

URBAN POWER . . . . . CRUCIAL LINKAGES:

Ruth Crow

(It is recommended that this document be read in conjunction with the document 'Urban Power . . . It's Limitations and Potentiality . . .' some extracts from the writings of Manuel Castells).

Non Nuclear Futures

October 1977 was a month of mobilisation of the anti-uranium movement. The widespread support for the Movement Against Uranium Mining has shown in a variety of ways in localities all over Melbourne. . . . people taking over the parks and streets, marching from suburbs to the city and through the city itself, with street stalls of anti-uranium protestors mushrooming in numerous shopping centres. The October Mobilisation seems to have ushered in a new period of urban struggle and is rapidly developing new ways of gaining mass support.

Non-Nuclear Futures and Urban Issues:

- 1. Anti-freeway
- 2. Urban Energy
- 3. Community Facilities.

- 1. There is a link being developed between M.A.U.M. and the movement against freeways and the movement for peace and disarmament.
- 2. The stand taken by the Australian Conservation Foundation against uranium mining has strengthened opposition to uranium in urban action and conservation groups. Some local M.A.U.M. groups are beginning to study in detail how plans for urban areas which have been championed by local urban action groups can be strengthened by considering the conservation of urban energy.
- 3. There are potential links between services for health, welfare and child care (and other social movements) and the anti-uranium movement. The concern of many people about the break down in human relationships (shown by increase in baby-bashing, wife bashing, rape, suicide and other violence against people) is now being linked with the need to humanise the urban environment and in some instances the violence is being identified as part of the price to be paid in a society which places growth as its most important criteria.

Some of the Main Groups Active on Urban Issues :

- 1. Self-help Groups or Consumer Groups.
  - 2. Urban Action or Community Groups
  - 3. Coalitions of Action Groups
  - 4. Organisations of Professional Workers
  - 5. Union Movement.
1. Self-Help Groups: These organisations are mainly organisations of people as consumers of services e.g. single parents, playgroups, tenants and so on.

Some of these groups have been initiated by organisations which in the past have been generally supportive to the social order, but now are channelling efforts towards protests . . . for example, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, the Centre for Urban Research and Action (the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre), the Ecumenical Migrant Centre. Although from time to time some of these groups do take radical action they tend to be ideologically conservative and their localism and economism keeps them well within the consumerist movement.

The Canadian Marjaleeno Repo warned about the potentiality of such groups being a way of diverting from the main issues of the class struggle. She wrote in an article entitled "The Poor Against the Working Class" . . . "a new category is created; THE POOR (the under-privileged, the culturally deprived) and these became the subjects of intense study, as if in their 'culture of poverty' their behaviour, their life style, their 'expectations' and 'motivations' would lie an explanation to a major flaw of capitalism . . . They are dealt with in non-class terms, however."

While heeding Repo's warning and recognising that such groups have relied heavily on intellectually trained people finding "the poor people type of problem", we must nevertheless welcome all such efforts at developing participation and control over social services. Our political task is to use the growing experience of self-help groups to develop a more conflictual base rather than to allow their efforts to remain limited to campaigns over their own over-exploitation.

2. Urban Action or Community Groups: many of these have been initiated because of direct threats . . . in the late 1960's the inner urban movement mobilised against urban renewal; more recently there has been a metropolitan-wide movement against freeways which has been particularly strong in the areas which are most directly threatened. Coming into existence because of direct threats meant that these movements have been relatively easy to initiate; but sometimes fail to keep up the tempo when the threat is either removed or the protest has been lost.

These movements become more stable when campaigns have progressively shifted towards demands for comprehensive neighbourhood planning. At first this was mainly about the need to co-ordinate land use and transport planning but more recently greater consideration is being given to including the need for appropriately siting facilities for social use. The preparation and popularisation of action plans prepared by urban action at grass roots level is ushering in an historically new approach to planning.

However, a warning on similar lines to that in the section on self-help groups is made in Marjaleena Repo's article on "The Fallacy of Community Control" its worth quoting . . .

"The 'neighbourhood as a community' concept assumes a classless society at a local level, in which a 'people of all classes' work towards a common goal . . . the assumption is that everybody is equal, that all work together for the common good, that no class conflict exists . . ."

There is considerable truth in this, of course, but the political challenge is to show people, from their own experience, the class nature of society. Many of those who are attracted to be active in urban groups are white-collar workers, and the forms of organisation of these groups reflect this fact. However, the issues taken up by these organisations affect the lives of all working people and there is thus the potential of wide support when action is needed on particular issues.

Manuel Castells describes urban struggles as "of second level importance". This fact has a number of consequences, one of which is that the most ardent members of urban action groups are often easily disheartened; that campaigns are sometimes sporadic and that these organisations are often frail and easily co-opted into the conservative apparatus of capitalist society. On the other hand, the technical and professional education and experience of many urban actionists are often unselfishly given to help promote action and the contributions which have been made in both theory and practice by these groupings of people are an important phenomenon of this period of history.

Urban action groups are beginning to clearly state that what matters in life are human values. For example, in the North Melbourne Association's C.A.N. Report (Citizens Action Plan for North Melbourne) it is stated . . . "Value judgments can be based on a high regard for material wealth, or for status or for freedom, or for privacy, or for preservation or for <sup>cultural</sup> experience or personal expression, and so on, or some combination of these values. What really matters, C.A.N. believes are the human values, not material wealth, nor status, nor freedom at the expense of others; but a life that sees social values as distinct from economic ones as the prime objectives." (Note in 1973 C.A.N. was written by a group of fifty members of the N.M.A. and the above value judgment was endorsed at a public meeting of about 100 people).

It has been possible for numerous coalitions of urban action groups to be formed. For example, the Committee for Urban Action, the Combined City of Melbourne Associations, (to a certain extent the Citizens' Action <sup>Against</sup> Freeway, is a coalition of local action groups). Some of these coalitions are ad.hoc in character and are frailer, more sporadic and more easily disheartened than urban groups in the localities. (A feature of some of the broad coalitions is the role played by professional organisations or organisations mainly composed of professional people, e.g., the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the Royal Planning Institute . (The National Trust could be included in this too), and on the welfare front the Victorian Council of Social Services. To a certain extent the experiences of the white-collar professional workers in the urban action groups has influenced the professional associations; and of course vice versa.

4. Organisations of Professionals: (R.A.P.I., R.A.I.A., V.C.O.S.S. and others of a similar character).

Until recently the professional experts directly engaged in planning, building and providing social services in our cities have regarded their work as separate and apart from politics, as a purely technical matter at the service of the established powers. This has not meant that they have been politically neutral, on the contrary they have been part and parcel of political paternalism. Content with confining themselves to tackling problems in a piecemeal way without any over-all vision.

Recently a new dimension has entered into the relationship between town planning and politics and between town - planning and social and economic planning. There is a growing recognition amongst some professionally trained planners (etc.) that town planning cannot be regarded as an isolated set of interests, and that it is essential to make contact with those political forces which are aiming at a general transformation of society. There are increasing examples to show how these professionals are recognising that conservatism and political neutrality are shackles which must be broken and they are looking for encouragement and allies in the urban action groups and in some instances amongst the blue-collar unions.

Similarly to the local urban action groups and the urban coalitions these groupings of people are frail, and their militancy tends to be sporadic and they tend to be easily disheartened.

This tendency towards disillusionment is understandable in the light of such town planning travesties as the dismantling of the Melbourne City Council Strategy Plan, the recent scandals as regards land subdivision and many, many other examples. Many of these professional planners take their first step towards more progressive attitudes through an ardent belief in participation in planning . . . believing in what Leonie Sandercock describes as "redistributive social justice" . . . "to give more ordinary people more say in decisions affecting the quality of their environment and daily life." As Leonie sadly asks in the last paragraph of "Cities for Sale". "How do we guard against the possibility that those who already win in the market place will also be the winners in the political market place created by the participatory procedures?" Leonie's question is asked time and time again by the progressive people who are professionally engaged in planning. The answer is to be found in finding a footing in the broader, more general social contradictions. (the four points outlined by Castells can help towards this solution).

5. The Union Movement: This includes all those "working for a crust" and is therefore not limited to only industrial workers. White collar workers and more recently not insignificant numbers of tertiary trained and professional workers have become part of the employed work force.

From time to time attempts have been made by the unions to break out of the constricting patterns of struggle that regards wage standards as the only legitimate business for which unions are organised. One outstanding example of this was the Living Standards Convention held in 1967 at which one of its six seminars was on town planning and another on welfare. The Amalgamated Engineering Union (now the A.M.W.S.U.) helped to initiate a movement for adequate child care in the late 1960's. More recently the A.M.W.S.U. has produced the booklet "Australia Uprooted". This booklet shows that the concern for broader living standards of a decade ago is beginning to emerge as a policy on Australian industries as a whole. In addition in the People's Economic Program (P.E.P) there is an appeal by the unions for help in formulating a program on welfare rights, tenants' union, women, regional development, migrants and the environment.

Such efforts by the trade unions can provide a framework for local action groups and unions to work together. A recent meeting held in the A.M.W.S.U. offices indicated one of the ways this could be done.

This meeting was called jointly by the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Amal. Metal and Shipwrights' Union to hear Richard Grossman speak about Environmentalists for Full Employment. Judging from the quality of the discussion it would seem that the time is ripe to bring together the environmentalists and the many diverse organisations that are involved with living standards. . . . the trade unionists and urban actionists helping to form the central core along with the environmentalists.

This could be one of the crucial linkages between those working for political change at the local level and those who are more directly involved with struggles at the point of production.

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 . . .

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.

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(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 <sup>proliferation</sup> ~~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.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING:

1. Plan for Melbourne Part 1. Note this booklet was prepared by the "Modern Melbourne Committee" of the C.P.A. and adopted by the Victorian State Conference of the Communist Party of Australia on 3rd November, 1968. It was circulated to all delegates and a pre-conference discussion resulted in a number of amendments finally carried by the Conference itself.

As Plan for Melbourne is now out of print it is only available in photostat form (price \$2.00) Phone 328-2345 for further particulars. It may be possible to borrow a copy from some of those who bought them when they were available.

2. Melbourne : The Social and Ecological Choices by Ruth and Maurie Crow  
A.L.R. No. 49 (1976)

3. Challenging Alternatives Needed by Maurie Crow Praxis No. 8 (March 1976)

4. Women in Australian Suburbs by Ruth Crow Join Hands October 1976.

5. Centres for Young Children (which also serve the needs of their parents)

A submission from the Victorian Branch of the Communist Party of Australia to the Victorian Consultative Council on Preschool Child Development June 1972. This booklet is now out of print but photostats are available (price \$2.00) Phone 328 - 2345 for further information.

6. Resolution on Child Care passed at the Victorian State Conference of the C.P.A. in 1976. This was published in Join Hands October 1976.

7. A number of articles by Jack Munday and by Geof Lacey have been published in A.L.R. and Praxis, in particular Jack Munday's "Urbanism a Challenge to Socialism" in A.L.R. No. 54 and Geof Lacey's "The Dominant Car" in A.L.R. No.50.