

## **Blackball Mayday 2004: a report.**

This year's Mayday celebrations took place over three days. It was therefore a comprehensive event and for me retrospectively had something of the quality of a ritual as it opened up context and structure.

It took place during a politically volatile time as the foreshore and seabed hikoi wound its way toward Wellington.

The context I want to place the following description within, is that of the alienation of labour under capitalism: that the results of the labour of the wage worker are alienated in that he or she does not in any meaningful way, own or control the product of that labour, either individually or collectively.

I suggest that, with modern technology and globalisation, this alienation has become more intense and all pervasive, invading the area of non working life as well. The results of our labour, both paid and unpaid, disappear into a global economy and into a digitalised realm of non material reality. Instead of food preparation happening within the family we have the fast food phenomenon. Family relationships are replaced by tv or the x box or the computer. Any traditional sense of belonging is replaced by the carnival of consumerism.

We oscillate between the temporary 'communities' of the fairground or the battlefield and this is globalised into a way of being. The wall snaking through Gaza, the demolitions etc, become a much wider symbol. Closer to home, the foreshore hikoi becomes a symbol of resistance to belonging being taken away.

On the Friday before Mayday we invited local schools to come to Blackball for a seminar on unionism and its historical roots in our village. Thanks to a grant from the NZCTU we could offer schools a transport subsidy and the response was good. In the morning forty history students from the two Greymouth secondary schools arrived. We divided them into groups and asked them to come up with a definition of 'a worker'. They easily covered the category of selling one's labour, of differential wages, and of voluntary versus paid labour.

Following that we role played an individual 'bad employer' situation and each group was asked to write a contract to remedy the situation. Once again, collectively, they covered most areas. We could then tell them of the requirement in law for a contract.

Then we role played a collective situation involving a bad employer and the workers ended up resorting to strike action. The employer attempted to find scabs from the audience and although some were tempted, they were quickly shamed. The role of a union was then canvassed with good understanding.

Finally we asked them to define the word 'solidarity'. After initial puzzlement, they managed to do a good job. A brief survey of early local union history was given and the students were taken on a tiki tour of key sites in the town.

In the afternoon forty Year 7 and 8 students came. Despite their youth they entered the role plays with alacrity and surprisingly, delved deeper into issues than the secondary students.

Feedback from students and teachers was very positive and it will become an annual event. I was struck by the students openness to union ideas and concepts.

On Friday evening the choir presented a selection of union songs in the Hilton, songs with an IWW flavour and filled with the energy of collectivism. They are always a joy to sing as choir and audience are joined in solidarity.

On Saturday morning we began with a seminar on rebuilding unionism. The current CTU organising plus strategy was outlined together with the more recent theme of co-operation rather than competition. Robert Reid gave a background to Unite and the idea of the community union and then Mike Treen outlined the recent successful organising of fast food, hotel and cinema workers. He talked of getting rid of any convoluted approach to workers; and that simply asking them to join and signing up on the spot was what worked.

Dave Feichert, a visiting organiser from the UK, who has also worked in the European Union as an organiser, talked of the concept of sustainability. For example, in the fishing industry there is sometimes the need to include two species of fish within the one quota, for one of the fish species feeds on the other. When it comes to planning, the market is a moron. He talked of unions in the EU refusing to be confined by an adversarial framework; that anger is not enough and that rights have to be embodied in law. But as well we need to have the ability to mobilise effectively. He told us to bring the two worlds of Blackball together (the old timers and the new timers) and to seek ways to involve the miners.

This was followed by a forum on Globalisation and Marginalisation as it affected the Coast. Leigh Cookson began with an overview. She made three main points: that the new world order is the old world lie; the rise of bilaterals as a way for the right to steer through the failure of the WTO negotiations; and the internationalisation of fear to justify a war without end.

Maxine Gay talked of the plight of garments workers across the globe, with a fall of real wages in all countries. She suggested a strategy that all people, wherever they are, must benefit from what they produce and that we must demand protection for our jobs. She encouraged contact with unions in China. She pointed out a key contradiction with the current Labour Government: that while they have brought in better legislation for workers, they have at the same time undermined workers through free trade agreements.

Rod Donald talked of the power of consumer choice in bringing in fair trade, in favouring local made product, of the need to use NZ based financial institutions, of the role of ethical investment, of co-operatives, of local government procurement favouring local business and of the need to keep local infrastructure intact in rural areas.

General discussion followed and inevitably began to centre on the Warehouse and its effect in Greymouth. But what to do about it given its obvious attraction for low income people? The meeting broke into groups and made banners.

A march then took place through the town to the Community Centre where Dave Feichert talked of the struggle for the 8 hour day and of the 8 hours reserved for culture and recreation.- of how precious that category is.

The gathering then viewed a play, a tale of the gold rush era, with many of the wider community attending. The AGM of the Museum Trust was held and the Chairperson's report spoke of achievements to date and the need for a part time worker and to raise the funds for a full set of building plans. Mayday 2008 is opening day.

On Sunday an oral history project took place with a mix of generations of Blackball people reminiscing. They talked of Blackball as it was with the mine operating, of a childhood spent 'in the bush', of the freedom, of the sporting depth to the culture, of the balls, of the town being alive 'under the earth and above the earth'; of the presence of Semple, Webb and Hickey in large photos in the Miners Hall,

watching over the cowboy movie or Donald Duck. They talked of it being a union run town, and that community equalled union.

And then of course the closure of the mine, people moving away and what they took with them. Those who stayed talked of the changes. It was a moving occasion as history was recreated.

After going on this journey through the three days, one had to come to the conclusion that we have some choices: What sort of world do we want to live in? What relationships do we choose to form? What do we want to belong to? Is it the carnival or is it something else? Of course to ask these questions simply from the point of view of individual choice is nonsense. Community and union as a class identification are essential categories. At the same time the over determinations of mechanistic Marxism must be avoided. It seems essential to withdraw from 'the carnival', to take back the power of our labour, to retain local infrastructure in the face of government perversity, to decide on our belonging and commitment, to de-alienate the family, to challenge the multi national corporates as they inveigle, seduce or bulldoze their way through our towns. Down here we have to consciously build bridges between groupings of people, to confront fundamentalist tendencies and on occasions be prepared to be humble as we learn from the elders.

But in terms of hope, the openness and intuitive knowledge of the students remains a vivid lesson.

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