

# Winning on our Issues with Power<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Social movement organisations need to have a pragmatic understanding of our current weaknesses and challenge ourselves to be much more adventurous for how to build social power and transformative change. This article considers three core weaknesses of our activist organisations, including how our issue agenda is often reactive, our disconnection from place and our poor track record on collaboration. It then suggests that the hope for stronger social change lies with a proactive issue agenda, strong reciprocal coalitions and the ability to move campaigns at multiple scales (locally, regionally, nationally, globally). The article includes a variety of examples that suggest how this stronger kind of organising is possible.

Social movements and progressive organizations need to take stock of where we are at, and consider three fundamental changes to how we work to build our power. Firstly, to be successful social movements need to organise around and inside of a clear moral vision and a set of goals for the society that we want. Secondly, we need to significantly rebuild the power of our organisations and recognise that currently our social movement organisations are debilitated and weak. And thirdly, in that rebuilding process, we need to rebuild our movement from the base up. When I say ‘the base up’ I would stress the importance of locally scaled politics, in particular the power of building participation and new activists, to create new members in our social movements and organisations.

## **Taking stock of where we are at**

But before we look to answers, we need to make an honest assessment of where we are. These reflections are based on my experience. I won’t speak for others in different social movements, and I’m sure all people’s perceptions are different. But I think we have fundamental weaknesses in our social movements, at three levels:

- the types of issues we work on
- our connection to place and local participation
- our organisations

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is not refereed.

### *Issues*

Lots of progressive politics is a politics of abstraction. As social movements, we tend to talk in high-level concepts, rather than attempt to connect what are abstract concepts to what are people's day-to-day life experience. For instance, Nina Burrridge's paper discussed how social movements are often values movements that are centred on the middle class [see paper by Nina Burrridge in the Rights section of this volume]. I think that there's a real gap in the way that we are trying to speak about the concerns that we raise as social movements, we often speak to a set of values rather than connecting values with people's interests.

An example may illustrate this. In the environment movement when we're talking about climate change, we talk about targets and that Australia and the world needs to set big and bold targets. But we are not talking in Sydney about a major concrete environmental issue that links directly to climate change, and that is public transport (and particularly a sustained campaign to fix it). Our city is congested and clogged with commuter nightmares, particularly if you live in Western Sydney, South Western Sydney, or the Central Coast. It is not exceptional to commute for over two hours a day, yet there is no functional campaign to deal with the issue. Instead, those of us who are part of the environmental movement, and I see myself as part of this (and struggling with the difficulty of this), we often avoid building campaigns around these day-to-day concerns. We stick to a conversation about targets and abstract terms. This is a weakness and keeps our movements isolated from those who are not already privy to what 'targets', for instance, mean.

Additionally, our movements tend to be reactive when building issue campaigns. This means that we have our battles picked for us, by politicians and employers. We are very good at saying no, and not very good at saying what we want. It is virtually impossible to effectively set an agenda when saying 'no'. It leaves us miles away from achieving systemic change. An example is the significant battle around electricity privatisation. While this is an important and challenging campaign, it faces almost impossible hurdles.

A key weakness is that it is a battle that picked us. The cruel irony of this campaign is that even if we ‘win’ and electricity privatisation is stopped, our victory is standing still. We haven’t actually built any proactive social change around this issue, for instance gains around energy efficiency, green jobs or renewable energy. Our tendency to consistently run reactive campaigns – no war, no corporate globalisation, no higher education fees – leaves us with the best option being that we are standing still on our agenda. Indeed, we are not articulating a clear agenda when we are articulating our social movement goals. This is a real problem.

### *Place*

The second significant gap is around place. Our social movements and many of our organisations have become de-linked from the local. The organising base of social movement activists is the inner city, and even within in the inner city we see turf wars. Part of what this panel was asked to speak about is electoral politics, and if we are to be honest we have to recognise that there are wasteful turf wars in the inner city between the Green and the Labor-left. Two of our major progressive forces battle it out between each other, contest each other in elections, and yet the majority of Sydney residents are often left outside of these discussions and outside of any engagement with organisational politics. This needs to be fixed. And the strategy to fix it has to be bolder and braver than beginning with a blame game. And while this continues we have a lot of wasted progressive politics de-linked from where the majority of Sydney lives – outside of the inner city.

In contrast, the Rights at Work campaign which set up 22 local rank and file activist groups in marginal seats across the country is a step towards the strategy that must be built. This was about locally engaged politics and it was about building activists out of people who’d never been activists before. Yet a question remains even for the Rights at Work campaign, or for *Get Up!* meet-ups, or the climate change networks that were set up by the Nature Conservation Council, what happens after the election? All these movements organised around the 2007 election and were very successful, were very grass roots, but what happens now? Where are these movements? What resources do they

have? What agenda are they building? What co-ordination exists? Are we going to continue to focus on local 'place-base' building – where we engage new people in politics, or was that a strategy just for the last election which will end with it.

### *Our organisations*

Thirdly, progressive organisations face major challenges. We struggle to collaborate and build coalitions amongst ourselves. In particular, there is a lack of trust across both social movement organisations and more established traditional organisations. Even when there's not a lack of trust, there is a lack of time invested in building strong relationships. We have ad-hoc coalitions where someone knocks on the door and asks for a favour, requests a person to come and talk at a particular rally, or requests we be involved in an event at the last minute. This is not how long term sustainable, social movement relationships are built. It does not allow us to understand each other's interests and form relationships together based on what we have in common.

Additionally, we have weak organizations, So many of our NGOs (through no fault of their own) are absolutely hamstrung by the funding agreements that come from the NSW and Federal government. The effect has been insidious, where many NGOs have been forced to focus on service delivery rather than advocacy – the advocacy role is being deliberately cut away. This is a major attack on our civil society organisations that we have not yet grappled with. We have identified the problem, for instance there is lots of research explaining how migrant resource centres could not talk about refugees under our last government, but we don't have a strategy or plan to turn it around, and nor can we expect a change of government to change this problem for us.

Moreover, I don't think we have a strong focus on growing the size and participation in our social movements and NGO organizations, or what I would call organising. I think we often assume that coming to a rally will automatically politicise people. As social movements we do not take enough responsibility for political development and awareness raising. I always like to ask people to think back to the first time they got involved in social movements, and how accidental it was. And how important individual

mentors were along the way. I worry that our movements do not invest in a program of mentoring and developing new people. I think we too often gloss over the levels of development that we need to take our people through in order to prepare and produce a much stronger movement. Yet, if we are not doing that we are not going to produce the pool of activists, networks, organisations and new leaders that we're going to need to achieve social change.

### **Moving forward**

Of course it is not all doom and gloom. I think that there are three answers to our weaknesses. These will help us to win power, and win on our issues.

Firstly, we need an agenda. While I don't think this is controversial, I think we can't understate how difficult it is to develop an agreed program. Regardless, it is essential that we have a clear broad base agenda about where we need to be going and that has to be an essential part of how we organise.

I recently spent some time in Chicago where the unions were organising a campaign against Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is a terrible employer, the largest employer in America and pays a minimal wage. The unions in Chicago initially ran a campaign in Chicago to try and stop Wal-Mart from opening. The slogan was 'No Wal-Mart'. The key spokespeople were white male union leaders. But Wal-Mart was very clever. They cultivated relationships amongst African American churches where Wal-Mart was going to build its store. The issue became a turf battle between poor African-American communities who wanted cheap goods from Wal-Mart and established unions. The union leaders were portrayed as trying to deny jobs to African Americans. The 'No Wal-Mart' frame was incapable of winning anything on that issue. So, some community organisers decided to shift how they approached the campaign.

In the United States there is a long tradition of living wage campaigning, rooted in the churches and the Catholic social tradition. The campaign sought to rekindle the idea of a living wage, and instead of arguing for 'no Wal-Mart', they ran a living wage campaign

for all retail workers. This campaign frame helped bridge the divide and rule politics that had been wedged between the African-American community, the religious community and the union movement. Instead of being against something, the unions and community organizations were for something. It was about setting a new standard for employees in Chicago. Against the Daly Democratic machine, they won a majority of the councillors in support of a living wage campaign. The campaign set a new standard in Chicago. Unfortunately three months later the decision was vetoed, but six months after that that the Council was transformed with a series of hostile alderman turfed out by a progressive electoral coalition. That social movement around living wages changed the political climate in Chicago. We can learn about the power of agenda campaigning from this.

We can take these lessons to the electricity campaign. One of the best outcomes from this campaign could be a recognition in the union movement that it needs to take steps toward the environment movement. How we going to deal with the demands for electricity in this state, in a way that is cognisant of the pressures of climate change? Similarly, a win would be where the environment movement recognises the power of coming to an alliance with the union movement, and not simply fighting each other with the things we disagree on but the things that we do agree on.

This would be a hopeful agenda. Instead of everyone saying no, we started saying yes. There is a lot of agenda building politics happening. I even see this created by the hope of the Rudd government. I don't think the Rudd government is going to be the cause of change, but I think that the shift in government means that people can start thinking optimistically about what we can move forward to achieve rather than just defending our own.

I see it in particular in a campaign we are running at Unions NSW for 6 months paid maternity leave. Of course, the fact we need this campaign is an indictment on Australia, that Australia and the United States are the only industrialised countries to not have maternity leave. Even Tanzania has 14 weeks paid maternity leave. But there has been an innovative approach in this campaign I think. We've decided to link our campaign with

the Health Standards around what length of time women need to be able to breastfeed their children and to form strong bonds of attachment to support child development. We think that that's a really great way to be able to move forward with a new agenda. Moreover, we don't see it as just paid maternity leave and winning on a single issue. Instead we see that an agenda for work and family balance is part of establishing a industrial relations system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This broader plan is an attempt to carry an agenda based politics.

We also need to rebuild the power of our organisations. I am committed to reworking the power of our organizations and our ability to collaborate by helping to build a coalition called the Sydney Alliance. This project aims to work over the next 4 years with organisations, including religious, union and community organisations, to transform their power. Before we start campaigning on issues, the Alliance is committed to working to rebuild our organisations and how we can work together. After all, in order to win on an agenda no organisation can win the sort of change we need to achieve on its own. Collaboration is key to successful social change.

In working together, I also think we need multi-scaled coalitions. Think of the 'Your Rights at Work' campaign, where it had unions working together nationally, at a state level and also local committees in marginal seats where individuals could participate. It was both central and local, and it provided an opportunity for how we can balance new participation and activist development at the same time as trying to influence and shape decision makers. Multi-scaled coalitions that engage and develop new volunteers, activists and campaigners are essential.

Local organising, propelling a progressive agenda, can have a global effect on decision makers and create a lasting social change. This is how we can rebuild our power to win on our issues.