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Blue Singlets and Broccoli: Culture in the Service of Union Struggle

Abstract

Raymond Williams once wrote that “the task of a successful socialist movement will be one of feeling and imagination quite as much as one of fact and organisation”.¹ What did Williams mean by this? My interpretation, which I think is consistent with Williams’ whole body of work, is that he was arguing that left politics – and by implication studies of social and labour movements – should take a “cultural turn”. Williams was warning us not to overlook an important element of struggle – the cultural element. My perspective is that of a student of contemporary industrial relations in Australia. What Williams is saying to me is that our studies of labour struggle, past and present, in this country (and elsewhere) emphasise instead the political, legal and strategic elements of campaigns. They largely ignore what might broadly be termed the “cultural aspect” of struggle, although there are notable exceptions, which will be discussed below. And most studies of union struggle, if they deal with culture at all, do so in a celebratory rather than an analytical way.² Further, while there are now many studies, particularly in Britain and France, of working class struggles that pay attention to culture, little specific attention is given to union culture.

Blue Singlets and Broccoli: Culture in the Service of Union Struggle

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Introduction

Raymond Williams once wrote that “the task of a successful socialist movement will be one of feeling and imagination quite as much as one of fact and organisation”.¹ What did Williams mean by this? My interpretation, which I think is consistent with Williams’ whole body of work, is that he was arguing that left politics – and by implication studies of social and labour movements – should take a “cultural turn”. Williams was warning us not to overlook an important element of struggle – the cultural element.

My perspective is that of a student of contemporary industrial relations in Australia. What Williams is saying to me is that our studies of labour struggle, past and present, in this country (and elsewhere) emphasise instead the political, legal and strategic elements of campaigns. They largely ignore what might broadly be termed the “cultural aspect” of struggle, although there are notable exceptions, which will be discussed below. And most studies of union struggle, if they deal with culture at all, do so in a celebratory rather than an analytical way.² Further, while there are now many studies, particularly in Britain and France, of *working class* struggles that pay attention to culture, little specific attention is given to *union* culture.

This all begs the question of “What *is* culture?” And some subsidiary questions which bounce off this, such as “How do you define union culture?” and “What is its relationship to working class culture?”. And finally, the most important question of all “Who cares, anyway? Is union culture – whatever that is – central to union purposes, central to struggle?”

These are all large questions, and while I’d like this paper to answer all of them, in depth, it won’t, of course. What it will do is firstly, sketch in the elements of union culture; secondly, discuss

something of what is known theoretically about “culture” as a whole and where union culture might fit in to that; and thirdly, analyse a specific contemporary industrial campaign to find out something about the interrelationships between culture broadly defined, union culture, and struggle.

I’m interested in using sociological methods to investigate these questions, for while my own “disciplinary” base is industrial relations, I don’t think that IR itself has the theory or the methods to tease out these issues. In particular, in analysing the campaign from which I draw my empirical material, I’ve found that more orthodox notions of union strategy – particularly the way in which unions mix industrial and political strategies – simply isn’t all that helpful in explaining what was going on. Thus my own “turn to culture”.

The title of the paper picks out one of the familiar “cultural icons” of traditional unionism – “blue singlets” – and juxtaposes it with another familiar object, but not one that usually crops up in studies of union culture – “broccoli”. They were both part of a recent industrial campaign in Perth. How and why I am arguing that broccoli can be seen as a *cultural* (as opposed to an *agricultural*) icon in a particular union campaign, will become clear later in the paper. Picking up this idea of “old” and “new” union culture, therefore, the paper concludes with a discussion of some ideas about “traditional” and “innovative” union cultural strategies.

To refer to the theme of the conference: “labour and community”. This paper connects to the theme by raising questions about how a “sense of community” is created in the labour movement and, equally importantly, how the labour movement can gain support from the wider community in its battles. The struggles by unions to claim legitimacy in the public sphere – the “battle for hearts and minds” – seem to me to be particularly sharp at the moment. The 1998 waterfront dispute is the example everyone knows about; but the 1997 “Third Wave” dispute in Western Australia illustrates these themes equally well.

To digress briefly, before I go on, about why I am presenting this paper at a labour history conference, when it is about events that happened as recently as 1997. There are three reasons. The first is that the empirical material on which it is based was collected as part of an ASSLH (Perth Branch) documentation project³ – a “history of the present”, if you like – utilising the skills and input of a number of our committee members. The second is that some of the most insightful comment on the material collected, and earlier tentative analyses of the material,

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has come from labour historians. The third, related to the second, is that the theoretical insights of labour history, and the conscious attention it pays to sociological and cultural issues, are I believe of great importance to students of contemporary industrial relations like myself.

What is Union Culture?

The *products* of union culture are readily recognisable: the banners, songs, badges, picnics, cartoons etc. that we are all familiar with. Since the 1970s, there have been a number of collections of such material: for example, in the UK,⁴ Australia,⁵ and elsewhere. While some of this work falls within the “celebratory” tradition described by Howkins,⁶ the best of it moves from a descriptive vein into a more analytical mode, which tells us much about union culture.⁷ The *process* of creating contemporary union culture was well documented in the 1980s with the formalisation of union cultural activity under the Australia Council’s Art and Working Life Policy in 1982.⁸ However, while debate on the Policy and its outcomes was at one time lively and varied,⁹ this debate has not been conducted within the “mainstream of cultural debate”¹⁰ nor generally within debates about labour history, and certainly not within industrial relations. There have therefore been few attempts to theorise what “union culture” is or how it might be studied, or what the point of doing so might be – using contemporary union campaigns in particular.

One of the questions I have said I am interested in is the question of “what is union culture?” Material culture, such as the union banner, is clearly part of union culture, and the processes of creating material culture are also important to union culture. But implicit, and sometimes explicit, within the limited amount of writings on union culture, is the notion that culture is more than artefacts and processes and practices. Union culture is also about shared (and contested) meanings and interests; in Raymond Williams’ phrase a “whole way of life” and in E.P. Thompson’s, “a whole way of struggle”. To explore these notions, I need to turn to a wider literature on culture.

Union Culture, Working Class Culture and the Concept of “Culture”

No one in their right mind should write – or think – about “culture”. Williams famously suggests that it is “one of the two or three most difficult words to define in the English language”.¹¹ He later bemoans “the number of times I’ve wished that I had

never heard of the damned word".¹² E.P. Thompson calls culture a clumpish term, which by gathering up so many activities and attributes into one common bundle may actually confuse or disguise discriminations that should be made between them.¹³

Eley sums up fifty years of writing on culture by acknowledging the notorious difficulty of organizing the disorderly profusion of intradisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and varying national-intellectual meanings and understandings of the "culture concept" into anything resembling consensual form.¹⁴

Finding Eley's words a useful escape-hatch, I'll side step defining what "culture" is, at this stage. But for me, as a student of contemporary industrial relations, four issues stand out of all of this:

- the relationship between culture, ideology and power that is illuminated by some of the literature;
- the fact that culture has both order-maintaining and order-transforming aspects;
- the diversity and "layering" of culture(s); and
- the need to take a "cultural turn" in industrial relations.

With respect to the first issue: in industrial relations, I think we accept that power is manifested in industrial and/or political struggle. Unions are said to use traditional industrial/political/arbitral means to further their aims (much less of the last-named in the 1990s!). What I think we leave out of our consideration, however, are the cultural manifestations of power. I am thinking along the lines of the kind of analysis by Stuart Hall¹⁵ of the way in which the (very contradictory) elements of Thatcherism were deployed to "win hearts and minds", and of the seeming powerlessness of those who opposed Thatcherism to turn the tide. If we look at power from a cultural angle, then, we are forced to consider questions like "is there a 'cultural method' of waging industrial disputes?" – or alternatively are the traditional means somehow tinged with cultural elements?

There are two aspects to the second issue, the order maintaining/transforming issue. One is to what extent union's cultural practices challenge and try to transform the broader society – and in what senses they perhaps don't. Australian unions are said to have a "labourist tradition", a phrase that

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really encapsulates a whole gamut of ideas, including an emphasis on state intervention, and on political rather than industrial action. It is a tradition that is inherently conservative – on the whole, maintaining the current order of society. The other aspect of maintaining/transforming order is an internal one: the extent to which unions want to hold on to “traditional elements” of their own culture, and the extent to which they are prepared to transform themselves culturally. A good example of this is the strongly masculinist culture of some unions in Australia and elsewhere, and alternative union strategies which challenge this culture.¹⁶

The third and related issue is the “layering” of cultures, which comes through much of the literature. Williams has been criticised for presenting a monolithic view of British working class culture, and as a reaction to his and others’ early views, much of the burgeoning cultural studies literature emphasises this notion of “layering” of cultures. With the increasing diversity of union membership, the question arises as to what kinds of “layering” of cultures might be taking place in the union movement, as the numbers of traditional blue-collar workers decline, and pink, white and even gold collars become proportionately more dominant in the union movement.

So why the need to take a “cultural turn” in examining industrial disputes? Industrial relations claims to be a highly interdisciplinary field, and says its adherents should use whatever method comes to hand to help them understand and explain IR phenomena. Although I am also interested in exploring WA’s recent industrial relations history in a more “conventional” way,¹⁷ in IR terms, I believe the Third Wave dispute lends itself to a “cultural viewpoint”. Larouche and Audet, and Godard,¹⁸ amongst others, have criticised industrial relations for being too functionalist in its approach and for neglecting “alternative” theories, and I agree with their criticism. Culture is being (re)discovered in all areas of social scientific investigation¹⁹ – why not in industrial relations?

I’ll step back a bit now and look at what I mean by “union culture” and where it intersects with other cultures. Following on from the discussion above, it is obvious that union culture is about traditional union cultural products such as banners, newspapers, etc. There is some overlap between the cultural objects and practices used/venerated by unions, and working class cultural products and practices, which are a huge resource upon which union culture draws. The rediscovery of working class literature like “The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists” is an example. Working class traditions like the public meeting are

very much union traditions as well.²⁰ But union culture, while it overlaps with working class culture, has a life of its own that is different to working class culture. One aspect of this is its engagement with professional artists, which was at the heart of the formal Art and Working Life movement of the 1980s and still continues today. This approach recognises the inherent creativity of working people on the one hand, and the central importance of working class culture, but also acknowledges the role to be played by professional artists (usually called artworkers when they work in a union setting). Burn quotes a group of Canadian artists who work with the union movement who say they are

not claiming to represent the lived experience of the people in the movement, rather our work articulates a set of beliefs which are collectively held and held by ourselves as well ... we don't produce trade union culture or working class culture in an organic sense, [our work] is a representation of the issues and the institutions of the unions.²¹

In addition to this engagement with the professional arts sphere, unions are shameless borrowers from a variety of cultural traditions, not just working class tradition. Unions parody hegemonic cultural expressions, subverting dominant cultures and “high art”, they take up and use popular culture when and where it suits them, they borrow from the languages and practices of the past – all strategies which advance the cause of union struggle, and some of which I hope to illustrate in the discussion which follows.

A very important point that needs emphasis is that while many cultural expressions “just happen” in a spontaneous way in campaigns or everyday union life, culture can be “used” strategically by unions. Unions often shape cultural elements to their own institutional ends in a conscious way. But at the same time unions face the problem that they cannot always control internal cultural factors – much less external cultural manifestations. Culture is eternally contested – both without, and within. It is dynamic. Thus culture is somewhat of a “wild card” in union campaigns. It is partly, but not wholly, controllable.

For all these reasons, union culture is a force to be reckoned with in the present – not a “museum piece”. It remains an important component of “winning the struggle for hearts and minds”. Hence it requires our attention on theoretical and empirical fronts. The following discussion of WA’s 1997 Third Wave campaign illustrates this.

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The Third Wave Campaign

Overview

Although little has been published about industrial relations in WA in the 1990s, I'll claim parochial partiality and say that events there have not only been interesting, but that WA has been in the vanguard of Australian labour law "reform" (I use this word in the most ironic sense). At least, that is the viewpoint of the reformers.²² WA has deregulated and decentralised its IR system more comprehensively than elsewhere,²³ if one remembers that the "big bang" approach to IR reform in Victoria largely led to a flight to the Federal system. Reform in WA has been in three stages, as follows:

- 1993: First Wave: workplace agreements legislation, with minimal "safety net", a so-called "optional alternative" to the awards system and conciliation and arbitration;
- 1995: Second Wave: restrictions on unions' rights to organise (largely aborted due to political considerations); and
- 1997: Third Wave: a revival and intensification of the Second Wave.

The reforms have been described more comprehensively elsewhere.²⁴ What is important for my purposes in this paper is to stress the interlinking of the various elements of reform, and the government's strategy of introducing reform in a seemingly gradualist manner; "evolutionary rather than revolutionary" in the words of the proponents of reform. The First Wave – workplace agreements – was about reducing the *demand for* union services by individualising the employment relationship, and while this option has not been comprehensively taken up by the IR parties (less than 10% of WA employers have used workplace agreements²⁵), it has nevertheless exerted a considerable influence on bargaining outcomes in WA and has profound social justice implications.²⁶ In the government sector, especially, the employers' strategy has been to offer immediate wage increases to those prepared to sign workplace agreements, but to delay collective negotiations for as long as possible.²⁷ The Second and Third Waves were about reducing the *supply of* union services by a variety of means which circumscribe the traditional organising activities of trade union. The elements of these "reforms" include mandatory state-controlled union ballots prior to industrial action, restrictions on union right of entry, penalties

for unions seeking to move from the state to the federal industrial jurisdiction, curbs on political donations by unions (but not by corporations), and elimination of the “check off” as an industrial matter, which has hit hardest at public sector unions. A projected “Fourth Wave” aims, as the First Wave did, to reduce the demand for union services – this time, by strengthening state protections and services for individual workers experiencing industrial problems.

Each of these “waves” has resulted in lengthy and widespread protest by the union movement. My focus is on the protest accompanying the passage of the “Third Wave” legislation.

A War of Meaning(s)

It is impossible to analyse union activity in an industrial campaign without looking at the activities of the employers or, in this case, those of the legislators, which gave rise to the campaign. While this is part of my overall analysis of the campaign, I don’t have the space to do it here. I do however acknowledge its vital importance in any “cultural analysis” of union activity in the campaign. Just to sketch in a few thoughts.

The dominant discourse in the government’s 1993 and 1996 election strategies, and in its literature, videos, etc., has been the notion of “choice”. There are other, underlying and overlaying, discourses as well – about “co-operative workplaces”, about the unnecessary evils of “third parties” (tribunals, unions) interfering in the employment relationship – but it is notions of “choice” that reign supreme. This discourse constructs an identity for the worker of a rational, omniscient being who is fully cognisant of the choices s/he makes. Necessarily, the discourse assumes there is an equality of power between the worker who makes a choice, and the employer who offers it. All of this masks a deeper reality in the outcomes of the First Wave: that new entrants to the workforce, or new hires at a particular workplace, have no choice about whether they accept a (potentially substandard) workplace agreement or not, that 25% of agreements offer below-award ordinary time rates, that 60% and more of agreements eliminate conditions such as penalty rates and overtime (and thus it is likely that considerably more than 25% of workers have had a decrease in overall take-home pay), that women are one and a half times as likely as men to be offered containing below-award wages, that it is vulnerable labour market areas such as hospitality, cleaning, security and retail (with a preponderance of female, often young, workers) that are hardest hit, and that the secrecy provisions with respect to agreements

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mean that neither workers nor researchers know the full extent of their impact, other than at the aggregate level.²⁸

Like the First Wave, the Third Wave rests on the notion of “choice”. It sets up a discourse about “freedom of choice” for the worker about whether s/he joins a union, introducing, in the government’s words, “long overdue rights for employees” in response to some unions leaders’ “privileged positions of influence”.²⁹ The rights of employees vis-a-vis capital, or employers, receive little mention in this discourse. The government’s discourse is against the grain of IR research, which shows that the proportion of workers who are “unwilling conscripts” is much smaller than the proportion who are “unwillingly excluded”.³⁰ Union density in WA, historically lower than most other states, declined by a massive 41% or 15.2 percentage points between 1992 and 1998, a larger decline than anywhere else in Australia.³¹ WA union density now stands at 21.8% as opposed to an Australian average of 28.1%.³² The newest ABS statistics union density statistics, to be released in December 1999, may well reveal that WA union density has dipped below the magic figure of 20%.

Part of my broader purpose (but not in this paper) is to find out how the government has deployed its strategies to convince the electorate to vote for it on a policy platform³³ that appears inimical to the interests of working people. It has not simply been a “marketing exercise” but a more comprehensive and subtle range of cultural strategies that have captured hearts and minds (and votes) in a thorough way.

What I will deal with in this paper is some of the strategies by which unions contested the dominant discourses of the government in one particular campaign. To set the scene for this discussion, it’s necessary to state that in 1997 unions, under the umbrella of the Trades and Labor Council of WA, waged a campaign in opposition to “the Third Wave” that was creative and unusual but in one sense ultimately unsuccessful, in that the legislation was passed with little amendment. On the other hand, the legislation has not been enforced,³⁴ a notable exception being the abolition of check-off arrangements by government employers³⁵ (although not, by and large, by private employers). Judged in this light, then, the unions’ campaign was a successful one. Arguably, a law that is not enforced may as well not exist. However, it can also be argued that the existence of anti-union and anti-collectivist legislation, even if rarely enforced,³⁶ has a “chilling” effect on the bargaining relationship between unions and employers, and on individual propensity to join a union. It’s clear, in short, that it is a complicated picture to unravel the real

effects of the Third Wave, and more research is required to determine the effects the legislation has had over the last two years. But that is not what I want to explore in this paper, which as noted above is about union “cultural strategies” during the campaign.

What I am interested in examining here is union strategies as seen from a sociological/cultural perspective. The argument I advance is that, engaged in a war of meaning(s) as much as a war in any other sense of the word, the unions continually deployed a set of strategies to capture the moral high ground in the campaign, and to attract adherents to their cause – both unionist and non-unionist. I can only sketch out some of the strategies, and I do so in the following section using the “lens” (for want of a better term) of notions of space and place in the campaign.

Space, Place and the Third Wave Campaign

One of the unique aspects of the Third Wave campaign was its creation of a permanent public space dedicated to the struggles of working people, which still remains at the date of writing (September, 1999). Initially, at the height of the campaign and about three weeks before the legislation was passed, unionists pegged out a site opposite Parliament House, under the provisions of the Mining Act. It is a small site, about 500 square metres, at the end of an open-air car park, in an elevated position that overlooks the Parliament. Significantly, this pegging out occurred on 1st of May. The site then became a base for the campaign in all sorts of ways, providing R&R for protestors, and then, once the legislation was passed, giving the campaign a physical, geographical focus. Participants – who included union officials, rank and file, and others in the community – transformed the site into a motley but colourful encampment with an array of temporary installations and a burgeoning series of rituals and performances. The temporary installations included a vegetable garden, initiated by staff and members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) which produced, amongst other things, broccoli for the soup pot that bubbled away on the barbecues on the site. This was the “Workers’ Embassy” phase. Gradually, however, union members began to build a series of permanent monuments on the site, as part of a specific strategy to disengage from the site but at the same time ensure that it remained as a permanent memorial. This was the “Solidarity Park” phase – very much a “blue singlet” phase, as the skills of the building workers began to predominate. The various

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transformations and rituals have been described in detail elsewhere.³⁷ Seen through the lens of human or cultural geography, there are three things that can be said about the Third Wave campaign.

A Celebratory Place

Firstly, and most obviously, Solidarity Park functions as an iconic place that now expresses union ideology and struggle in a frankly celebratory sense by means of the various monuments and their plaques: a huge granite rock with a dedication plaque to “Freedom of Association and Freedom of Speech”, a “Fountain for Youth”, a brick monument (topped by the triple-8 symbol) to a young union organiser who was tragically killed on a demolition site in 1996, a “People’s Wall”, etc.³⁸ In public art terms, the unions were involved in place-making – in a big way. As expressed by the Assistant Secretary of the BLPPU/CFMEU (whose members did much of the work to create the site:

We have transformed a neglected wasteland into a beautiful public facility for the people of Perth, now and in the future, that should stand as a monument to the courage, creativity and determination of the working people of this State.³⁹

As part of this celebratory process, and in an attempt to ensure that the park does not disappear under the bulldozers, the ASSLH (Perth Branch) prepared a discussion document for the National Trust of WA,⁴⁰ arguing that although the park was newly-created, it was worthy of classification because of its significance. The Society put the view that the park represented a “nodal point” in both time and space. In time, by recalling the struggles of the 1890s and by recognising in our current historical moment that we are approaching an epoch in which, inverting the most famous phrase in Australian IR history, it may be that “individual choice’ substitutes for the rude and barbarous processes of collective bargaining and centralised awards”.⁴¹ In space, by the site’s location not only opposite Parliament House, but as the nodal point in a precinct that includes: Parliament House; the tallest of the CBD buildings which are just visible beyond Parliament House; the Constitution Centre; the National Trust; the commercial centre of West Perth, and a large government building that houses, amongst others, the offices of the Minister for Labour Relations. Even in an architectural sense, the site is “nodal” – its structures are low and simple and ordinary in contrast to the fine nineteenth century brickwork of the Constitution Centre, the grey stone bulk of Parliament House, the angular 60s

modernism of Dumas House, and the post-modern shapes of the city towers.⁴²

A Multi-Layered Place

Secondly, the site operated at a number of complex and multi-layered levels while it was occupied 24 hours a day during the six-month campaign. In doing a sociological and cultural “reading” of the site, I have been aided by Lucy Taksa’s application of the work of geographer Henri Lefebvre to the industrial setting of a railway workshops, finding it equally applicable to the Workers’ Embassy site.⁴³ The interviews, observations and photographs show that the site operated at a number of levels: lived, perceived and conceived. In the “lived” space, participants did the sorts of things that have to be done as part of everyday life: cooking, cleaning, talking to visitors (about the legislation and unionism), leisure activities and entertainment to sustain long shifts and long involvement in the campaign. As the garden example referred to above shows, participants used their skills – work, leisure, domestic – to enhance the site as lived space, often in quirky and unusual ways. In the “perceived” space, participants created a rich source of symbolic representations that amused and sustained them, kept the public coming to the site and ensured the media featured it continuously. So the garden was both “practical” but also “symbolic”; “we’re here for the long haul” in the words of one union official.⁴⁴ Other symbolic practices (for example, holding an “Embassy Black Tie and Work Boots Ball” on the site just after the legislation was passed, issuing “Embassy passports”, establishing formal hand-over ceremonies from one shift to the other each evening) reclaimed unionists’ right to be seen as “the people”, as worthy and honourable citizens as opposed to some mythical, unruly, dangerous, degenerate, testosterone-powered “mob”. The latter is the media stereotype of the “traditional unionist” which unions often find difficult to disrupt⁴⁵ – an image that has a long historical pedigree.⁴⁶ In the “conceived” space, participants built monuments, turned space into place, and transformed an anonymous car park space into a gift for the people of WA. In the words of TLC Secretary Tony Cooke, the unions presented the government with a “shit sandwich”⁴⁷ – knock it down, and look like vandals; leave it there, and preserve a monument working class struggle!

A Place Connected to Other Places

Thirdly, a spatial analysis of the site must bring a truly

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geographical imagination to bear, something that is difficult for a non-geographer, but I'll try. I've mentioned above the site's nodal location in relation to its immediate surroundings. But the literature suggests we connect the local with the global, and indeed there were some union officials who gently warned me not to get too focussed on the Solidarity Park site when collecting data and analysing the campaign, for the campaign was about much more than one place. In the geographical literature, exactly paralleling this warning, is Massey's notion of a "progressive sense of place", the idea that uniquely differentiated places like Solidarity Park must be linked to "places beyond".⁴⁸ Massey is right, for "reading" only the site, and neglecting its links to other places, misses some important points. These include the fact the Third Wave campaign was carried out in regional centres as well as Perth, that the Workers' Embassy caravan could be mobile and go out to suburban shopping centres and worksites, that the campaign itself and union officials needed to move into workplaces,⁴⁹ and that there were union campaigns going on elsewhere in the world, like the Liverpool Dockers' strike, rooted to a particular local place but revealing the operation of similar global forces at work in labour relations.

What the Third Wave Campaign tells us About Culture in the Service of Struggle

What I promised at the beginning of this paper was to use the Third Wave material to discover something about the interrelationships between culture broadly defined, union culture, and struggle. There are three main areas I'd like to explore as a way of working towards my aim of exploring these relationships.

Union Culture is a Hybrid Beast

The first area I want to mention is the complexity of defining what "union culture" actually is. Material objects and symbolic practices are easy to identify in this campaign, even fun to interpret, to trace from material object, to "newly invented tradition", to the discourse of participants.⁵⁰ Cultural objects and practices were drawn from a whole range of traditions. Traditional union culture forms part of the background. The early site achieved much of its dynamism and its appeal to media (and amateur) photographers from the banners, for example. Labour song is another strong union tradition. The TLC commissioned songs for each of the "Waves" from singer/songwriter Bernard Carney; "Don't tell us how to run the show" for the Third Wave,

“Stand together” for the First, and so on.⁵¹ Traditional working class culture was another resource used by participants: the notion of creating a “people’s space” like Solidarity Park has a clear historical lineage back to other “people’s spaces” such as Sydney’s Domain, London’s Hyde Park Speaker’s Corner, and Prague’s Wenceslas Square, historically a method of reinforcing working class identity.⁵² Popular culture was yet another resource; at an early stage in the campaign, unionists handed out leaflets at a big football match, with a message for “Eagles supporters” on one side, and a message for “Dockers’ supporters” on the other; both identical messages about the import of the proposed legislation and the need for solidarity.⁵³ Mocking parodies of “official culture” – a traditional strategy of the less powerful – were common, too. The various rich cultural allusions surrounding the word “Embassy”, for one. Others have analysed the “carnavalesque” aspects of the campaign, the use of “the politics of pleasure”, using the work of Russian cultural theorist Bakhtin.⁵⁴ Finally, history was used as a cultural resource, with participants, in Marx’s oft-cited words, borrowing plenty of “names, battle cries and costumes” from the past⁵⁵ in order to “invoke the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history”.⁵⁶

Union Culture is Eternally Contested, Within and Without

The second area I’d like to explore is the degree of contestation that centred on cultural issues during the campaign, issues of meaning and representation. There are two aspects to this. One is the contestation of the dominant discourses of the government, about “choice”, “individualism”, etc., at the heart of which is a picture of the typical worker as someone who, given the right kind of legislative framework (the “three waves”) can choose to exercise their rights. These rights include to be or not be in a union, to have a workplace agreement, and to negotiate freely face-to-face with their employer in a situation of equal power and full information, without the “interference” of third parties such as unions and industrial tribunals. Clearly, this view erases/obscures issues of who holds power in the employment relationship and the wider society. In this hegemonic version, the typical worker is “rational economic man (*sic*)”, another image with a long historical lineage. Government strategies created and disseminated this image in a variety of ways – via videos, newspaper advertisements, DOPLAR publications, and a (then) Minister for Labour Relations who was a tireless public speaker.

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This is/was a powerful image, with the government discourse (apparently) conferring agency and power on the average worker. Union strategy was to unpack the contradictions in this image, and at the same time contest another image that I have previously mentioned, that of the “typical unionist”. Thus the campaign was as much about meanings and representations as about whether the law, in “objective” terms, was “good” or “fair” for workers.

The other aspect of contested meanings is contested meanings *within* the labour movement. I have explored this fully elsewhere, looking at what happened to one of the site installations, the sandpit, as it was moved around to accommodate the building work – a literal as well as a figurative marginalisation (in the eyes of some participants) of values about gender, community, family.⁵⁷ Another contested meaning arose over when the unions should leave the site, with the some unions wanting to continue the occupation long after other unions were saying “the site has achieved its purpose, let’s move on”. In the end result Solidarity Park was staffed for a six weeks longer than originally planned. The flyer from one union, which urged the rest to “resist a pathetic eviction notice”, proclaimed that “[t]here’s no point wearing red socks if you’re carrying a white flag”.⁵⁸ This was not just a struggle about union strategy and personalities and factions – although it was partly that – but also a struggle about the meaning of the site and the cultural dimensions of the campaign.

The conclusions I have drawn from this and other observations at the site was that union solidarity (and by implication union culture) is not a monolith – like the big granite rock at the site. I have tried elsewhere to develop ideas about the “multi-strandedness” of union solidarity. This uses the work of European sociologists Zoll and Valkenburg, which applies to the labour movement theories developed by Giddens and others about what is happening to individual identity in the “second phase of modernity”.⁵⁹ I would argue that the same can be said of union culture, that it is multi-stranded, that we ought to be talking about union *cultures* rather than union culture, and that while these cultures can coexist and reinforce each other, they also have the potential to conflict with each other. Two quotes from the participants says all this more succinctly than a barrel of theoretical texts:

Yes, we do go off in different areas. I don’t think planting a flower here or planting cabbages and lettuces or wearing red ties – this is my opinion on it – was doing much. And yet in the end when I sit back and realise what had gone

on, a lot of people do take notice [...] I thought a stronger aspect should have been taken [...] but] now looking back probably it wasn't a bad thing. It never did any harm to the campaign and in fact it made [the public] aware [of it]".⁶⁰

And further:

Anybody who comes here can do anything they want. If they want to just come up here and sit and have a look and read a book or something like that, that is fine. If they want to get up and plant a tree or build a wall ... whatever they want to do. I don't think people should feel that they've got to come here and do something. If they just want to come and sit and contemplate, think about what it is to be a unionist, or even just sit and think about nothing, then that's fine.⁶¹

Union Culture is a Strategic Weapon in the Service of Union Struggle

The third aspect of union culture that I think is important is the degree of consciousness and strategic planning going on about cultural issues, at an institutional level within the union movement. To what extent were "cultural strategies" consciously planned by the Trades and Labor Council and its affiliates, and to what extent did the myriad of cultural expressions "just happen"? The answer is "both, depending". The various decision making bodies of the TLC developed and endorsed some of the ideas, which came from the Campaign Committee or from individual TLC delegates such as union officials; wearing red on Thursdays, for example, which one of the above quotes refers to, or taking the "Workers' Embassy" caravan off the site to country locations and then the Royal Show. But it was obvious on the site that a good deal of minor activity "just happened", as a result of what one or a few participants wanted to do, because it was that kind of site, as suggested in the second quote above. There was often some tension between what some participants wanted to do spontaneously, and overall conscious campaign strategy, particularly as the TLC tried to move the focus from Solidarity Park back to workplaces. The notion of culture as a specific strategic weapon is articulated well in many of the interviews. An artworker, a performer who has worked on this and many other campaigns, talked about one of the "stunts", surrounding Parliament House with burning candles

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one night, as “killing them with beauty”, which is an extraordinary metaphor. The same artworker suggests:

I think that unions can use the arts and to a certain degree have exploited it very well in WA. Not just for propaganda but just to celebrate working class culture. And I think working class culture is going through a complete transition at the moment. As we all know people are moving out of the blue collar tradition. [...] a lot of manufacturing is dying and work restructuring is completely changed the way we view things [...] I think there's many sorts of purposes for the arts in working class culture. And I think sadly because the government's changed it's not as funded and as well-supported as it should be, and has become a use-by-date-stamped fashion item”.⁶²

The interview record shows a whole range of different awarenesses and views about how unions can use culture in a strategic sense. Union officials and artworkers interviewed suggested that the strategic functions of “the arts” in union campaigns could range from crowd control (“they can protest without hurling abuse or hurling anything else”⁶³) to more subtle notions of the function of cultural means in representing meaning (putting women at the head of marches and rallies “was a clear signal to the media, you know, shove it, stop transmitting us purely as men – we are the community!”⁶⁴).

Conclusions

Culture and Struggle

I want to conclude very briefly with some observations about two issues that I raised at the beginning of the paper. One is the centrality of union culture(s) to union struggle. I hope I have successfully made the point that understanding the cultural dimensions of the Third Wave campaign is an important aspect of understanding what was going on overall. If one looks, for example, at the long occupation of the Solidarity Park site from a purely functionalist perspective of union strategic intent, it made no sense for the union movement to deploy so many of its officials and other resources there for so long. But if one examines the social and cultural functions of the site, bringing people together, creating solidarity, disrupting media representations, then the strategy makes sense. The cultural dimensions of the campaign were complex and multi-stranded, however, and at times unpredictable. A campaign such as this brings many

different “cultures” together, not simply different union cultures and occupational skills (the AMWU built a metal door for the site, the Teachers’ Union made a sandpit) but other cultural differences between participants that arise out of differences of gender, race, class, occupation, age, employment/unemployment status, etc. Culture is central to union struggle, and can be used strategically, but it is not a unidimensional variable that can be easily manipulated.

“Old” and “New” Union Culture

The other issue I want to address is to do with juxtaposing “blue singlets” with “broccoli” in the title of this paper, and suggesting at the beginning that there are somehow distinctive “traditional” forms of union culture that can easily be contrasted with distinctive “new” or innovative forms. I would argue, in fact, that the analysis of the Third Wave campaign does not show this at all, that union culture/s is/are too complex, and borrow/s too relentlessly from a whole variety of areas, to be put in neatly labelled piles, like pairs of socks. While we’re on the topic of apparel, what this contemporary union campaign does show however is that union culture is not, in the words of Lachie McDonald, a “use-by-date-stamped fashion item”. Lachie is right, that the state has withdrawn its support for arts in working class culture. But the culture is nevertheless alive and well.

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Notes

- 1 R. Williams, ‘You’re a Marxist Aren’t You?’, in *Resources of Hope*, Verso, London, 1989 [essay first published 1975], p.76.

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- 2 A. Howkins, 'Labour and Culture: Mapping the Field', in J. Martin and K. Taylor (eds), *Culture and the Labour Movement*, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1991, pp.15-32.
- 3 J. Bailey and D. McAtee, 'A People's History of the Third Wave Campaign', *Labour History*, vol.74. 1998, pp.241-6.
- 4 For example, J. Gorman, *Images of Labour*, Scorpion, London, 1985.
- 5 For example, L. Layman and J. Goddard, *Organise! Labour - A Visual Record*, Trades and Labor Council of WA, 1988 and A. Reeves, *Another Day Another Dollar*, McCulloch Publishing, Melbourne, 1988.
- 6 Op.cit.
- 7 See L. Taksa, 'Toil, Struggle and Repose: Oral History and the Exploration of Labour Culture in Australia', *Labour History*, vol.76, 1994, pp.110-27 and some of the references cited therein, and the contributions in Martin and Taylor, op.cit., for exceptions that deal with the past. For an analysis of media representations of union culture (rather than union culture *per se*), see K. Muir, 'The scent of blood: representing unionism as masculine practice', Centre for Labour Studies, University of Adelaide, Research Paper Series, No.8, May, 1997 and K. Muir, 'Difference or deficiency: Gender, representation and meaning in unions', in B. Pocock (ed.), *Strife: Sex and politics in labour unions*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997, pp.172-93.
- 8 D. Mills and unnamed co-authors, *Art and Working Life: Cultural activities in the Australian trade union movement*, Australian Council of Trade Unions/Community Arts Board of the Australia Council, Sydney, 1983; S. Kirby (with a forward by I. Burn), *Artists and Unions: A Critical Tradition*, Australia Council, Sydney, 1991 (which contains a brief "cultural history" of Australian unions at pp.7-15); The Australia Council, *Industrial Issues: Cultural Tools Papers and Proceedings of the 2nd National Arts and Working Life Conference*, October, 1990, Melbourne, 1991; K. Muir, *Creative Alliances: Unions and the Arts*, Union Media Services, Sydney, 1992; Taksa, 1994, op.cit., pp.116-20.
- 9 As noted by Burn in Kirby, 1991, op.cit. ; see The Australia Council, 1991, op.cit., for examples. Since the election of conservative governments around Australia, the Australia Council's AWL programme has been disbanded, there is little if any money available for more formal projects, and THCs and TLCs around Australia no longer have Arts Officers, as they did in the 1980s and early 1990s.
- 10 Burn, in Kirby, 1991, op.cit., p.4.
- 11 R. Williams, *Keywords*, Fontana, London, 1976 (Second edition, 1983).
- 12 R. Williams, *Politics and Letters. Interviews with the New Left Review*, New Left, London, 1979, p.154.
- 13 E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common. Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, Penguin, London, 1991.
- 14 G. Eley, 'What is Cultural History?', *New German Critique*, vol.65 (Spring/Summer), 1995, pp.19-36.
- 15 E.g., S. Hall, 'The toad in the garden', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan, London,

- 1988.
- 16 Well documented in Pocock , 1997, op.cit.
 - 17 J. Bailey and B. Horstman, "Life is Full of Choices": Industrial Relations 'Reform' in Western Australia since 1993', Paper to be presented at the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ), Newcastle, 2-4 February, 2000.
 - 18 V. Larouche and M. Audet, 'Theorizing Industrial Relations: The Dominance of Logical Positivism and the Shift to Strategic Choice', and J. Godard, 'Theory and Method in Industrial Relations: Modernist and Postmodernist Alternatives', both in R. Adams and N. Meltz (eds) *Industrial Relations Theory: Its Nature, Scope and Pedagogy* IMLR Press, Rutgers University and Scarecrow Press, New Jersey, pp.255-82 and pp.283-306 respectively.
 - 19 M. Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*, Sage, London, 1995.
 - 20 Taksa, 1994, op.cit., at p.120-24.
 - 21 In Kirby, 1991, op.cit., at p.5.
 - 22 It was "the model emulated by the Commonwealth Government for Australian workplace agreements in its recent Workplace Relations Act 1996", according to the (then) WA Minister for Labour Relations; Kierath, G. 'Labour Relations Legislation Amendment Bill [The Third Wave]. Second Reading Speech', *Hansard, Western Australia, Thirty-fifth Parliament, First Session*, 20th March, 1997, at p.725.
 - 23 B. Horstman, 'Decentralised and deregulated Australian industrial relations: the effects on HRM and IR in small enterprises', *Employee Relations*, , vol.21, no.3, 1999.
 - 24 Bailey and Horstman, 1999, op.cit.
 - 25 Horstman, 1999, op.cit, pp.325-40.
 - 26 Bailey and Horstman, 1999, op.cit.
 - 27 J. Bailey, K. Berger, R. Fells and B. Horstman, 'The Management of Public Sector Labour Relations in Western Australia - an Overview', Paper to be presented at the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ), Newcastle, 2-4 February, 2000.
 - 28 Bailey and Horstman, 1999, op.cit.
 - 29 Kierath, 1997, op.cit, p.730.
 - 30 D. Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p.109.
 - 31 Bailey and Horstman, 1999, op.cit.
 - 32 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat.No. 6310.0.
 - 33 Entitled "Jobs and Choices" in 1993 and, predictably, "More Jobs and More Choices" in 1996.
 - 34 Bailey and Horstman, 1999, op.cit.
 - 35 Bailey, Berger, Fells and Horstman, in preparation, op.cit.
 - 36 As has been argued with respect to the small but nevertheless significant number of cases under the common law and the Trade Practices Act in the 1980s which underscored the lack of a "right to strike" in Australia.
 - 37 J. Bailey and D. McAtee, 1999, op.cit.

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- 38 J. Bailey and D. McAtee, "A Hard-Tied Knot": the Significance of Solidarity Park', in J. Bailey and D. McAtee, (eds) *The Workers' Embassy Scrapbook* (Papers in Labour History No.20), August, 1998, pp.76–82. Pictures of the various monuments can be found at pp.6, 33, 34, 74 and 82 of *The Workers' Embassy Scrapbook*.
- 39 J. McDonald, 'Solidarity Park Forever', in *The WA Construction Worker*, BLPPU/CFMEU, Spring, 1997, p.7.
- 40 Reprinted as Bailey and McAtee, 'A Hard Tied Knot', 1998, op.cit.
- 41 C. Power, "'Storming Bullshit Castle": A dialogical Analysis of the Third Wave Campaign', in Bailey and McAtee, 1998, *The Workers' Embassy Scrapbook*, op.cit., pp.85–99.
- 42 The Trust felt it could not classify such a newly-created site, that it needs to stand the test of time before such a decision could be made.
- 43 L. Taksa, 'Technology, Work, Gender and Citizenship at the Eveleigh Workshops Precinct: an Historical Interpretation of Landscape, Identity and Mobilisation', *Labour History*, vol. 76, 1999, pp.153–70.
- 44 See Interview with Peter Stokes, CPSU organiser, Di McAtee interviewer, 22nd December, 1997, held in the Battye Library of Western Australian History's Oral History Collection, Perth ('Battye').
- 45 Kathie Muir's work is useful here. Muir ('The scent of blood ...', 1997, op.cit) examines media treatment of the 1996 cavalcade to Canberra to unpack notions of how the image of the typical unionist is constructed by the media in such a way that it "others" the unionist, in contrast to "us", the law-abiding majority.
- 46 See for example E.P. Thompson, 1991, op.cit., and E. Yeo, 'Culture and Constraint in Working Class Movements, 1830–1855' in E. Yeo and S. Yeo (eds), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590–1914*, Harvester, Sussex and Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1981.
- 47 Quoted in Bailey and McAtee, 1999, op.cit, p.23.
- 48 D. Massey, 'A global sense of place' in A. Gray and J. McGuigan (eds) *Studying Culture: an introductory reader* (2nd ed), Arnold, London and St Martin's Press, New York, 1997, pp.232–40.
- 49 Particularly into government workplaces, as public sector employers were about to cease payroll deductions of union dues as a result of the Third Wave.
- 50 A short list of metaphors that arise from reading the Third Wave campaign, and particularly the Workers' Embassy/Solidarity Park site as "text", include metaphors of occupation and land ownership, metaphors of military struggle and resistance, metaphors of stately ritual, metaphors of domesticity and suburbia, metaphors about "useful work" (as opposed to "useless toil", using William Morris's terminology), and finally metaphors of carnival and inversion of the normal social order in a Bakhtinian sense, "the world turned upsidedown". The metaphors are/were not only embodied in material objects and practices at the site, but also to be found in the discourse of participants (the latter showing up sharply in the recorded interviews).
- 51 See Interview with Bernard Carney, Singer and Songwriter, Di

- McAtee interviewer, 1st September, 1997, held in Battye.
- 52 Taksa, 1994, op.cit.
- 53 See Interview with Stephanie Mayman, Assistant Secretary of the TLC, Janis Bailey interviewer, 22nd October, 1997, held in Battye.
- 54 Power, 1998, op.cit. and J. Brown, 'The Politics of Pleasure and the TLC', in Bailey and McAtee, 1998, *The Workers' Embassy Scrapbook*, op.cit., pp.100–106.
- 55 K. Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Pierson, C. (ed.) *The Marx Reader*, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp.156–76, at pp.156–7.
- 56 E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Tradition', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds) *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto/Cambridge University Press, 1992 (first published 1983), pp.1–14, at p.1.
- 57 J. Bailey, 'The Shifting Sands of Solidarity', Paper presented at the Future of Solidarity Conference, Flinders University, Adelaide, February, 1999.
- 58 In Bailey and McAtee, 1998, *The Workers' Embassy Scrapbook*, op.cit., at p.71.
- 59 J.Bailey, 'The Shifting Sands ...', 1999, op.cit.
- 60 See Interview with Christy Cain, MUA rank and file, Jo Brown interviewer, 14th September, 1997, held in Battye.
- 61 See Interview with Jo Pike, AWU Organiser, Jo Brown interviewer, 4th September, 1997, held in Battye.
- 62 See Interview with Lachie McDonald, Artworker, Di McAtee interviewer, 16th September, 1997, held in Battye.
- 63 See Interview with Bernard Carney, op.cit.
- 64 See Interview with Stephanie Mayman, op.cit.