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COMMUNITY CHILD CARE AND THE FUTURE:

A contribution to Discussion by Ruth Crow

URBAN POWER . . . IT'S LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIALITIES

(Extract from a paper prepared for a discussion on urban problems. It has not been specifically prepared for discussion on child care)

Three Conditions Specific to Australia:

1. Suburbanisation
 2. Strong Trade Unions
 3. Domination of National Politics.
1. Australia is One of the Most Suburbanised Countries in the World.

The urban-suburban development functions perfectly for the accumulation of capital, the organisation of centralised management, the stimulation of commodity consumption, the differential reproduction of labor power and the maintenance of the social order. The problems are more than loneliness, isolation, lack of stimulation and insufficient services such as child care and health centres. The increase in baby bashing, drug abuse, suicide and such "crimes" are symptoms of the breakdown in human relationships in Australian society where consumerism is the inseparable twin of sexist oppression.

Consider these two features of the crisis in our suburbs . . .

(a) In our car dependent suburbs the family turns in on itself. The aged, children and women are trapped in the suburbs where community life is declining and women bear the increased burden of the "invisible work" needed to provide the compensatory private life centred on car and home.

(b) the new-type social problems, that are now recognised, quite commonly, are inseparably linked with the problems of the squandering of the world's natural resources.

The sprawling suburbs which depend on cars, road and petrol are using an ecologically extravagant form of transport and added to this the suburban life style demands a proliferation of consumer articles, many of which are extravagant ecologically. Thus the campaign around real living standards can be linked in a very natural way to the campaign against squandering our world's resources, in particular to the anti-uranium campaign.

2. Australia is a country where there is a very strong Trade Union Movement:

To date the link between the trade unions and local groups has mainly been at the level of protest, but the stage is now being reached where it is imperative that ways are found of presenting a more human type of urban environment as a positive alternative to the problem ridden environment of the urban areas.

It is necessary to become quite precise in presenting alternative ideas so that the future will not produce the anachronisms of the present which are expressed in the prevailing ideas, for example, that all dwellings are for nuclear families; that cars are the most prized form of transport; that the bigger the school, university, hospital or super-market the better; that community and neighbourhood are no longer significant; that there is no suburban isolation but only "unhappy and inactive people."

When the trade unionists and the local action groups begin to work out such alternatives there will be no anti-freeway protest without mention of what sort of life could be envisaged if the car was not allowed to dominate our urban areas, anti-power station campaigns without in some way advocating a new life style of participatory activities which would reduce the need for fossil fuel; housing policies which merely look at the economics of housing and ignore the human needs of those who will make the buildings their homes; child care as if the child's needs are paramount and there are no parent needs; education, health and so on as if these needs are quite separate and apart from general community needs; and in most cases on all of these issues very little consideration as to whether the siting of these facilities will lead to clustering of human activity or not.

Alternatives are already beginning to take form as more and more people are taking the future into their own hands and setting up community based child care, community schools, community health centres, food co-ops. and other do-it-yourself community efforts. But these efforts will remain frail and easily co-opted into the conservativeness of establishment institutions unless there is developed an overall political movement with an over-all vision into which these human small scale efforts can be dovetailed.

One factor which makes it difficult for trade unions to embrace some of these new movements is that traditionally unions have dealt with standards (of wages and conditions and so on) which are definable and separable and have measurable solutions, which are usually expressed in economic terms. Some of the new issues are inherently different, they are ill-defined, and rely on elusive judgment in particular circumstances, and have in effect their own dynamic. For example in community child care the emphasis is laid on the word "process", stating that the object of that group is to help "the process of creating community". As Castells states . . . "The role of organisation is decisive in the orientation and development of an urban social movement." This is using a different sentence to say what was first enunciated by Marx in the Communist Manifesto and popularised by Lance Sharkey. In his book on The Trade Unions, 1942, . . . "The real fruit of their battle lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers."

"Australia Uprooted", "P.E.P." and the possibility for developing an organisation such as Environmentalists for Full Employment are steps by the Trade Unions towards workers have more control over their lives, not only over conditions under which they work, but about the products they make and the way these products are used. These steps cannot be taken by the Trade Unions without linking up the movement in the work places to the movement in the localities.

3. Australia is a Country where Progressive Political Effort is concentrated at the Federal Level:

There are many reasons why State and Municipal Movements play such a secondary role to the national government; for example, many of the progressive campaigns have a national or international importance, (the campaign for peace, the campaign to ban uranium mining are two obvious examples.) However, an over concentration by progressive forces at the national level can mean that the campaigns at the local level and at state level are neglected. There is the contradiction that although in the past those who challenge capitalism have spearheaded the move towards national organisations (e.g. national unions, the national pensioners associations, the national committee of the Union of Australian Women, the Australian Teachers' Federation, etc.) the move to nationalise the conservation and urban action groups is coming from the Fraser Government. This enticement is recognised by some as an attempt to decapitate virile state organisations and dissipate their strength.

Naturally many contradictions in Australian society are ones which affect all Australians, and many issues can best be tackled at the federal level. But, rather than divert from the local grass-roots efforts in the localities it may be best to consider how to use the strength that already exists in national organisations rather than to proliferate effort and run the risk of the new types of organisations being bureaucratised. As Manuel Castells points out the urban action and conservation groups are "structurally secondary", the fact that they are not directly connected to production means that they are easily dominated and co-optable. The move to nationalise such groupings could make such a conquest easier for the establishment and this would be an intolerable set-back to these fragile organisations.

The strong national organisations that some Trade Union have inherited is an asset which could have very significant use for some of the urban and conservation groupings in the campaigns in the near future, relieving them of the need to maintain centralised organisations.

There are many starting points for links between local groups and the trade unions, for example, the campaign around social services. It is imperative that alternatives are popularised which will reverse the trend of public poverty in the midst of private affluence. Local campaigns are already advocating all sorts of personalised services for health, welfare, recreation, family support and for better opportunities for the arts, for education and libraries and so on.

An immediately important political task is to take up the challenge of the State Government's F.A.C.S. Program (Family and Community Services) at its face value.

During October Brian Dixon mouthed all sorts of rhetoric, stating that the Victorian Welfare Department "wants to hear from every person interested in welfare in Victoria" and inviting participation in the spending of one million dollars in regional and state wide family and community programs during 1977-78. "We are looking for every person who cares enough" one leaflet from Dixon's Department states.

The F.A.C.S program at state government level and the Fraser Government's Bailey Report are both making all sorts of promises about the devolution of power and at the same time setting up a power base which, if not challenged by a popular movement, could become another form of domination by those who serve the interests of the capitalist class, and at the same time, a form of repression of the grass-roots local movement by the integration of their groups into a powerless apparatus.

A further quote from Manuel Castells is pertinent. Castells is writing about the results of Nixon's revenue sharing policy of 1972 when federal funding was replaced by a distribution to state and local governments (compare to the dismantling of the Australian Assistance Plan by the Fraser Government). "The analysis of the first two years of the revenue sharing program shows that in half of the cases the money was not spent but used to reduce local taxes. Concerning funds actually used, the two most important areas were law enforcement (police) and education, which are the usual responsibility of local authorities. Less than three percent. was spent on welfare or some kind of social services such as health centres. In most larger cities there was no expenditure at all in activities that could replace the cancelled federal programs.

To correct the possibility of lack of balance in this section of the report it is necessary to state two implied assumptions.

Firstly, the urgent need to give prominence to the significance of F.A.C.S.' program may leave the impression that local campaigns are mainly about "social-welfare programs". This is far from reality. Although the social content is crucial, the alternatives in urban policies need also to embrace other immediate interests such as housing, transport, recreation; in effect all matters to do with daily life. One particular aspect which is so frequently completely disregarded is the siting of facilities, or the social arrangements for social activities, and their relations with land use and transport.

Secondly, by emphasising the need to consider campaigns at the local and state level does not mean the rejection of the need for some connections with the national political process. In practice, one of the most significant effects of campaigns on local issues is that urban daily life is transformed so that more people can be partisans on national issues and have a meaningful connection with politics at local, state and federal levels. The Trade Unions would also become more meaningful through such a process.

However, the main purpose of presenting alternative perspectives is not to gain political power in the context of the parliamentary democratic structure, although it is conceivable that such success in some circumstances could help forward the extra-parliamentary movement. The main emphasis should be on a vision of a practical alternative enabling a more human urban life style.

THE STRUGGLE TO IMPLEMENT SUCH AN ALTERNATIVE IS A NECESSARY PRE-REQUISITE FOR THE INEVITABLE EXPANSION OF SUCH STRUGGLES TO FORM PART OF THE EXPERIENCE NECESSARY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE TO CARVE OUT THEIR OWN PATH TO SOCIALISM - CREATE THEIR OWN ORGANISATIONS IN THE PROCESS.