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Picturing a fairer world through local struggles for social justice

**Abstract**
The photographs and words of Illawarra activist Sharon Callaghan record local struggles for social justice during the 1990s and beyond.
Picturing a Fairer World Through Local Struggles for Justice

Sharon Callaghan

It was 1999 when I started conscientiously taking photos as a record of local struggles for social justice. The Wood Police Royal Commission revealed that the NSW Police Special Branch had been collecting and maintaining illegal files on citizens for decades. An amnesty meant many of us could apply for our Special Branch Files under the Freedom of Information Act. I shared the general concern that the collating of such files was a serious breach of a citizen’s privacy. It was revealed that over 27,000 individual files were kept. It’s a strange feeling to think that your efforts to safeguard human rights and create a fairer society are viewed as “suspect” by some people in authority. But I found myself almost more concerned that these valuable historic records on progressive activity could be lost or destroyed. I was concerned that social justice campaigners were not necessarily consistent recorders of history and political activism. However, shadowy figures on the police payroll were documenting and photographing the social justice campaigns of peace activists, feminists, community welfare workers, unionists, writers and academics. My response to this betrayal of our democratic rights was to take my camera everywhere recording the public protests, the worker campaigns, struggles for justice and even the small actions that give voice to people seeking a say on matters that shape their daily lives. May Day remains my favourite day of the year. It is the day we honour old rituals imbued with the memories of those who struggled at great cost so that those who came after them could have a decent livelihood.
On May Day I love the colour red. The banners and slogans of the comrades on the street inspire me. I want us to be able to take to the streets and demand decent housing, health care and education as part of the human rights and entitlements of workers. This May Day camaraderie which carries a cry for world peace along with a heartfelt demand to keep the local hospital emergency ward open, is a powerful link with our shared local needs and universal fears for the future. In 1990 on May 1st International Workers Day, I witnessed bravery the likes of which I had never seen before. In Guatemala, around forty thousand university students, Indigenous women and workers formed two lines and slowly marched through the city in a silent and defiant response to the Guatemalan Government’s repressive regime that was killing hundreds of thousands of workers and social activists. On this day all around the world people are on the streets seeking justice and a fair go and for many this public expression is at a very great risk. I particularly like the way our collective efforts mean that when an economically irrational government implements their policies to sack a blue collar worker, a teacher or a university professor has the opportunity to stand by their side and say this is wrong and disastrous for a community, as well as a family.
May Day, Wollongong, 2003

I particularly love the Scottish Pipers who lead the May Day march through the city streets with a stirring mix of joy and poignancy.

Hiroshima Day, 9 August 2003, Wollongong Mall

The Illawarra Unions Singers are part of that collective reclaiming of the streets where their harmonies remind us of the value of celebrating solidarity.
The blue and white peace flags that accompany most public rallies epitomise the decades long efforts of peace advocates. We continue to witness how bloody warfare degrades our humanity and lets the warmongers profit as they crush the peace dove.
What always inspires me is that as our poorest citizens struggle against job insecurity, reduced health assistance, cuts to dental care, environmental and workplace injury, it seems to be these very folk who devote most to local and international struggles for peace and justice. I wish our political leaders could make the same links between the local and the global.

The Patrick Maritime dispute that saw the docks and ports of coastal Australia fill with workers, their families and supporters was a spirited time. When the bosses bring aggressive dogs and mace to a workplace as part of their “negotiations” with the workers, then the slogans of the working class come into their own: “Touch One, Touch All” or “Here to Stay” and “As Long as it Takes".

Doreen Borrow,
Port Botany,
MUA Dispute,
1998
The official doublespeak of the Federal Government’s Workchoices legislation does not convince those who are watching their hard-fought-for industrial rights disappear. When a worker cannot bargain collectively and their Industrial Award entitlements are slashed, they stand alone before the industrial might of their bosses. When the independent umpire is no longer there to hear workplace disputes and unions are no longer permitted to talk with their members, democracy, like the workers, is under attack. So the workers are making choices. We are choosing to expose this deliberate betrayal of our rights. We name this “reform” for what it is, an attack on the workers.
The student movement has always borne the brunt of official efforts to silence dissent. When students fail to reconcile the democratic theory discussed in the lecture theatres with the political reality that shapes all our lives, they see their future and bring new passion to the struggle for a fair go. I love the flair of student protest. Students do colour and symbolism in style. As well as taking their demands to the street, they sit in, sleep over, bake off, dress up and are known to perform their message using many cheap and borrowed props. Student protest the world over reminds us that even in the most bleak of times, we can still speak out with joy and humour, and we must, as the survival of our collective dissenting spirit is depending on it.
All in all it’s about comradeship. It’s about knowing that when your job is at risk, your family is facing eviction from their home, or your human rights are being violated, there is someone who is standing alongside you to face the challenge. And even better than that, if it comes to the crunch, many more are prepared to join you and even stand up front to protect your rights. That’s why we need to protect our shared rights, our solidarity and protect it forever. There seems to be more of us these days capturing the images of our grassroots social movements and recording community struggles. But for me, photographing our local campaigns is more than reclaiming the task of recording our activism. It is a way to preserve memories and capture the optimism of those who hold a vision of a peaceful and fair society. These images tell a story of our shared times and shared hopes for the future.