditions this will take some time. That interval is going to be filled with a multitude of lost motions and elections and also by a lot of action initiated independently and even in opposition to union officials. Since the action groups are absolutely independent of union officials, there is plenty of scope for them to take initiatives, especially at the office floor level. Thus effective opposition to the new Work Test in DSS and CES offices was organised in those offices rather than in the

Branch Offices of ACOA, in Victoria, NSW and the ACT. The real fight against management reviews has been initiated and conducted on the office floor with little support from union officials. Reliance on union officials is a recipe for disaster. Where the officials are NCC'ers it is a guarantee.

The only way in which a union unambiguously adopts a policy is if it has support from its membership. Pushing through policies behind the members' backs only means that they can be easily overturned later. Electing "radical" officials without a strong, militant organisation to discipline them only means that they will be constrained by the circumstances of office to sell out later.

2. A perspective for the action groups which leads to similar conclusions to the electoralist one, sees them as 'ginger groups'. Their role should be to pin-prick officials — to play the role of the official's rank and file conscience. This role requires that the ginger group maintain its credibility with the officials — criticisms of them should not be too strong or strident. Further, the officials are best influenced by only keeping half a step to their left. It is thus legitimate to participate in the officials' caucuses and campaigns, as the ginger group is defined by its relationship to them.

It is only possible to adopt a consistent, militant rank and file line if a group is absolutely independent of any officials who are not subject to their discipline. That is to say, officials who are not bound by its decisions and do not take an overwhelming role in making them. Given the current size of the action groups this means not have union officials as members; in any other a situation the tail would wag the dog. In the case of the ginger group approach to union officials "maintaining credibility" is a relationship of dependence. No action can be taken unless the officials think it reasonable. The logical conclusion of this position is the decision of a self-styled

revolutionary to vote against criticism of the NCC associated officials at the ACT Branch of ACOA's Annual General Meeting, for the sake of unity (the motion was, in any case, carried).

The ginger group position is justified by the following logic: 1) the union officials are to the left of the union membership 2) the ginger group is to the left of the officials, 3) the ginger group should influence the officials to lead the sheep-like masses to the correct line. Needless to say this approach has nothing to do with relying on the strength of the rank and file and the working class' capacity for self-activity.

Once a ginger group perspective is adopted the chances of building an action group and involving new people become severely limited.

A ginger group achieves results by applying pressure in strategic places — on committees, through personal contact or by proposing an idea at the right place or time. Success is defined in terms of bureaucratic victories. A clique around a small political cabal is the most appropriate form of organisation for such activities — there is no real need to encourage widespread participation in the group, though it is handy to involve some of the union officials. A large group may open the way to policies and individuals unacceptable to "friendly" officials.

3. The electoralist and ginger group approaches are both justified in terms of the close attunement of the group to the desires of all members. The group should voice the desires of the "advanced workers, the backward workers and the workers in between".²⁹ Watering down the group's politics and maintaining credibility in the eyes of union bureaucrats is thus rationalised in terms of the consciousness of the average union member. This argument, which glorifies the views of the majority of union members as the last word on any question, is politically conservative. In all situations, except those of a dramatic upsurge in militancy, orienting to the mass of the union membership, the

average member or trying to accommodate to the consciousness of all workers amounts to taking a conservative position. It is opposed to a rank and file approach which seeks to transform workers' consciousness, rather than taking it as given.³⁰

4. Another argument sees the action groups as consciousness raising groups, for their members. However, this conception does not provide a strategy for changing a union. It does not affect large numbers of workers by involving them in activities; it only provides a warm, human support and intellectual discussion group for a small number of people. Indeed growth is inimical to such a consciousness raising group. Large numbers mean a loss of personal contact, intimacy and emotional rapport; one runs the danger that policies will be considered on a purely political basis and that people attracted to them will start working to implement, rather than just talk about them.

5. The Transnational Co-operative is a proponent of another view of how militants can best organise in a union. This view, which is by no means confined to the TNC sees the action groups as essentially propaganda organisations.³¹ This strategy, which is attractive to some because of its emphasis on research, convincing argument and consensus is inadequate on two counts.

First, the attractiveness of research and publicity activities for militants is limited when there are also concrete political and organisational tasks to be undertaken. Second the consensus required by this view before action can be taken, so as to avoid "divisiveness" and political hostility, can never be achieved. Consciousness develops unevenly. A rank and file group takes advantage of this by promoting and encouraging radical ideas and actions outside the normal consensus of the union — this is intrinsically divisive. Propaganda groups run the danger of declassing militants, by academic practices or turning them into the research

handmaidens of union officials.

For marxists, research and consciousness raising follow on from political activity. They are only relevant if subordinate to political tasks and can only be achieved by involving fellow workers in useful practical activity.

The situation in the VRG Reform Group is somewhat different from that of the other action groups. The hard core of the VRG has a clear rank and file perspective, rather than an electoralist one. The arguments, outlined above, have carried far less in GEAG, PSAG and GERAFA. The VRG is caught in a contradiction. For most of the large number of the VPSA who give passive support to the VRG group, its significance is primarily electoral. They see the solution of the problem of the union in terms of replacing the "professionalist" leadership. Hence the difference between the response to the VRG campaign for General President (47% of the vote) and to a demonstration against staff ceilings (less than 60 people turned up). The VRG has credibility in the eyes of many Victorian public servants. Its problem is to increase their awareness of the group's politics, and to convince them that only their own activity and involvement can change the union, rather than the election of VRG members to official positions.

Conclusion

PROVIDING a focus for militant activity is the key aspect of a rank and file group's orientation to the office floor. That is, encouraging unionists to take matters into their own hands, in the Department or office. For example PSAG and GEAG have emphasised the need to set up joint union committees to present a united front of unionists to management in work places. This is particularly crucial when management is on the offensive, as in the case of Joint

Management Reviews. But it is also important in cases involving accommodation and other "routine" matters.

In such cases union officials will be able to achieve little, unless union members are prepared to take action. In many cases they must be prepared to act independently of hostile officials as well as management. During late 1979 and early 1980 GERAFA has been agitating for general meetings to ensure an effective rank and file controlled campaign over the union's 20% wage claim. For four months ACOA officials were totally inactive apart from preparing a case for the Arbitration Commission. Their strategy has been the same as that used in the CERR campaign: token industrial action to get the case into the Commission, no mobilisation of the whole union membership.

In contrast to an electoralist, vote gathering attitude to office floor organisation, the rank and file approach is characterised by "consistent militancy". Only militant action decided upon by and involving the union's membership will be successful in defending their living standards and extending their control over the work-place. The current crisis of capitalism and its restructuring mean that no victories will be won, or defensive actions be successful, as a result of conciliation, collaboration or "reasonable dialogue" with bosses.

It is clear that militancy is not at present the keynote for all actions by clerical unions. The majority of members are not yet consistently militant nor does the structure for implementing such policies exist. However, this does not mean that they are utopian or impossible, only that a long term strategy for their implementation has to be adopted. Pandering to the backwardness of sections of the union membership cannot be a part of that strategy. Such an approach only reinforces a conservative "common sense". The central purpose of a rank and file organisation is to change what are

accepted as reasonable" policies and actions for the union. This can be done by offering a pole of attraction on the left; a pole in terms of the ideas put forward and also an organisational focus. Those attracted to the focus will be militants in the union — people looking for strong policies and proposals for action, who recognise that their effectiveness will be enhanced by joining a rank and file group. In order to do this it may be necessary to appear "unreasonable" and to jeopardize "credibility" in the eyes of more conservative members.

For example, the action groups have a responsibility to point out that arbitration is a dead end — the graveyard of disputes — despite the commitment of public service union officials to arbitration and the widespread belief that significant gains can be won purely through the Commission. Similarly, abortion and other "social" issues are important areas of work for the action groups. The availability of abortion directly affects the ability of women to enter and remain in the work force.³²

Ultraleftism, which is not yet a danger in any of the action groups, consists of destroying credibility in the eyes of already militant workers, not those of the less conscious ones. Without standing on the left edge of what is "reasonable" to militant workers, the prospects for drawing them to the left and into the group are minimal.

In the case of Arbitration, there are plenty of examples of the lack of success of other unions' claims. Then there is the example of the CERR debacle. Militants in the public service are receptive to the idea that what happens outside the Arbitration Commission is more important to the final determination than the charade inside. It may be difficult to convince a majority of public servants that this is the case, given the importance of the ideology of state neutrality in the public service, but it is not impossible and it is becoming easier. The public service unions' wage claim will be a dismal failure if this militant position is not pushed and is not available as a

guide to action.

With abortion it is not a question of convincing unionists that free abortion should be available on demand. 70% of Australians already believe that abortion should be legal. The task is to show that abortion is a class issue. This is relatively straightforward for well developed militants and women who have been in contact with the women's movement. They are the people whose activities will convince others.

By building the groups, through

recruiting militants, the opportunities for greater contact with other workers grows — it becomes easier to discuss politics with more of them and to involve them in action on the office floor. It is through such action that consciousness changes, opening the way, not only to militant trade union consciousness but also revolutionary class consciousness. For revolutionaries, militant trade unionism is not only an end but also a means.

Footnotes

1. The emphasis in the following account is somewhat biased to the administrative and Clerical Officers Association, as this has been the main area of my research and experience. There is extremely little published material available on any of the public service clerical unions. I am indebted for much of the information in the article to workers in the various unions. Jeff Soar's Honours Thesis in Sociology at Monash University (1980) is a very useful source on the VPSA. My own Honours Thesis (Macquarie University 1978) also includes material on the Commonwealth Public Service labour process not brought together elsewhere.

2. For a specific, if over theoretical, account of how marxist class analysis can be applied to the public service see G. Carchedi "The Economic Identification of State Employees", *Social Praxis* 3(1-2).

3. Thus changes in the public service labour process are conditioned by the class struggle and economic conditions in society at large and the combativity of workers in the public service.

4. For a more detailed account of the nature of internal labour markets see R.C. Edwards "The Social Relations of Production in the Firm and Labor Market Structure" in R.C. Edwards, M. Reich and D.M. Gordon (eds) *Labor Market Segmentation* Heath 1975.

5. See recruitment and induction literature for the public service for examples of the "career service" ideology.

6. Australian Bureau of Statistics, census figures.

7. Ibid.

8. C. Harman *Is A Machine After Your Job?*

SWP (Britain) 1979.

9. N.G. Butlin, A. Barnard, J.J. Pincus "Public and Private Sector Employment in Australia 1901-1974", *Australian Economic Review* 1st Quarter 1977.

10. eg *Federal Public Service Journal*, November 1948 and March 1949.

11. see Bruce Juddery's forthcoming history of the ACOA.

12. The idea of the ruling class offensive is elaborated in my "A Poor Start to Prosperity" *International Socialist* 8 1979.

13. See R.N. Spann *Public Administration in Australia* NSW Government Printer 1975, p502. Scientific management techniques had been current in Australia for a long time — they had set off the 1917 railways strike in NSW for example.

14. See K.E. Grainger "O & M in the Public Service" *Public Administration* 17(2) June 1958 for details.

15. For an excellent analysis of scientific management see H. Braverman *Labor and Monopoly Capital* Monthly Review Press 1974. A typical O & M exercise was the introduction of production line organisation into registries, for example.

16. Braverman *ibid*.

17. See the Public Service Board (Commonwealth) "Submission to the Committee of Inquiry into Technological Change" July 1979 and its ADP Resource Planning publications.

18. G.E. Caiden *The Career Service* Melbourne University Press 1964 p417.

19. Pat Lanigan, Director of the Department of Social Security 18 October 1978.

20. Answer to question on notice number 2204, to the Treasurer, by Bill Hayden, 27 November 1978.

22. The following is based on the avalanche of leaflet literature which accompanied the CERR campaign, the *ACOA Journal*, issues of *Grey Collar* (published by GEAG) and discussions with ACOA members in different Branches.

23. *Canberra Times* 20 February 1980.

24. "Whose Union 2nd Edition" (leaflet, Anne Forward March 1979) for the view of the right wing of the ARG.

25. *Alternative Viewpoint* May 1979.

26. For example *Alternative Viewpoint* May and June 1978.

27. "Whose Union . . ." *ibid*.

28. See *Red Tape* (published by the VRG) various issues 1979 and R. Kingsford *VPSA Reform Group Activities During 1979: What We Have Done* (leaflet).

29. This is a quotation from *Australian Communist* number 96 July/August 1979 journal of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) — the "Maoists".

30. For the history of early rank and file movements see K. Appleby "The Rank and File Movement Yesterday and Today" *International Socialism* 1:83 1975.

31. See for example the perspective of a *Tribune* article on the ACOA, 29 August 1979.

32. For examples of this approach see *Rank and File* number 3, January 1980 (published by PSAG), *Red Rape* (two newsletters of the same number published by the VRG and GERAFA) and especially *Grey Collar*.