

The ‘turn to industry’: what happened when left activists joined the working class?

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In the late 1970s in New Zealand, a group of young people in their twenties left their middle-class lives and got working-class jobs, joined working-class unions and lived in working-class communities. Why? They were activists and communists and they wanted to bring radical politics to the working class.

They were members of the Socialist Action League (SAL), a group formed in the late 1960s out of the student anti-Vietnam War movement. In the late 1970s, SAL decided to refocus its organising efforts, shifting focus from the university campus to the industrial workplace. ‘We must make the industrial workers our milieu’, the SAL National Convention agreed in 1976. ‘We must make their factories, their unions and their communities our base of operations.’ This shift, called the ‘turn to industry’, was based on a view that blue-collar workers were uniquely placed to stop the gears of the capitalist system and produce real and lasting change.

This tactic of placing oneself among the working class has a long lineage in the international left, from the tactic of ‘salting’ (union officials getting jobs in non-union workplaces to help build union organisations) to the New Left’s turn to community organising. But unlike other campaigns, SAL activists viewed the union bureaucracy with suspicion; they viewed it as a hierarchy that limited the inherently radical potential of the rank-and-file. As a result, they refused to take up leadership positions within the union. Instead, they would join the rank-and-file of the workforce and the union and fight from the bottom-up.

For one group of SAL activists, New Zealand’s meat-freezing industry became their ‘base of operations’. Some remained there for nearly two decades, during a period of industrial upheaval, rapidly changing social and political landscapes, and the introduction of brutal neoliberal market reforms which devastated industries and workforces. During this time, they were active in rank-and-file union issues, and they attempted to bring the anti-apartheid movement and feminism into the workplace, with varying degrees of success.

In 1978, two young Pākehā SAL activists, James Robb and Helen Mulrennan, hit the road, leaving behind New Zealand’s capital Wellington for Hawke’s Bay, a semi-rural area and the site of two major freezing works. ‘We were young ... Going on the road, getting a job ... going up on the chain,’ recalled Mulrennan. ‘It was exciting being part of a political group and going into the freezing works ... We decided to take the “turn to industry” and the freezing works were a major industry in New Zealand.’

This ‘turn to industry’ reflected an international strategy on the part of some factions of the left in response to the perceived ineffectiveness and idealism of campus organising, as well as the dramatic increase in workplace militancy in the two decades after the 1970s. Robb said, ‘we recognised that there was a real ferment amongst industrial workers, and we needed to be part of it’.

At the same time, they sought to bring internationalism (the fight against apartheid for example), feminism, and socialism into the workplace and a union movement that was largely concerned with 'bread and butter' issues – potentially conservative on social issues, but militant when it came to workplace issues (collective bargaining, discipline, health and safety, and control over the job). In 1978, a SAL activist wrote: '[We are not] walking away from our political campaigns and concentrating on the narrow preoccupations of the union officialdom ... [we are] taking our entire political and organisational activity as a party and focusing on the industrial workers ... this orientation will strengthen our women's liberation and anti-racist work'. In line with their efforts of 'breaking the power of the bosses and mobilising the majority of New Zealanders to build socialism,' SAL viewed unions as organisations that could and should fight political battles. A 1984 pamphlet proclaimed that 'it is not enough for trade unions to concern themselves solely with the narrow questions of their wages and conditions'.

Mulrennan and Robb both got jobs at the freezing works on the chain. They were big hirers. Thousands of people worked at these plants at the peak of the killing season. Mulrennan remembered the first day: 'It was a massive place you walked into and the place would just go silly when the newbies came on the chain, there'd be yelling and people would bang their knives on the steel which would make an incredible racket – but that was sort of a tradition'. Whole families worked together on the chain and a majority were Māori. For many Pākehā at the time, the freezing industry was their introduction to Māoridom. One Māori freezing worker claimed that 'the Pākehās become Māori when they come into the freezing industry'. For Robb, Māori 'were so much a part of it, and predominated in the whole place ... You don't quite come out Māori, but that's not a bad characterisation ... The Māori aspect was special'.

At the freezing works, SAL activists encountered an already organised and militant workforce. By the 1970s, freezing workers emerged as the most strike-prone workforce in the country, accounting for around half of working days lost to strikes and stoppages. In a 'blood and guts' workplace dominated by speed, regimentation and monotony, workers sustained a strong union culture. Freezing workers frequently challenged the prerogatives of employers and asserted their own control and autonomy on the job. The issues of heat, speed, unfair dismissals and safety inspired stop-work meetings and wildcat strikes, while the negotiations around the National Award regularly led to protracted strike action. This was a culture of resistance. But while freezing workers were militant, they were not radical. Their union culture reflected a desire for control over the job, fair pay, and comradeship among the mostly male workforce. Union culture found expression in strikes, picket lines and 'nerve' centres, or strike committees, that were organised during strikes and aimed to alleviate the impacts of the strike on families and build solidarity within the community.

SAL activists saw this as fertile ground. And they initially had some reason to be optimistic about the potential of organising freezing workers around broader political goals. In 1978, when Ngāti Whātua (a Māori tribe in Auckland) protestors were evicted by police from Bastion Point in Auckland, Wellington freezing workers walked off in a wildcat strike to protest the government's actions. In the same year, two women at the Fielding freezing works took on both the company and the union in the fight to be trained as butchers, a job previously reserved for men. At the Whakatu freezing works in Hawke's Bay, a foreman called a Māori worker a 'black bastard' and the workers walked off the job.

Once SAL activists secured jobs, they distributed their paper, *Socialist Action*, which included extensive coverage of industrial relations in the freezing works and the politics of the day. Regular columns entitled 'Meat Worker Notes', or subsequently 'From the Shed', written by Robb, Mulrennan and others appeared regularly, recounting events at a local workplace level, and news about the broader political movements of the day: American imperialism, Māori land rights and treaty issues, apartheid in South Africa and the women's movement. SAL activists also reported on key changes in the industry, including the changes in ownership of the plant, the introduction of

technology, and the deregulation of the industry. Robb recalled:

... it was a bit difficult at first. Nobody knew of us or cared ... it took us a while to find our feet and to work out what we could do and what we couldn't do. It was still a very fertile ground, but it just took a bit longer to find out how you could operate. It took a while to get the paper known, but we did eventually. And most people were receptive, mostly because of the Māori coverage, but also when we had a little strike or something we'd do a report on it and it was the only place they got sympathetic and truthful coverage ...

Mulrennan said, 'we thought we'd get a good response; we'd be workers alongside workers and we'd be active unionists'. But in bringing political campaigns into the workplace, SAL did not always find a receptive audience, as Robb recalled. 'We sold our paper around the canteen and at the gate, and so everyone knew where we stood on things. Some workers agreed with us, a small number joined our organisation ... There were some who disagreed with us, some who hated us passionately, and they let us know too'. One freezing worker said that he and others 'used to give [SAL activists] hell. They would say "power to the people" and all that. We used to give them a hard time. They were different, that's for sure. But they were good people, *great* people'.

The 1981 Springbok Tour marked the high point of tension over sporting contacts with apartheid South Africa, and the anti-apartheid protests against the tour invoked bitter battle lines within communities and workplaces. When the tour came to Hawke's Bay, the freezing works were as divided as the rest of the country. During an anti-apartheid march in the town, Robb saw one of his workmates watching from the footpath: 'One of them made baa sounds like a sheep'. 'Quite a few workers went on the protest,' said Mulrennan, 'and quite a few went to the game ... [but] a lot of people got won over as the discussions went on, because [apartheid] was a real discussion point.' SAL activists also invited speakers onto worksites. In 1980, anti-apartheid activist Sam Ramsamay spoke at the Westfield freezing works, while in 1981, exiled Black South African trade unionist Andrew Molotsane gave a talk at Tōmoana to an audience of freezing workers during their lunch break, made up of both 'keen rugby fans' and others wearing 'Stop the Tour, '81' badges.

The anti-apartheid protests reached a climax on 25 July 1981 when anti-apartheid activists stormed the field of Hamilton's Rugby Park, where the South African team was playing, chanting 'Remember Soweto! Remember Sharpeville!' Following the announcement of the cancellation of the game, a major victory for the anti-apartheid movement, James Robb pressed the emergency button that stopped the chain, and put his fist in the air, and 'the place went beserk,' recalled Mulrennan. Robb claimed that 'there were a few expressions of anger, but most of the uproar was good-natured. I got a few hosings that morning. [But] it led to some much better discussions ... It was only after Hamilton that everyone realised the anti-tour movement was serious and needed to be debated'. For some, the protest over the tour went against some of the freezing workers' 'stoic beliefs' as well as the tradition of rugby culture in the works. As one freezing worker recalled, 'I was thinking ... bloody hell, it's just a game... We had our stoic beliefs, you know. But we were all anti-racism, that's for sure ... So we didn't agree with [apartheid] at all. But we also agreed that rugby's rugby, you know ... our views were simple.'

If the Springbok Tour unsettled the rugby culture, some workers viewed the training of women as butchers as a threat to the 'man's world' in the works and the union. By 1973, equal pay rates for most departments were introduced into the collective agreement. But as women entered the freezing works in greater numbers in the 1970s, the fight for equal access to jobs became central and SAL activists, some of whom were women, took on this fight. In doing so they were taking on both the company and the union. The president of the Freezing Workers Union said, 'We feel strongly that there is a definite place in the industry for women [but] we don't think that handling

sheep guts is a job for women'. For some rank-and-file workers, too, women entering the works posed a threat to the workplace and union culture as a masculine space. 'I never believed women could be good unionists', said one freezing worker. 'We were worried that if the boss told the women to do something they would just do what he said without recognising the union.'

Following demands by the women at the work, and a period of campaigning, the men at the works voted in favour of women being trained. Mulrennan believed that they voted 'because they thought we'd never be able to do it. [The attitude was] they'll never be able to hack it, so there's no problem anyway. And once women were able to do and get up to speed ... there was quite a lot of pride about it'. After a while, the men 'embraced' it, according to one freezing worker, and a common argument in favour of women taking up these jobs was that many of the women were married to male freezing workers: 'at the time you had most husbands and wives that were both on slaughterman pay checks. So why resist that?' Another male worker who was initially opposed said that Mulrennan 'proved she could match the blokes; it took a strong person take a stand like she did, in a male-dominated work environment'.

SAL activists played a major role in this campaign and in the process challenged the view that equal opportunity for women was a trivial issue, beyond the scope of the union. In other words, they challenged men on the meanings of union solidarity. 'As many workers recognise,' Eileen Morgan wrote in 1984, 'strengthening the bonds of solidarity among workers is key to building a union movement capable of defeating government-employer attacks ... But solidarity does not only mean respecting the picket lines of other unions or taking up financial collections to support workers ... It also means fair and equal treatment of every worker'. For Mulrennan, the campaign broke down the idea of 'men's jobs' and 'women's jobs' and the dominance of men in the workplace, but only in a very limited way. 'The chain used to be a completely male place', Mulrennan said at the time. 'If women went anywhere near it there was a lot of yahoos and carrying on. That still goes on a bit, but women are far more accepted. It is like you are one of the boys.'

SAL activists thus had some limited successes in bringing political campaigns into the workplace. They did not shy away from debating these issues with fellow workers. Working alongside the rank-and-file was central to this success. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, SAL's efforts to bring political struggles onto the job were often superseded by the more immediate and pragmatic efforts to maintain pay and conditions, and control over the workplace, especially as such issues came under attack by employers in the context of industry deregulation, neoliberal reforms, and major attacks on the union movement. The same militancy that SAL sought to harness was in fact the result of a workforce and union movement fending off the erosion of wages and employer attacks in the context of at first a recession, and then an employer offensive aided by radical neoliberal reforms. Freezing works were closing across the country by the late 1980s when the industry was deregulated and subsidies for farmers were removed. At this time James Robb and Helen Mulrennan lost their jobs along with thousands of others.

The 'turn to industry' was an ambitious agenda and one that would transform the lives of the activists involved. One historian has suggested that these campaigns 'met with little success' and were a product of a 'vanguardist elitism' that viewed industrial workers as 'others' who needed to be organised from above by 'an enlightened minority'. Indeed, some might be cynical about their efforts, but what can we learn from them? What did the activists themselves learn in the process?

Firstly, in terms of 'success', it is important that 'what was won must be judged by what was possible,' as Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward argue. SAL activists did enjoy some limited success in bringing important political campaigns into the workplace and their strategy of working alongside the rank-and-file was central to their strategy. As one union official explained, their 'visibility was way out of proportion to their numbers, because they were articulate ... They were

members of the union and workers'. For SAL activists, politicisation and education was a two-way process. SAL members were young, these were some of their first major jobs; they worked actively in the union, moved into neighborhoods surrounding the freezing works, immersed themselves into the community and social life and built close personal relationships in what was a strong workplace and union culture. They came to the freezing works with their own prejudices and preconceptions about the working class. Describing the paper, Socialist Action, Robb claimed:

We made a special point of reporting what our workmates were saying about these issues in Socialist Action, including where they disagreed – this was one of the reasons the paper really appealed to the workers – they could see their opinions reported in a way that never happened in the bourgeois press. For me, it was this more than anything else which shattered the myth of the reactionary worker in need of a bit of liberal enlightenment. Our workmates had the same range of opinions, from conservative to radical, on these issues as everyone else, and they were far more open to discussions on these things than I had expected, having largely shared the prevailing liberal prejudices up to that point.

For Mulrennan, the biggest lesson was the power that workers held. 'Workers were confident to take action and workers were confident that they could fight and win. And they did win,' she explained. Mulrennan continued, 'we were part of the freezing works, we were part of the workforce and the union ... we were workers alongside workers and active unionists'. James Robb said, 'I got a small glimpse of the courage, self-confidence, openness to serious political discussion, the unselfish generosity and of the power of the industrial workers when they act in solidarity,' Robb explained. Robb says he generally tries to avoid dispensing advice to those organising today, but he did say the following:

The main thing would be to see that you have more in common with Bangladeshi clothing workers than you do with your kiwi boss or foreman. And to find ways to link up with fellow workers wherever they are and feel your strength; feel the fact that you're the creators of the world's wealth and that gives you immense power. Workers are so written out of the general discourse of politics in this country and everywhere in the world, it's hard for workers to feel their own strength because there seems to be no sign of it at the moment. It's only when you begin fighting that you realise you have strength.

Our cynicism about such campaigns today perhaps reflects that fact that as Robb points out, 'workers are so written out of the general discourse of politics'. In a recent *Overland* article on left organising in poor communities, Joanna Horton described the increasing disconnect between the left and the material realities of those who face poverty. More generally, there has been a lot of debate recently about the relationship between the left and the working class, especially since Trump, Brexit and the rise of the right across the world. A long-standing critique suggests that nominally social democratic parties now represent a cosmopolitan middle-class liberal elite, while the working-class has become disenchanted with politics or, at worse, the voting base of racists and demagogues. But the lack of similar style campaigns today is not only a change in attitudes, but a wider structural change.

The erosion of older forms of solidarity (declining trade union membership, attacks on welfare and the increase in precarious work) has left some questioning whether or not the working class are still agents of social transformation. Despite this, as historian Peter Cole has written about the dockworkers who fought against apartheid, SAL's 'turn to industry' provides 'a useable history for us to adapt to contemporary struggles'. The lessons and the philosophy behind SAL's 'turn to industry' remain relevant: real change is going to come from the bottom up; the workplace remains an essential area for organising and for political activism, and political and industrial issues should

always be connected. Even in our increasingly connected global economy, workers still possess power and exert influence. SAL activists understood this, and they acted on it.

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