

Putting it out there: The (democratic) meanings of social movement unionism as union-civil alliances in New Zealand



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Jane Parker and Ozan Alakavuklar



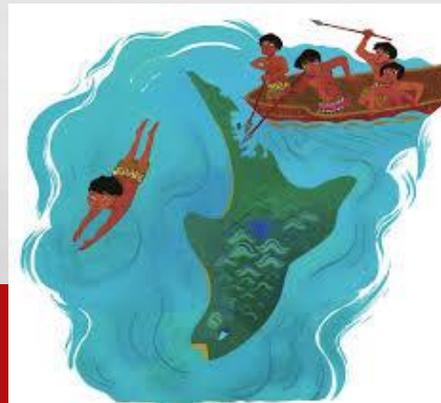
OVERVIEW

- 1. nature of the study**
- 2. unions, alliances and democracy**
- 3. New Zealand (NZ) union background**
- 4. case: the environment**
- 5. discussion and conclusions**
- 6. Q&A**



1. NATURE OF THE STUDY

- **CONTEXT** NZ, union decline and pursuit of revitalisation
- **AIM** to assess the nature, rationale and democratic character of union-civil alliances in NZ
- **FOCUS** NZ Council of Trade Unions, affiliates and the environment
- **METHOD** exploratory - qualitative, interpretivist inquiry, using manual thematic analysis



2. UNIONS, ALLIANCES AND DEMOCRACY

- **WANING UNIONISM** NZ union membership nearly halved in the early 90s; has plateaued/declined since union numbers also nearly halved between 1991 and 2016 (now 25)
- **UNION RESPONSES** survivalist/instrumentalist rationale has informed much union effort (recruiting, organising, restructuring, pursuit of law changes)
- **UNION-CIVIL ALLIANCES** instrumentalism v other explicit/implicit rationales; democratising impacts?
- **FORMS OF DEMOCRACY** liberal (representative) and participatory – unions informed by, inform, and criticised for, variants of both (e.g. Michels, 1915)



2. UNIONS, ALLIANCES AND DEMOCRACY (cont'd)

- **RADICAL DEMOCRACY**

challenges capitalist arrangements

many argue for class struggle, prefer a political economic analysis of class

- **LaCLAU and MOUFFE (2001)**

framework introduces hegemonic struggle in political realm

argues for an irreducible *plurality* of political struggles with which to radicalise and deepen democracy, and counter 'new forms of subordination' via new social movements ('multiple antagonisms')

leads to *constant* reformulation of social and political spheres, and defends the collaboration of various, ongoing struggles – including working-class struggle – emerging and transforming power relations



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2. UNIONS, ALLIANCES AND DEMOCRACY (cont'd)

- **UNION-CIVIL ALLIANCES** scholarship assigns multiple meanings, e.g.
 - **Dibben (2004); Webster (2006); Fletcher and Gapasin (2008)**
 - **Frege et al. (2004): emphasise instrumentalism**
- **OUR DEFINITION OF SMU** unions' significant engagement beyond matters of job regulation with wider social and political change involving civil alliances
 - **aligns with Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) view of social movements**
 - **Encompasses community unionism, (US-style) organising**

3. NZ UNION BACKGROUND



- **UNION-CIVIL ALLIANCES**

**not a traditional trait of NZ unionism
scant and localised empirical evidence**

- **NZ COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS (CTU)**

**90s: centralisation process
from 2000: move towards a more professional org'l approach**

- **Parker (2011): alliance-building starting to percolate movement**

- **not articulated in terms of democratic arrangements**
- **often around work-centred issues**
- **seen by informants as intertwined strand of wider union revival effort/instrumentalism within existing democratic and political arrangements**
- **reactive, ad hoc**



3. NZ UNION BACKGROUND (cont'd)

- **UNION-CIVIL ALLIANCES**



BUT: 2011 study informants detected a growing sense of urgency for the CTU/affiliates to widen relationship with outside groups

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inaugural CTU Union Leaders' Forum in 2010: discussion on building a modern union movement with regard to:

- **wider social and political context**
- **linking union legitimacy to the quality of internal democracy**
- **SMU as a potential avenue for helping define strategic direction**

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4. CASE: THE ENVIRONMENT

- **UNION-CIVIL ALLIANCES**
- **EXAMPLES**

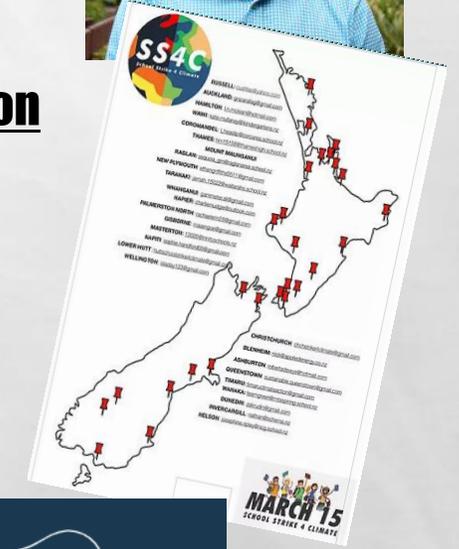
CTU and some affiliate activity on CC

February 2016 – CTU submission on priorities for NZ Emissions Trading Scheme Review

December 2017 – response to the Stocktake Report from the Climate Change Adaptation Working Group: Just Transition

- **PSA, E tū, NZNO, NZEI and Unite affiliates**

March 2019 – CTU expresses support for young people taking strike action on Climate Justice; for Muslim community in Christchurch



4. CASE: THE ENVIRONMENT (cont'd)

• ANALYSIS

CTU & some affiliates stepping up some policy development, alliance work and stress on union-other stakeholder connections

- largely working within / seeking to extend existing representative and participatory (democratic) approaches
- much activity still around problem articulation, agenda-setting and planning but some action
- also: elements of more radical activities involving action (material practice) by parts of/individuals in unions, and aspirations to augment radical approach



4. CASE: THE ENVIRONMENT (cont'd)

- **BUT** environmental agenda problematised by intractable differences (e.g. Hampton, 2015)
despite growing examples, little strategizing *between* interests/area
continued focus on short-term gains of wages and conditions
- **RESPONSES?** complexities suggests participatory democratic processes need to work in concert with representative approaches (also Pateman, 1970)
time and strategic urgency
 - “As the rallying cry of the trade union movement globally on climate change puts it - there are no jobs on a dead planet.”

- Sam Huggard (CTU Secretary, 13 March 2019)



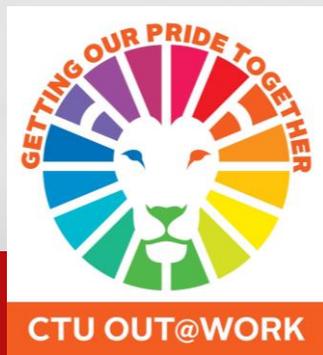
4. CASE: THE ENVIRONMENT (cont'd)

- **RESPONSES?** **couch growing union concern with environmentalism within CTU/affiliate-groups' wider array of alliances to reflect *intersectionality* of interests; positive sum outcomes; anticipate and welcome dissent (cf. its anaethetisation) towards coordinated action**
 - **need a radicalised democratic approach to politicise issues; become part of hegemonic struggle through chains-of-equivalence to build a politics from below to challenge neo-liberalism**
 - **regenerate and revision core and new functions? (e.g. with nimble technologies, stronger education/training function (e.g. ILO, 2007), different ways of working)**
 - **overseas learnings**



5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- **CTU/union-civil alliances as SMU still not a core trait of the movement, largely workplace focused & seen as instrumental for unions in NZ**
- **however, wider issue alliances *are* developing unevenly, often in early stages (including around the environment),**
 - **often embody liberal democratic and oligarchic tendencies and tensions (efficiency and democracy trade-off)**
 - **growing recognition that coalition is connected to progress made by other civil groups in the face of neo-liberal hegemony**



5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS (cont'd)

- far from cohesive views about capitalist transformation involving coalition parties overhauling their own organisation or relations
 - alliance effort around environmentalism yet to define democratic efforts for emancipatory strategies
 - **BUT elements of radical democratic thinking and material for varying durations**
- **PROGNOSIS** socio-economic conditions for union revival not promising (Croucher and Wood, 2017); transformational project stultified

- **BUT:** these very exigences
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local and external factors – challenges, opportunities, aspirations
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unions increasingly working with social movements to challenge power power relations & seek social transformation (e.g. Waterman, 1993), as ‘continuous associations’ (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2017)



“is likely to retain a healthy pragmatic streak” (Capie, 2018)



7. Q&A

