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Communities and Unions: Class, Power and Civil Society in Regional Australia

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Abstract

One hundred and thirty years ago in the Illawarra, mineworkers established an autonomous district union which by 1911 numbered nearly 4,000 members working in 22 mines along the escarpment. The same generation of workers established one of the first attempts in Australia to organise working people including but beyond their workplaces, at the community level, by forming the Illawarra District Council of the Australian Labour Federation in 1896, which tried to combine industrial and political activities in one organisation in the one community.¹ The history of unions in regional Australia is the story of their existence in the community.¹ Historians and sociologists have captured some of this and in this paper, in seeking to answer the question ‘what do unions do that make them successful parts of their communities?’—I have reviewed the now quite substantial literature on regional unionism covering Broken Hill, Bulli, Lithgow, Newcastle, the Pilbara, Port Kembla, Wagga Wagga, Wollongong and Wonthaggi.

Communities and Unions: Class, Power and Civil Society in Regional Australia

Mike Donaldson

This paper was originally delivered at the 'Community Unionism, Labour's Future?' conference at the University of Wollongong, Friday, 18 April 2008, sponsored by the Gramsci Society (Asia-Pacific), the South Coast Labour Council, the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Labour History Society and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong.

One hundred and thirty years ago in the Illawarra, mine-workers established an autonomous district union which by 1911 numbered nearly 4,000 members working in 22 mines along the escarpment. The same generation of workers established one of the first attempts in Australia to organise working people including but beyond their workplaces, at the community level, by forming the Illawarra District Council of the Australian Labour Federation in 1896, which tried to combine industrial and political activities in one organisation in the one community.¹ The history of unions in regional Australia is the story of their existence in the community.¹ Historians and sociologists have captured some of this and in this paper, in seeking to answer the question 'what do unions do that make them successful parts of their communities?—I have reviewed the now quite substantial literature on regional unionism covering Broken Hill, Bulli, Lithgow, Newcastle, the Pilbara, Port Kembla, Wagga Wagga, Wollongong and Wonthaggi.

Although they are in some ways quite different, the class composition of these nine towns typically comprises five broad groupings. Firstly, there exists a substantial majority of wage earners and those reliant on their wages, including, usually, quite a number of workers in the 'cash-in-hand' economy. A significant number of people (mainly and the unemployed—reside there, too. There is also a substantial number of self-employed

people including owner-drivers, providers of domestic and personal services, trades people of all varieties and professional people such as lawyers, doctors, health specialists, dentists, accountants. Shopkeepers, small manufacturers, publicans, small business people generally, are very important in regional Australia, but those with the biggest economic clout are the senior- and middle-managers employed by the town's bigger businesses—the councils, industries, supermarkets and other large retail chains and hospitals. Major employers, key shareholders and directors of large companies are absent from these communities. They live instead in the important capital cities of the world, and usually are not particularly knowledgeable of or interested in what occurs in the regions.²

In some places the local petty bourgeoisie almost exclusively runs the town. The local bosses, small business and professional people control local government and other organisations, and their spouses, relatives, friends and business associates, also run the important civil, benevolent and recreational bodies. Sometimes they have an anti-working class bias, as has been the case in Wagga Wagga for many decades, where membership of the local elite overlaps with membership of conservative political parties. But this is not always the case, and even when it is, the situation is never fixed and final.³

Regional unions operate in this class-differentiated environment and to do so they adopt two complementary broad strategies, one 'internal' and the other 'external'. Internally, they build and support connections and relationships *within* their natural constituency, inside the broadest section of the community, in the first and frequently in the second grouping that I have just outlined, and they represent, advance and defend these particular interests. To do this, they quite strategically *reach beyond* their natural constituency to enter into alliances, both short- and long-term, with all or part of one, two and sometimes all of the three other groupings. Occasionally, too, they work deliberately against those interests to advance their own, although, particularly in a small town, this is very difficult to sustain. Unions' ability to reach out and make alliances with, say, non-government community organisations, small businesses and the local state, is really a function of their capability to organise within their broad local base. The more interconnected they are within the local working class, the greater is their capacity to reach effectively outside it and to form productive relationships with other classes and their representative organisations.

Some years ago, a sociologist worked out that there were

more than 70 different ways of using the term ‘community’, and so it seemed that the word didn’t really mean very much. Subsequently some historians, notably Jim Hagan and Henry Lee, decided that in the Illawarra in particular, economic change (especially changes in technology, transport, media and marketing), growing occupational, social and ethnic diversity and the decline of the family as a unit of production, have proved “perhaps finally lethal” to the actuality of community itself.⁴

But amidst the kerfuffle about definitions and leaving aside nostalgia for days long gone, seven facts are germane to a consideration of community today. About three quarters of Australians spend five hours or less travelling to work each week and the vast majority of shop, recreate, educate their children and attend medical facilities within an hour travelling time of their homes.⁵ Along with superannuation, these homes, which for the most part are their own, are the only substantial assets that most Australians will ever have. What happens to them, then, and to their local environment, matters. Nearly half of Australians have lived in their suburb for eleven years or more and just over a quarter for more than twenty years. Most know their neighbours’ names, are on good terms with them and feel safe in their neighbourhood.⁶ A substantial number of Australian families remain matrilocal, that is, many married daughters choose to live within an hour’s travel of their mothers. If communities are anything, they are agglomerations of family and friends. Families form the basis of the networks of reciprocal obligation that make up community, and their interlacing binds the community together.⁷ Not surprisingly then, for decades with remarkable consistency, opinion polling has revealed that Australians place ‘family and friends’ substantially ahead of ‘money’ and even ‘work’ as what is most important in their lives. And finally, as Erik Eklund and Greg Patmore have reminded us, communities are not only about relations between people, social networks, but are also about “economic and social infrastructure”, “common resources and facilities”, the roads, parks, sports grounds, beaches, schools, universities, libraries, churches, shops, cafes, clubs, theatres, pubs and workplaces that exist in a particular geographic area.⁸ When we have something to fight for, Antonio Gramsci pointed out about eighty years ago, we are inclined to act in defence of people “within the circle of our humanity”, “close to us”, “familiar to us”.⁹

The family-household is the basic unit of community and it makes sense to see communities as sets of interconnected

families. Kin and 'fictive-kin' are the source of practical and emotional support and sociability. Relatives, friends and neighbours provide for no payment almost half of all childcare in Australia. Grandparents (particularly grandmothers) provide 25% of all the care for children under five years-old.¹⁰ In addition to childminding and care of the elderly and sick, cooking, cleaning, shopping, nurturing, counselling and lending small amounts of money are all services exchanged between mainly working class women within a community. The emotional and psychological support provided by this ongoing system of exchanges, this gift economy, is vital for social reproduction and for the establishment and maintenance of the 'moral economy' which underpins the expressed values of the community itself.¹¹

Working class people, then, are sometimes reliant on others outside the family for their well being and continued existence and this fosters an ethos of mutual help and assistance. In the past, the informal assistance of family and friends gave rise to a number of working class associations and societies with close links to trade unions. Friendly societies, co-operative societies, workers' clubs, and women's auxiliaries all embraced mutuality, association, community service, fellowship, self-help and improvement which are the moral economy of the working class.¹²

New organisations have emerged over the last few decades. Following the earlier producers' and consumers' co-operatives have come cultural workers' associations, research institutions, working women's centres, workers' health centres, tenants' unions, migrant resource centres and older persons' organisations which enable people to understand, celebrate and successfully resolve the challenges of daily life. Estimates vary, but probably about two out of three adult Australians are involved in formal or informal voluntary activities. Just over half contribute unpaid time to a group or organisation, and about a quarter are active in two or more.¹³ The Wollongong City Council's Community Information Directory lists more than 3,000 organisations on its web page under the heading 'community'. These organisations collectively are also significant employers. By the late 1980s, more people in NSW laboured in community services than in construction, transport and storage combined. These workers carry forward the work of the predecessor organisations, and the lateral connections, the interlocks between their boards and committees of management are profuse and dense. They also connect very firmly into the various levels of government present in the locality.

Not only have new organisations developed, but new

forms of organisation have to. A recent study on mobile phone usage and text messaging in Australia found that among the 88 per cent of Australians who own mobile phones, nearly three-quarters of calls and 98 per cent of text messages are to family and friends.¹⁴ Surprisingly, perhaps, a review of the now quite substantial sociological literature on internet use, reveals that it too is 'integrated into the rhythms of daily life' and strengthens existing friendships and relations with family and neighbours, leading to a denser social life.¹⁵ The net also takes a lot of the grind (and perhaps some of the fun) out of network organising.

I was delighted on May Day 2006 to hear the speaker, Reverend Gordon Bradbury, a local Uniting Church vicar, chastise the assembled local Labor Party politicians for what he regarded as their lack of activity and commitment in opposing Work Choices. His outspokenness is no new thing, of course. Before him, the Rev. John Queripel was 'moved on' from the same church in the 1980s for being too radical. And further back, clergy appointed to Wollongong parishes "often found it advisable to modify their opinion on the relationship between God, man, and magistrate" in light of the politics of their congregations. A pastor at Helensburgh travelled by horse, rather than ride on "a scab train". In January 1887, the whole congregation at a Methodist church in Bulli walked out when a lay preacher who had scabbed took the pulpit.¹⁶ This firm pressure on the clergy even extended to matters after death. Nine of the miners killed in the Bulli mining disaster were Catholic. One of them had been a scab. The mourners withheld his coffin from burial in consecrated ground, and released it only after the officiating priest appealed to them from the graveside itself.¹⁷ But if the clergy supported the workers, their support was reciprocated. During the 1940 national coal dispute, striking miners built a brick wall on the church grounds in Corrimal guided by the Church of England's Rev. Mutton.¹⁸

Spiritual and cultural activities, entertainment and sporting events, drama societies, bowls, cricket, rugby, soccer and surf-lifesaving teams, all require time, effort and formal organisation, premises and grounds. These proceedings, institutions, values and practices make up part of the local structures of power. They also strengthen the integrity of the community, are a means by which people identify with it and socialise their children into it.¹⁹

Sociologists still know far too little about union activists, and unions jealously guard what information they do collect about them. But we do know that union activists are joiners. People active in the union are likely to be active elsewhere.

Steve Best, for many years the Secretary of the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council (ITLC) and Paddy Molloy a militant miner and member of the Unemployed Workers' Movement were on the executive of the Corrimal Bowling Club. Best, who became president of the Club and its champion bowler died in a car accident returning home from Sydney on a bowling trip. Ernie Browne, Vice-President of the Southern District Miners' Federation, and an Alderman on North Illawarra Municipal Council was President of the same bowling club. Miners President, Fred Lowden, too was a member.²⁰ When James Oliver was Secretary of the Scarborough Lodge and its representative on the Miners' Federation Southern District Board, he was also Secretary of Scarborough Rugby League Club and its delegate to the Illawarra Rugby League. Con Quilkey, long-time Councillor on Bulli Shire Council, and President of Bulli-Woonona Labor Party branch was also President of Woonona Bowling Club.²¹ Labour Council Secretary, Merv Nixon's 'second office' was at the Thirroul Leagues Club and Waterside Workers' Port Kembla Branch Secretary, Ted Macalear enjoyed a lengthy and close association with the Berkley Sports and Social Club. The organisations of civil society within the working class and the connections and overlaps between them are what make the working class powerful.

When union organisations articulate this power for the good of the community of which they are part, their security is enhanced and their future more certain. Thus the Labour Council on the south coast has fought for the improvement of local schools and for the construction of a high school and the university. It has campaigned for working women, against conscription and for peace; fought with the unemployed in the 1920s and 1980s; defended freedom of speech and the right to vote; worked with pensioners' groups for aged-care; and battled for sporting, leisure and cultural amenities and train services for the community.²² Unions in the Pilbara, too, worked closely with local clubs and sporting teams. When the mining company, Robe River, attacked the unions, community organisations collapsed and civil society went into a sharp decline, from which it has not yet recovered. When the unionists fought to reunite, they did so in the homes and pubs, talking about work, of course, but equally about schooling, healthcare and social facilities.²³

Like union organisations in Lithgow and Broken Hill, the Labour Council on the South Coast and its affiliated unions have long been involved in public health often successfully fighting to establish and working to maintain local hospitals

and health services.²⁴ Hospitals in Bulli (1893) and Coledale (1917) and Wollongong were supported by subscriptions by local unions who for many years provided a very substantial proportion of their income. The Building Trades group of the SCLC successfully fought to retain the hospice at Waterfall and was instrumental in the establishment of a blood bank and a natal clinic.²⁵ The 1970s saw the SCLC join with residents' groups to do something about air and water pollution and the movement of coal on the roads, and the Federated Ironworkers' Association, too, vigorously took up the issue of the dumping of coal.²⁶ Labour Council Secretary, Ted Harvey, had summed this up in 1956, saying "If we confine ourselves to so-called purely industrial matters we would be betraying the interests of the trade unionists of this district".²⁷

The linkages between families and between organisations within the working class reach out from the class to engage those who might be hostile to or sceptical about the labour movement's intentions and objectives. One of the first major disputes in the Illawarra, the 'battle of Bulli' in 1887, saw miners and their families joined by shopkeepers and merchants to physically repulse, on five occasions, shiploads of scabs from Sydney brought in to break a long-running strike.²⁸ Similarly, in Newcastle in November 1909, when the coal miners of NSW went on strike, several large local storekeepers established the Merchants' Relief Fund, "for the purpose of supplying the families of miners and others". A bookseller and auctioneer from Adamstown, a few kilometres southwest of Newcastle city, wrote to the miners' union donating fifty loaves of bread per week to the community.²⁹

In Port Kembla, "leading professional and commercial men" contributed to relief funds during a two-month dispute which started late in 1919. In Wonthaggi, a coal mining town in Victoria, a four-month coal miners' dispute in 1934 was supported by donations from local farmers, commercial men and local businesses. On a larger scale, businesses from across the Illawarra were major contributors during the *Dalfram* dispute of 1938-39 and during the 1938 coal miners' strike. Donations came from various local businesses. Davis & Penny (local wholesalers), Wollongong taxi drivers, W. Waters & Son (hardware retailer and member of the Country Traders' Association committee), Wollongong hotels all contributed to relief funds. Local businesses donated prizes for special fund raising events, many staged in halls, theatres and hotels free of charge. Broken Hill strikes secured support from small vegetable growers, publicans, and even from larger commercial

operations. In the 1940's coal strike, Jack Conino gave twelve boxes of fish, and miners' President, Fred Lowden, commented that it "would be remembered by the miners when they were once again in a position to spend". *The Illawarra Mercury*, W. Waters & Son (again), the Grand, Commercial, Oxford, Harp and Illawarra Hotels and Brandon's cake shop all gave some money, because they "knew where the money in their tills came from". Customers remembered who had been generous when they needed help and who had not.³⁰

Support from small businesses and community organisations for the 31 miners who occupied their colliery at Kemira for 16 days in October 1982 was extensive. The recently established Wollongong Women's Centre organised a luncheon to foster mutual support between the partners of the Stay In miners. Local doctor, Geoff Hittmann, visited the miners underground under threat of prosecution from the BHP who owned the mine. The Wollongong Workers' Club donated a hot meal every night. Zeims and Pinto Pearce butcheries, Leisure Coast and Parkview fruit markets, Panorama, Berkeley and Coniston Hotels, the Egg Board, Guest's Cakes, Westfield Smokers Market, the Ironworkers' Club, Kings Furniture, Dapto Soccer Minor League, Graham's Menswear, Corrimal Laundromat, Illawarra Camping Equipment, Clark Rubber (Figtree), the "Bread and Circus" theatre troupe and the North Bulli Colliery Bush Band all pitched in.³¹

While the majority of financial support for workers involved in industrial disputes comes from other workers and their organisations, many small business people have been wage workers themselves and many will be again. Overall, small businesses have offered a significant amount of support to local union families during industrial action.³² If they didn't, there was always the consumer boycott to help them remember who provided their bread, as the successful action of the Barrier Industrial Council (BIC) in Broken Hill demonstrates.³³

When the members of the 'Your Rights at Work' Committee in Milton-Ulladulla came up with the idea for the 'Fair Employer' strategy during the recent anti-Work Choices campaign, they probably didn't realise that they were walking in the footsteps of Paddy O'Neill, the President of the BIC. Both the Milton-Ulladulla activists and the BIC developed a 'union store' strategy, whereby those small businesses doing right by the unions would display a union endorsement in their windows. In Broken Hill, these shops were exempted from the consumer boycotts the BIC was imposing at the time, and the unions publicised their support.³⁴

But it is not only during times of exception, during strikes and lockouts, that cross-class support can be gained and given. Once secure and confident in its own constituency, the union movement is in a strong position to advance its interests through the formation of alliances. Often these alliances are formed to defend and develop common economic and social infrastructure and resources. In July 1980, the Wollongong Workers' Research Centre completed a report for the Port Kembla Branch of the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF) on the bypassing of Port Kembla. General cargo tonnages to the Port have been declining rapidly over the previous decade and with them, according to the WWF, the jobs of waterside, transport workers and the livelihoods of "small capitalists". The WWF added that while it had an obvious and direct interest in the well-being of the Port, "with this comes a responsibility that what is one of the greatest assets of the region, paid for largely by the working people of the Illawarra, is protected and enhanced". The report detailed this decline and it was launched at a public meeting from which a Port Kembla Harbour Task Force was established. Snowy Webster, secretary of the Seaman's Union Port Kembla Branch, commented that "a chronic . . . position exists that affects not only those who work on the waterfront but small businesses who depend on the shipping industry".³⁵

The Task Force comprised representatives from four maritime unions, two local transport firms, three stevedoring companies, the Wollongong and Port Kembla Chambers of Commerce, and the NSW Maritime Services Board. It met under the aegis of the Wollongong City Council and was considered a sub-committee of the Council itself.³⁶ It has been successful in winning for the port a facility for the export of grain, a ship-repair capacity and recently the establishment of a container terminal for the importation of cars. Crucial to these achievements has been the involvement of representatives of local and state governments.

For fourteen years from 1926 Steve Best led the ITLC and was an organiser for both the Australian Workers' Union and the Federated Ironworkers' Association. He was the ITLC's secretary and sole paid officer, a situation that has remained in place ever since, despite the massive growth of the population of the Illawarra and of the Labour Council itself, with union affiliations almost doubling and affiliated membership growing from 10,000 to 70,000 in forty years.³⁷ I pay very close to \$1,000 a year in union dues. Through our dues, other union members and I support six levels of union organisation: local, state and national levels within our own unions, and local, state and

national levels within the peak union bodies. The money and energy that goes into maintaining all these levels seems to many who provide them to be disproportionate to the resources that actually arrive in the communities where they live and work.

Getting trade union leaders out of their offices in the capital cities and into 'the other Australia' is always a good thing, and something they generally enjoy. Assembling a road show and driving a big union bus all the way from Sydney into New South Wales' regional towns as occurred during the recent Your Rights At Work Campaign, is a lot of fun. But it may not be the most effective way of using union funds. It reinforces the notion that unionists are 'outsiders', are people who breeze into town, stir up trouble for a couple of hours, pose for the media and then shoot through. 'Locals' versus 'outsiders' remains a potent motif in small town Australia, but one that is difficult to turn against unions when they are palpably part of, and not added on to, the community.

So, what do unions do that makes them successful parts of their communities? The recipe for failure is clear enough: absence, superficiality, narrowness, isolation, rivalry and division, imposition from outside and lack of resources. Based on the evidence reviewed here stretching over more than a century, the formula for success for community trade unions is: the existence of a unified organisation in the district based on local workplaces, across occupation, craft and skill; breadth of reach within the locality, for instance, reflecting and connecting with its various ethnicities and including those outside paid work (parents and carers at home, the unemployed and retired); a deep awareness of matters affecting family life and the ability to take up the issues outside the workplace that impinge on it; solid networking and a knowledge and use of overlaps with other existing organisations of civil society; a willingness and capacity to develop alliances across the classes to achieve specific outcomes; a working relationship with local government and local branches of state and federal governments; and the ability to obtain reliable support (particularly financial) from outside the area in times of need.

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