

Blue Singlets and Broccoli: Tradition and Change in Union Culture

Janis Bailey

Faculty of Business and Public Administration,
Edith Cowan University

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 Yet studies of labour struggle in Australia, past and present, emphasise the political, legal and strategic elements of campaigns, largely ignoring what might broadly be termed the "cultural aspect" of struggle,² or, if they deal with it at all, it is in a celebratory rather than an analytical way.³ And 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.

The "products" of union culture are readily recognisable: the banners, songs, badges, picnics, cartoons etc that we are all familiar with. But culture is more than artefacts and practices. It is also about shared (and contested) meanings and interests; in Williams' phrase a "whole way of life" and in E.P. Thompson's, "a whole way of struggle".

This paper focuses on a 1997 West Australian union campaign – the "Third Wave" campaign – which was documented by the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (Perth Branch). The campaign involved a long-running protest site, set up opposite Parliament House, which was occupied by unions 24 hours a day for six months.

The paper explores what might broadly be termed the "cultural" facets of the campaign. Attention is paid to both the macro level (the broader cultural strategies used by the unions) and the micro level (the "Workers' Embassy" site). It uses a number of theoretical perspectives – including ideas from human geography and Bakhtinian notions of "carnival" – to examine shared and contested meanings, and how they intersected and overlaid each other in various aspects of the campaign.

The study illuminates the role of culture in advancing union struggle, including the interweaving of "traditional" union cultural forms with new and innovative strategies.

in labour unions, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp.172-193. S. Kirby, *Artists and Unions: A Critical Tradition*, Australia Council, Sydney, 1991, contains a brief "cultural history" of Australian unions.

- 3 A. Howkins, 'Labour and Culture: Mapping the Field', in Martin and Taylor, *Ibid*, pp.15-32.

Endnotes

- 1 R. Williams, 'You're a Marxist Aren't You?', in *Resources of Hope*, Verso, London, 1989 [essay first published 1975], p.76.
- 2 Although see L. Taksa, 'Toil, Struggle and Repose', *Labour History*, vol.76, 1994, pp.110-127 (1994) and some of the references cited therein, and the contributions in J. Martin and K. Taylor (eds), *Culture and the Labour Movement*, Dunmore Press, Palmerston Press, 1991, for exceptions that deal with the past. For analysis of contemporary campaigns, 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, and K. Muir, 'Difference or deficiency: Gender, representation and meaning in unions', in B. Pocock (ed), *Strife: Sex and politics*