

PLOD ESSAY: A Real Community

Townpeople saw the dismissals as preparation for

I've been having an ongoing debate with some dear friends about Wonthaggi. It seems to me that the core spirit of this town still exists and is easy to tap into. My friends, who live in the hills, are not so sure about this. They believe the onslaught of sea/tree changers, tourists, Big W, Aldi and soon Buntings have changed things so drastically that the spirit that existed in the days of the Union, the Co-operative, the Miners' Women's Auxiliary is merely legend. I have elicited the opinions of other friends, who live in the district, sure that my view is correct. They seem divided. Thus, I have been thinking I need to strengthen my argument.

Lo and behold! Yesterday, Lyn Chambers gave me a sheaf of papers she thought I might be able to use in the *Wonthaggi Remembers* book we are working on for the Shire. In Lyn's envelop marked History of Wonthaggi, which included quite a bit of material about the Miners' Women's Auxiliary and the State School Mothers' Club as well as the Whistle Stop Song was an article called "Red Wonthaggi: a real community" by Historian, Humphrey McQueen. It is photocopied with no date on it, but it looks like it could have come out of the *Saturday Age* sometime late in the Howard years (or a Union Magazine!).

Here it is in full:

At Wonthaggi in 1934, the dismissal of seven miners provoked a strike that the workers won 20 weeks later. Their story deserves retelling for its own sake, as Richard Lowenstein discovered in his innovative 1984 feature film, *Strikebound*. More pertinently, the union's success raises continuing questions about workplace contributions to community wellbeing.

Wonthaggi and the State Coal Mine had begun life together in 1909 to supply the railways. Both had prospered until 1930 when management began cutting wages by

a third and retrenching a third of the workforce.



worse, perhaps closure.

The fount of public spirit in Wonthaggi was the Miners Federation. A trade unionist would be likely also to be a member of the friendly society, the dispensary, dental clinic, workman's club and, above all, the co-operative store.

Family members played in the brass band or sang in one of the choirs. Federation and town meetings were held in the Union Theatre, which hosted a co-operative cinema.

Despite the federation's pivotal place, it had been battered during the slide into depression. Indeed, Wonthaggi's co-op store contributed more financially than could the federation until its nationwide levy began to muster some strike pay. Typically, the locals shared that pittance with non-members who had lost their jobs.

With more time on their hands, the workers revived their other skills. They bought cattle and set up slaughter yards. A free barber operated while cobblers repaired boots.

Help also came from farmers who donated sheep and vegetables. Fruit was available for the picking. Coal for domestic uses could be picked up. The strike committee allowed enough coal to be dug to keep the town's power station operating.

Women became increasingly active in maintaining services through their own committee, perhaps Australia's first union auxiliary. Some toured the state to address public meetings.

None of these measures was novel, but their

combination marked an advance. To survive, the people of Wonthaggi had put the social into socialism.

Three months into the strike, union elections in June confirmed the swing to the left. The minister for railways, R.G.Menzies, retreated, reinstating the dismissed men. More remarkable was his acceptance of pit-top committees to negotiate directly with management. That surrender of prerogatives recognised the miner's capacity for self-organisation.

"Red Wonthaggi" had stuck it out because of the involvement of 400 men in the day-to-day tasks of the Broad Strike Committee, with 400 more men active in supplying their community and by the women's auxiliary. Without that participatory democracy, the town might well have died.

The mine did not close until 1968 and is now a museum, unlike the town that thrives as a regional centre with a new array of community groups appreciative of their past as "the town of co-operation".

"Trust" has become a fashionable term. But its manifestation as union solidarity is scorned by advocates of individual workplace contracts. Even proponents of the so-called "social capital" marginalise workplaces as sources of bonds that enrich community.

The value of work-based links is clear by comparing the victory at Wonthaggi with the destruction around Yallourn in a bushfire 10 years later. A royal commissioner concluded that the residents had allowed the State Electricity Commission's assets to burn because its "suffocating paternalism" had stifled "social responsibility": "Here indeed the townsman enjoys all that the heart of a man may desire – except freedom, fresh air and independence... He has no authoritative voice in the management of the town... there is no hall where the town people may publicly assemble..."

Both Wonthaggi and Yallourn had the government as their principal employer, yet that did not guarantee the workers' security. The miners won in 1934 because they created networks independent of the state. Their inventiveness remains relevant for campaigns against the sell-off of instrumentalities. More than state ownership is necessary to sustain the virtues that should be nourished by all work.

The significance of workplace cohesion for a wider wellbeing is also plain from contrasting two current examples. On one hand, the not-for-profit Gippsland Group Training is notable for its

ethos of preparing apprentices for life as well as work. On the other side, revelations about Moe have pointed to the disintegration that flows when job losses also sever links through a community.

Social disintegration is not directly proportional to the rate of unemployment, which was higher in Wonthaggi in the 1930s than in Moe during the 1990s. A potent antidote is the self-confidence that grows from co-operating with others to get the job done. From that working together stems appreciation of sociable labour as productive of benefits no market can supply.

Even if McQueen has not got all of his history exactly right, this is a pretty powerful argument. I don't believe that a town weaned on co-operation and participatory democracy, the way this one has been, can lose that core spirit even down the generations. These things are values that once learned cannot be lost. They are values that humans long for.

I reckon I will keep debating with my friends about this place. I have decided that the difference between those who agree with me and those who don't is that those who agree actually live here, and those that don't agree only live near here.

- C.R. Landon