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Reviving Radical Traditions of Democracy in Organising for the Future

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Abstract: Australian unions have adopted new organising methods to rebuild and develop combative organisations. The vitality involved is tempered by a hostile legal climate that supports flexibility, fragmentation and low wage work. This paper explores the common heritage between the new organising and theories of popular education, radical history and social movement experience that can give strength to these efforts.

Restructuring education and training in the 1980s and 1990s was one of the great aims of Australia's union movement. It was a key plank of the Accord intended to modernise Australian capitalism and revive an ailing economy coming off the end of the post war boom. It would link training with wages, tie skill development to industry restructuring, and extend education opportunities for workers, many of whom had not been well served by educational institutions.

Reshaping vocational education was a massive undertaking that created a complex web of national and industry agencies. Since 1996, when a conservative government replaced Labor, education reform has been firmly under the influence of 'industry', which has become a synonym for business. Many trade unionists who worked most closely on the original reforms now believe that their efforts failed to deliver the type of system they envisaged. (Brown 2003)

The Accord and training reform are now seen as a major factor in the rapid decline of union density and influence. The balance sheet that has been drawn does not reflect a political or ideological opposition to Accord-style agreements but instead an assessment that tying the interests of unionists to that of a Labor Party in government did not benefit workers, or unions. Recognising that union power could only be re-established from the base up the peak unions turned their attention to developing new layers of activists who would rebuild unions as combative organisations. This paper examines the revived interests in grassroots organising among unions and community organisations, including the emergence of new community unions. It looks at the context in which these new organising approaches are being applied and considers the links between rich but neglected traditions of education and organising that can have a positive influence in extending ideas of democracy and social and economic justice.

Context of new Organising Approaches

The restructuring of work has created a labour market that is turbulent, unstable and where people's participation in it is precarious and increasingly stressful. Economic rationalism has broken up traditional union industries and large scale workplaces where solidarity was learnt. Most new jobs are casualised and poorly paid, relationships between fellow workers are fragmented and solidarity in the workplace is more difficult. Today one-quarter of all workers are casuals, while in some industries - such as retail trade and hospitality - nearly half the workforce is casual, with no access to paid sick leave, annual leave or other basic entitlements. The number of middle-income jobs actually fell in the 1990s. The growth of low wage work is reflected in the numbers who need social security because they simply do not earn enough to maintain the most modest family income. In a population of 20 million, 2.5 million receive social security, one million children come from homes where no one has work, and two million are precariously employed. The time pressure on families, most particularly middle and low-income families, is becoming greater. The percentage of couples who have children and both work has gone from 44% in 1981 to 57% in 2001. (Borland, Gregory & Sheehan 2001, Watson et al 2003).

Severe declines in density and, to a lesser degree in actual membership, are features common to Australia, the US, New Zealand and British union movements. In Australia density halved to below twenty five per cent between 1982 and 2003. In New Zealand the decline was greater and concentrated over a shorter period of time. In the United Kingdom density fell to around twenty nine per cent between 1980 and 2000. In the US the percentage of the labour force belonging to unions fell to twenty-one per cent in 1980 and to around thirteen per cent in 2003, with only eight per cent of private sector workers covered. Membership numbers fell in each country as well. (Peetz, et al 2002, 83-85; Bronfenbrenner et al 1998, 2-3, Fine 2003, 22)

The way working class consciousness is constituted today cannot be the same as in the 20th century. Flexible capitalism has fragmented that. Marx saw capitalism creating its own gravedigger by combining workers in large numbers, showing their collective strength and potential. It was where people identified their community of interest and defined those whose interests were contrary to theirs, where they defined their enemy. Yet a feature of contemporary industry restructuring and labour force recomposition is the atomisation of workers, into small sites, cost centres, contractors and casuals, home workers and individualised contracts.⁴

A focus on new ways of building collectives and identity are needed to augment trade unionism and workplace organising, taking into account the diversity of interest and identities among the working class; the shortage of time not just in the individual's working week but in the household's working week, discontinuities in relationships as people work away from where they live, live further apart from their wider families, move house more often, are constantly establishing new community networks, schools and so on. There is a blurring between which issues are industrial and which community, raising the questions, where are today's sites of community of interest? And how do educators work in those sites on issues that are of immediate concern to those groupings?

Community Unions

One of the most interesting developments has been the emergence of a new type of organisation - the community union. In the US they organise people on the periphery of the labour market, often from immigrant backgrounds, who are mostly not covered by unions. They aim to do more than raise wages they also seek to give political voice to low wage workers.

In her study of 'community unions' Fine found that community organisers turned to organising workers around work and wages because they 'felt they had hit a wall'. It seemed that the 'new economy required that about a tenth of full-time workers be below the poverty line and remain there.' Lobbying for community services such as affordable housing, after school programs, and better public education were important but 'for communities to make real and lasting gains, large numbers of people needed stable jobs at decent wages.' (Fine 2003, 15)

The Stamford Organising Project – an unusual multi-union, geographically based, drive to cover low wage workers – combined features of trade unions, ethnic associations and community organisations to advance the interests of low wage workers. The Project partners included both workplace and community organising and utilised economic and political strategies to achieve their goals. Winning community support meant that the unions had to cast worker issues in broader terms by 'speaking explicitly about social, economic and racial

⁴ I thank Janet Burstall for explaining this idea to me.

injustice, and by speaking on behalf of the working class as opposed to a particular group of workers... and by forging deep partnerships with community organisations.’ (Fine 2001, 2, 7)⁵

The changed circumstances give new force to class as an analytical and organising tool because class and ethnicity, class and race and class and gender are inter-linked, reflecting the diversity of class identity. Expressed in its simplest form Australian unions have adopted an ‘organising’ as opposed to a ‘servicing’ or ‘business’ model for re-building membership and influence. Organising aims to involve members in collectively deciding their own actions and solutions, whereas servicing is portrayed as relying on union staff solving members’ problems. Servicing encourages membership passivity with little rank and file involvement, whereas organising emphasises the need for mobilising members, collective action and assertiveness or militancy. Crosby (2002) notes that in the Australian context shifting to the organising model was a ‘monumental change’, a ‘paradigm shift’. A leader of Australia’s union education program he encourages his staff to see themselves as organisers rather than educators believing that the two roles are now synonymous. Considerable formal union education still takes place in classrooms but attempts to recruit new members in industries with low coverage and hostile employers means that education/organising will often take place one to one, in small groups, in off-site cafes or lunchrooms, or in members homes. Educators are encouraged to use open questioning and listening techniques rather than downloading information or telling members what the union expects of them. They are encouraged to develop ‘member leaders’ and then organise more leaders with the theme being ‘organising never stops’ (Crosby 2002).

Radical Traditions and New Organising

Fine makes an important contribution in highlighting the broader conception of class that underpins the community unions. Identifying class beyond narrow economic terms is also the logic behind unions’ new organising efforts. But surely, critics would argue, ‘class’ is an outdated term that no longer provides insight to the contemporary world? But not so if we conceive of class as a set of social relations that are the fundamental feature of capitalism - not technology, forces of production or even capitalist ownership. Thompson’s (1968) metaphor for relations of production is as a field of force. It is through these relations of production - where people are forced to sell their labour power, exchanging it as a commodity, or be condemned to social exclusion or poverty - that capital appropriates the surplus of production. These relations are not confined to the sphere of work, they are incorporated in law, in the state, and in other aspects of society. It is this social relation that is fundamental to capitalism and which, despite changes in the economy, production systems, international trade, politics or culture, remains at the core of capitalism today. To narrowly define an economic base for capitalism is to be unable to understand it fully. Conceiving class relations as a ‘structured process’ means having a way of understanding changes in class relations. The struggle for radical democracy is thus not just, or even principally, about the struggle against a certain group of capitalists, however crucial that may be. More importantly it is about overturning capital - the system of wage labour and its basic dynamic, competitive accumulation. Bonefeld (1994) noted that one of the hallmarks of mainstream social theory is that it separates ‘society’ out into the ‘political’, ‘economic’ and other spheres as they appear on the surface of society. The Hungarian economist and adult educator Karl Polanyi first elaborated this insight when he presented in historical detail the process by which capitalism, for the first time in history, achieved the separation of the economic

⁵ Ellem (2003) describes a different community unionism in Western Australia’s remote Pilbara region. Needleman (1998) discusses union-community work with Asian sweatshop workers in Los Angeles and New York

from the political. (Polanyi 1957, see also Ellen M Wood, 1995, 2003, who has presented fresh insight into Polanyi's original work) The consequences of this separation are critically important to understand and reveal. Detaching economic power from political governance places economic hegemony often beyond the limits of political decision-making. It makes opaque the power behind investment, production, employment, and many other decisions affecting people's lives. It removes most aspects of daily life that come within the scope of the economy from democratic accountability.

Self-organisation and Leadership

The renewed interest in organising from below can draw strength from other traditions, such as radical political organising, the 'history from below' movement, popular education, and social movement experience that similarly emphasise self-organisation. These approaches rest on an underpinning assumption and expectation that ordinary people can transform their own lives. They share a belief that workers can exercise leadership, that counter-hegemonic history narratives can contribute to the formation of new historical consciousness, and that learners can direct their learning. It is the rejection of the humanitarian-philanthropic attitude that sees liberation as being delivered to subjects by enlightened others or outsiders because the oppressed are incapable or ill-equipped to author their self-emancipation.

Reconceptualising workers' education by going beyond narrow views of class composition, provided a framework for studying, not workers', but working class education. Such attempts owe much to the work of the British Marxist historians, many of whom were also adult educators, such as E. P. Thompson, George Rude, Victor Kiernan, and John Berger and others. (Kaye 1984) They recounted the historical development of social orders, the experience of exploitation and oppression and the episodes of dissent and struggle. It was committed and passionate and inspired a 'new labour history' focusing on working people in their daily lives, places of work and communities. It came to be known as history from the 'bottom up', where class has a cultural and not just an economic dimension. (see Thompson 1967)

They also helped clear away the mistaken view of Marxist historiography in which historical development is conceived of in unilinear, mechanical and techno-economistic terms. History from below contributes to the formation of an historical consciousness that Gramsci envisioned as the goal of a critical education. That 'which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present, and which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past, of all past generations, which projects itself into the future.' (Gramsci 1971, pp. 34-35)

Popular education – working with 'the people' with the intention of empowering communities to achieve collective and democratic social change - is based on a similar understanding. Freire's emphasis on context and conscientization, the early English working class self-education activities, Horton's work with the civil rights and labour movements and Thompson's feminist practice all rely on developing analytical and critical skills for emancipatory knowledge and practice. They necessarily go beyond the instrumental.

Leadership and Organising

Organising by itself however is not enough. Social movements are built not merely for expressive purposes but also for instrumental purposes, not only to change one-self, but to change circumstances. There is therefore a direct link between organising, educating and articulating a vision, or 'projecting the future' that raises the question of leadership. Change and leadership is about winning at least in part due to the organised opposition of the adversary.

Johnson (2001) identifies democratic leadership as being about the passage to a place, a conversation between leaders and followers that transforms both and is expressed in words, actions, and symbols. Emphasising the communicative nature of leadership in social movements Johnson argues that democratic leadership is a *conversation*, spoken *within* the movement, sustained by leader and follower, concerning the *goals* both can agree to pursue, pragmatically in light of their changing interpretations of circumstances and experience, and the *means* to achieve those goals against an adversary. (Johnson 2000)

Leadership is commonly associated with authoritarian and hierarchical behaviour. A different and more democratic way of understanding it is as a set of skills and a relationship between people. It is inseparable from strategic questions of how and when to act, who to ally with and for what goals, questions that are framed by conceptions of the nature of society and possibilities for change. It is the envisioning and articulation of a future, as Ann Mische (2002) makes clear in her study of Brazilian youth activists, and it is no less about the articulation and enactment of the means to that future.

This is a political process of self-emancipation combining cognitive and instrumental liberation. 'The oppressed author their own self-liberation through popular struggles which are educational, producing a cognitive liberation and instrumental, enabling the defeat of their oppressor.' (Johnson 2001, 97).

Conclusion

Australian labour's current aspirations are focused on internal revival and external organising. Disillusion with a corporatist approach to governing society has led organised labour to renew its approach to recruiting and educating new members and activists. Instead of seeking a consensus with capital it has set its course on entering into genuine and effective community based coalitions based on shared values and common objectives for a fairer more equal society.

A new environment confronts educators working to extend democracy in such a way that the political and economic spheres are combined. It is an environment where economic decision making remains the preserve of a small powerful elite, where the Cold War has been replaced by a seemingly endless war on terrorism, where civil liberties are under great threat especially from religious and economic fundamentalisms, where union density is declining and the anti-globalisation movement is strong particularly among the young, and where the number of wage earners continues to grow rapidly throughout the world. Many challenges remain. Winning deeper support will depend on labour being able to articulate a vision for a democratic future. It will mean being more specific than general notions of a fairer society. It will inevitably need to challenge power at its source, for otherwise it will be left to seek an accommodation with power and that is bound to fail. These challenges require an internal climate where critical thinking, questioning, and reflection on practice is fostered, and where the tension between loyalty and the freedom to critique and dissent is minimised. Internal union democracy and accountability of leaders to members is vital for renewal. The vitality evident in the new organising can be informed by drawing on the experience and knowledge of history. There is a danger that in the eagerness to be perceived as modern and in tune with contemporary developments the *continuities* between past and present can be ignored. The persistence of those structures and relations of exploitation and oppression that determine people's lives remain to be confronted if society, and education, is to be made more egalitarian, and democratic. Essential to this endeavour is the work and practice of critical educators, historians, economists, and activists. Revitalising radical-democratic politics depends on formulating alternative plans, policies and programs that are more attractive than those currently being offered, and on mobilising and

organising people. Writing near the end of the Second World War Karl Mannheim (cited in Williamson 1998) declared that ‘the educational aims of a society cannot be adequately understood as long as they are severed from the situations that each age is called upon to face and from the social order for which they are framed.’ His recipe to avoid after the war the kinds of catastrophes which caused it, was ‘militant democracy’, planning and social justice and education for everyone of a kind which acknowledged that ‘social awareness becomes a moral obligation.’ For Mannheim ‘a democracy in which people were merely expected to fulfil their social roles would not be safe.’ These remain vital watchwords at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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