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Union land is part of community land

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Abstract

Unionists are community members. The question we have to ask is how do we keep the links between our work as unionists and our work as active progressive citizens alive and open? How can community activists, often involved in struggles that affect the broad community and social infrastructure, keep the union movement informed and connected to these struggles? Perhaps it is useful to look at the arenas we predominantly work in as for many, these are often related to our paid work.

Union Land is Part of Community Land

Sharon Callaghan



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Unionised workers, in this district for example, have historically been in male dominated areas of struggle. So it is easy to hold images of working class men standing up for the 'underdog' as one theme of the union struggle. The value of having a strong and powerful union backing those often rendered voiceless has been a rightful role for union defenders of our workers' rights and our broader human rights. This role,

while necessary, runs the risk of being remote from grassroots campaigning, removed from changing political thought and tactics and limited by being tied to hierarchical union structures.

Community workers and community activists may predominantly work within peace groups, feminist circles, environmental networks or areas relating to the ongoing struggles around the “welfare state”, or whatever we are now in, in this post welfare state era where the individual is paramount. (That’s another story). If links are loose between the various sites of struggle we find we have less common language to share ideas, in turn resulting in fewer opportunities to stand side by side in a struggle. Without strong communication we won’t recognise our shared social justice work. Here are two anecdotes illustrating the need for ongoing connectedness between all defenders of human rights within the union or in another arena. One story can be described as a more successful collaboration than the other.

The first one is set in the very early days when slum landlords used their wealth and power to intimidate tenants out of their CBD blocks of flats rather than challenge rent controlled tenancies through the courts. When demolition workers illegally took the roof literally from over a tenant’s head, we had to act quickly. It meant John Queripel the local Uniting Church reverend (who could frock up at speed when the need required) and me from the local Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS) (who rarely frocked up at all) joining the union leader of the day to talk with the developers and landlords about how to best treat their tenants.

The key issue here was that we needed to do what the tenants wanted, whether to stay and fight or move on, while using the mechanisms available to us. In this case the tenants wanted to move on despite their legal and moral entitlements. In this particular incident racism and greed mixed to see a woman of colour arrive home from hospital with her new born baby to find her lounge room wall missing and dust and debris covering her new, clean baby things. So the issues canvassed included that the union workers could go on strike upon learning about the treatment of the tenants, leaving half demolished flats exposed to the weather. A raging reverend in his Sunday best could be chained to the developer’s construction fence. And a community worker carrying on about the rights of renters, could all make for a good story in the Illawarra Mercury. In this case the developer assisted the tenants by paying their costs to move out. The reason any action happened at all was because there was an opportunity for the community folk and the union

leader to talk quickly about what was happening in our town. It worked because the union was ready for action and there were some open channels for communication with the tenants and their advocates.

The second story dates from the late 1980s when a bus load of unionists left Wollongong to support the community in Rooty Hill argue against a new Steel Mill. Rooty Hill residents didn't want further pollution, traffic and industrial activity in a predominantly residential area. Wollongong workers, on the other hand, were arguing that the mill could be part of the existing industrial plants at Port Kembla without the same detriment while creating more jobs. The bus trip was distressing because a few union blokes addicted to tussling with someone, decided that two of us from a small group of women on the bus would be their distraction for the trip. Despite other union officials witnessing the sexist haranguing, they did nothing. Our relatively small contingent arrived to see what appeared to be an entire community out in strength: colourful, kid friendly and well informed on the issues affecting their community. One Wollongong unionist turned to another to say something along the lines of, "looks good doesn't it, next time we'll bring the women and children". This comment at the time had a profound effect on my feminist being. Women and children can still be accessories. Now we can be accessories in the struggle. Included but never consulted. Used for the colour that the media like so much. Women and children can be the soft edge of the hard union profile.

Women sit on picket lines and go on strike for the same reasons men do. Comradship. Empathy. Protecting a community against greed, exploitation, discrimination and injustice. It is how we view each other and understand the needs of all workers that will define how we work together. It is having awareness of all forms of injustice that shapes how we work to create fairness. A broad inclusive human rights movement that protects its activists from unfair treatment is likely to be successful against those who see workers as fodder in their push for profits. If we use each other rather than work collectively to our strengths then we diminish our own capacity as a movement.

Perhaps the key to union/community collaboration is to have a broad defining slogan for all our work. This slogan would have at its heart that our work is defending human rights regardless of where we are and what hat we are wearing. There should be no demarcation between our work for justice. We are not fighting to protect one job from the scrap heap but instead

for the right of a family to have adults in the paid workforce. We are fighting for the rights of children to have access to the resources that come with parents in paid employment. We are fighting for the rights of communities to have the maximum opportunities for all its citizens regardless of different abilities, gender, sexual preference, race or cultural background.

Being effective human rights advocates requires ongoing education within our ranks. We need ongoing reflexive practices within our networks to monitor that we are inclusive and listening. If we don't hear we won't have the language. If we don't have the language we won't have the practice. We need cultural awareness training, or more precisely cultural competency training, to clarify the links between our various struggles.

When I am at the gay and lesbian mardi gras fair day I am particularly aware of how discrimination can keep talented people from being promoted in a homophobic work environment. I feel saddened by the various layers of injustice when I read the words of Leonard Matlovich, a US air force pilot who said, "*The Air Force pinned a medal on me for killing a man and discharged me for making love to one*". So despite having fun at the fair I know I am also part of a human rights struggle as desperate and worthy as fighting WorkChoices or the war in Iraq. Every struggle, local or global, takes its toll. And that is our shared problem, our collective problem, irrespective of what t-shirt we are wearing on any given day.

When I lobby to stop the funding cuts to a local Aboriginal support service I do so as a unionist who sees good workers doing a good job being forced to look for alternative work. As a believer in the need for reconciliation with Indigenous Australians to come through practical support, I feel shocked at the loss of funds for essential Aboriginal services. As a community worker I am appalled at the lack of foresight by government funders who prioritise perks and parties over support workers for families with very little to their name.

All of my political identities shatter equally as I witness this official systemic neglect of human rights. If we fail to see ourselves on a human rights continuum we will fail to see opportunities to do our work well and include those who are, or could be, part of the struggle. When the union administration spends more time and resources organising shopping support for paid union members while ignoring the plight of the unemployed, the point has been sadly missed. These potential union members are ignored as they struggle to find paid meaningful work. And those who were loyal unionists, only to be discarded by profiteers during economic down turns, often

lose their links to the union once they are out of the workforce. As once proud workers they could end up alone in poverty and isolation.

If we fail to put the human rights of all citizens at the forefront of our work then the narrowness of our actions sits starkly against our broader ideals as unionists. The 1980s recession saw women accused of taking men's jobs when they entered non-traditional areas of work. The real enemies of men and women workers were those multinational companies that used discriminatory practices to increase profit while employing fewer workers. Discrimination against anyone diminishes everyone.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is a union that has benefited from the international links in their work and the human rights struggles most evident in the developing world. The MUA along with their brothers and sisters in the International Transport Federation have run a long-term campaign against abuse and exploitation of seafarers. Ships sailing under 'flags of convenience' are characterised by poor safety records, inadequate or non-existent medical facilities and, in the worst cases, neglect of their crew by depriving them of food and sleep. The MUA continues to collect back-pay entitlements for these workers and sign up ships to international wages and conditions. The notion of *touch one touch all* rightly applies to a seafarer from the Philippines as it does to a worker at Port Kembla. The human rights work of the MUA is the essence of unionism: not self-serving but a struggle to protect our shared humanity.

The Joy Mining dispute, like the Patrick dispute, was community unionism in action. The waterfront dispute had the benefit of being a big, televised, media-saturated affair with such offensive attacks on workers that even the more privileged in our communities were moved to action by this attack on human rights and democracy. Even those who would not normally be sympathetic to wharfies, found it hard to stomach this ruthless attack on workers and our democratic protection of workers' rights. However, the Joy dispute was smaller, more localised but an important learning experience for union activists. Writs and injunctions preventing union officials from participating in union activity meant 'concerned citizens' needed to take their spot, which then presented another type of problem to the companies using the courts to stifle union protest.

What we need to be mindful of here is that we don't use up the small groups of union and social activists to be fodder for the courts, when company money and legal resources pretty

much always outstrip the resources of grassroots campaigns. As courts and legal action increase as a way to stifle political action we must prepare well to respond. We need to maximise the opportunity and to publicise the injustices against workers. We have to work within the community and inspire more to act. Most importantly what we have to do is build strong relationships between union and social activists that can be called to action quickly and stand united against company use of industrial spies, court threats and other legal intimidation. So when we think of building community unionism we need to think of human rights advocacy. And when governments and big business want to break the union, it can be named for what it is, attacking our fundamental human rights.

All of us collectively must show the human face of our activism so that when opponents attack the union there is no demarcation between the union and the community worker, the sacked pregnant worker, the unemployed, the tenant and the person needing support from a community service. The international human rights and union slogan, *the people (the workers) united will never be defeated*, while old and familiar, makes a very good point. Whatever maxim we use, it has to include every single one of us.

