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WOW: the Wollongong Out of Workers' Union

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Between November 2005 and January 2006, as part of my honours thesis research, I conducted a series of interviews with people who were active in the Wollongong Out of Workers’ Union (WOW) during the 1980s. The aim of the research was to investigate, analyse and explain WOW as a project created by, and expressing, proletarian rebellious self activity. The thesis is specifically concerned with problems associated with freeing labour from the domination of capital and the question of whether work refusal and right to work struggles were contradictory or could be complementary. In investigating and analysing the praxis of WOW and its members, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the struggles of the 1980s around issues of work, unemployment and class composition.
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Some of the unemployed people who formed WOW lead the 1982 Right to Work March from Wollongong to Sydney.
The Wollongong Out of Workers’ Union existed from 1983 to 1989 and was re-formed for a short period in the early 1990s. Throughout its existence WOW was run and controlled by unemployed people, most of whom had no previous political experience and many of whom embraced a wide variety of ‘outlaw’ cultures—punks, petty criminals and drug addicts. Despite this, yet in a way because of it, WOW enjoyed a high and positive public profile both within Wollongong and throughout Australia. For years WOW had a membership in the hundreds, produced its own newspaper and established a vast array of resources and services for the unemployed including a food co-op and welfare rights centre which were run out of a seized and occupied house opposite Wollongong’s Department of Social Security.

Presented below are extracts from two of the interviews.

**Gillian Pope**

Gillian left school and was employed on some short-term training schemes before becoming active in WOW and, for a time, acting as the union’s Secretary. Gillian then got a job in the merchant navy where she worked for eleven years. Since leaving that job she has had a variety of short-term jobs and completed various courses. She is currently looking after her elderly parents and doing an aged care course.

NS: Why did you become involved in WOW?

GP: Because when I left school at 17 there were no jobs. The steelworks was closing down. All the clothing factories where the girls from Dapto went and worked [were] all closing down, and trying to get a job for those couple of years, first being under 18 and then the bullshit way you had to work to earn a bit of money when you were 18, it was just not on. And I couldn’t get a job because you needed to know someone, or have an in, to get a job by that stage. I ended up moving into Wollongong, as I was pretty much homeless when I was 17–18, and right next door it all started happening. I used to go down to CYSS (Community Youth Support Scheme) and straight away as soon as people wanted to do something, shout and scream about it, that’s what motivated me to get into it.

NS: Had you had a job before becoming active in WOW?

GP: Yes. I had a job at Jewels supermarket for a little while. I had a job at the Country Women’s Association. All on training schemes and when the training money runs out the job ends. They gave you no type of feeling that it would
lead to anything. It was really clear from the start that you are only there because they are getting a subsidy. There was no sort of path, no future you could plan on. You’re just there being a shit-kicker from week to week. And I clashed. I had problems with authority, because who are these people to talk to me like that? So I did have jobs. I worked every school holidays from when I was eleven at a riding school at Dapto. But I liked doing that because you got to ride horses. You only got paid minimum wage but we couldn’t afford our own horses.

NS: How important was the right to work for WOW?

GP: It was really important, in the context of the youth at one level, but in the context of all the people being kicked out of their jobs and companies just dumping people of all ages, families, kids, that knew nothing about welfare and weren’t given a point in the right direction—those kind of unemployed people—that those people should have the right to work, the right to work in the kind of jobs that they had done. For the jobs their kids weren’t going to get. Not so much necessarily for me because I didn’t like the hours you had to work. I didn’t like the way you were treated, just because you were young, or some sort of underling.

NS: When you were active in WOW did you want a job?

GP: Sometimes. At times. But I wanted the kind of job that was doing something meaningful. That’s why I liked going down to Canberra when we had the welfare centre going. I was more interested in that than delivering the food for the food co-op. Because I thought politics was the level you could really be doing something and change things. Not just for yourself. So, I thought that was a socially worthwhile job and we were totally justified in being paid by the government to, in drawing the dole, to do that kind of work, if they couldn’t provide us with decent jobs. I thought we had good intentions and integrity and that we were actually trying to do something with the money we were getting. It was a whole lifestyle thing, not something you just went and did sometimes. It was full on. So, I felt we were doing work.

NS: Did WOW encourage work refusal in any way?

GP: I think WOW encouraged people to not be pushed into things that they didn’t want to do. I think WOW encouraged people to create work rather than look for jobs that were on the job market. WOW backed people up in their basic human right to choose. For instance, how they dressed. Just because they dressed in a certain way, they were refused jobs. They were expected to cut their hair, take
their earrings out, remove this, do this, change. Those people had every right to refuse to do that just to get a job waitressing or something like that. So, I think WOW encouraged people to speak their mind, stand up and not to be intimidated by authority. But, we weren’t telling people to refuse work. It was a hard world and a lot of WOW’s members were really young people and they learnt how to get things out of the system.

NS: What were the effects of punk culture on WOW and its members?

GP: Punk was just a dress up thing at first, mainly. Everybody who had been told that what they were doing and thinking was wrong, suddenly they were in a group that made them think, “We’re not wrong, fuck you, you were wrong.” And boom, they were off. The freedom and creativity in music and art at that time was really a big release and broke down barriers for people who were out there in the suburbs. They weren’t going to get a mainstream job and all those things. So there were a lot of avenues for their creativity to come out through punk. It allowed it to happen

WOW members with the Union’s Log of Claims on the Lawns of Federal Parliament in 1983
because the whole mindset was like opening doors. It took them a long time to incorporate it. Now you see little kids and even babies with mini Mohawks died pink and all the trendy punk gear. And you think, we used to get beaten up in the street for being dressed like that. But, punk was a big, big influence and not just fashion wise. It was the mentality.

NS: What benefits did you get from being active in WOW?

GP: I got out of Dapto. We moved from England when I was seven, out to Dapto when I was nine and out of Dapto when I was 19. So I didn’t know what was going on outside of that place. WOW opened up my head space to whole different ways of looking at life and what was really going on and how things were really being run. That lesson continued through my 20s and 30s and the more I saw the less I liked. I still really like politics and it really gets me going but I’m not involved politically anymore. WOW gave me independence too. I’m not scared not to work. It holds no fear for me. After I gave away going to sea and spent all my retirement fund I was able to do what I felt I needed to because I knew that I could do that. I was quite happy to figure out how I was going to support myself and take myself out of the mainstream. I was able to do that, at that time in my life, because of the knowledge and resources I had developed when I was younger by the way we lived. All of that from WOW, the support system, and not to be afraid of the system and how to be independent of it. I got all of that from WOW. And I have always been able to connect with other people who are choosing to live outside of the mainstream. That whole outlook or mind set of staying outside of the system is still there.

NS: How would you describe WOW’s relationship with the trade union movement?

GP: Inter-dependent at times. We were both on about the same thing. It was their members that were being affected by unemployment and I think that their backing put it on us to take it more seriously and intelligently and become articulate and know what was going on. And people stepped up to do that. People needed to learn about what was going on and I think WOW helped with that political voice that needed to be happening. Going into the community, the unions helped us with stuff [so] that we could get out into the suburbs, to people’s houses. After the WOW punks had been in the paper and that, people relaxed and stopped beating us up so much. And people from the suburbs were coming into WOW and were getting over what people looked like. Coming into the welfare centre
with their wife and kids. I think the connection we made with the unions was a really positive thing. It’s another thing that makes me think “What the fuck happened to all that? What happened to the unions and all the socialists?” The relationship between the unions and WOW changed when we had to start defending the Labor Party and the Accord. I still get really bitter about that fucking con. I think that the Labor Party getting into power in 1983 seemed like a life boat to the unions, but only those who could scramble on board ended up getting anything. It’s shameful the state of the working class these days and the state of society. When we had a Labor Government for 13 years, through the 80s and 90s, what’s their legacy been for the working person? And I see the change in the relationship with WOW went back to that point, where the unions thought that they had clicked on to that power and if we go this way we are going to be alright. And they started forcing people into going that way because we have to go that way. But WOW had never been set up like that, to operate that way, being told what to do.

NS: How would you describe WOW’s relationship with workers in general?

GP: It had its ups and downs. I reckon there were times when they were really fond of WOW. When people saw that we were standing up and doing something, people thought “Yeah, they’re right.” A lot of people got to see that we were normal intelligent people, who did wash. You know what I mean. People are afraid of appearances, but people just fell in love with Debbie Woodbridge (one of our convenors) when they met her—lovely person that she was—once they got over the pink hair and the thing in her nose and stuff. And of course WOW helped win things for working people. Once it was demystified and taken seriously and the politicians were responding and things were happening the relationship was pretty good. Yeah, WOW got on with workers.

NS: Did you consider yourself part of the working class before you became active in WOW?

GP: I considered myself a working class person but I didn’t consider myself part of any working class. I knew my mum and dad were working class, because we lived in a housing commission estate and the people around me, we were working class. It was a working class suburb and all that. I was very aware that my people were working class people. But, as far as being part of a working class I didn’t really understand that. My dad liked Nando Lelli (local FIA President) and the union helped him out a lot. When there
were strikes and that, Nando Lelli would give dad a piece of paper and he could go into the credit union and they wouldn’t have to make their house repayments, their car repayments, it could all be sorted out. There was none of this people getting things repossessed. Dad thought the union was a really good thing. I didn’t really know how much my father knew about working class politics and history until I went back to visit him at home after I had become involved in WOW. He knew the words to the Red Flag and stuff and I said “Why didn’t you ever talk to us about any of this stuff when we were growing up?” To me working class was poor and at the bottom. But the concept of a working class and what that meant as far as a hierarchy and what that meant, like what were the other classes, it was like there was them and us.

NS: What about after you became active in WOW?

GP: Oh yes, straight away I began to realise then what a history there was and what I was a part of. Especially talking to my dad once he knew we could have a sensible conversation about it. Because I had become alienated from my parents as a teen. So, I got to know them again, having political conversations with my dad over a beer was the way we re-connected. I was fascinated by how much he knew about what had happened in England, in different struggles and how things were remembered over there. I also met people in the Communist Party and I loved those people, like Sally Bowen, Bill Whiley, Bob Heggen. The Communist Party was important to some people in WOW. Heaps of people who got involved in WOW got close to the Communist Party at times, and I really liked them all, but they never tried to pump their politics into our heads. People would have scarpered real quick if they had. The Communist Party was supportive on the same level as the unions were and the contacts crossed over because they were involved in the unions and it was very sociable and pleasant. While a lot of people were exposed to their politics they didn’t join the Communist Party. I think it was a good thing for a lot of people and it was a really sad thing when that shut down.
Craig Donarski

Craig dropped out of university to play music and rabble-rouse, before taking on a Broadcasting traineeship at the ABC. After more than 12 years as a program maker he left to establish his company Octopussy, which—as its name suggests—has many tentacles ranging from running The Hellfire Club to a small record label to a 5-year consultancy role with The Studio at Sydney Opera House.

NS: Why did you become involved in WOW?

CD: I felt guilty. At that point in time when I was leaving year twelve all of the Illawarra area seemed to be going down the gurgler. Opportunities for all of my peers to do anything just seemed to have evaporated. A few years earlier, when I was in year nine or ten in high school, everyone was always talking about what are you going to do when you leave school? And there was always this idea of a trajectory. That you would either leave and go to the steelworks or the mines or go to uni. They were kinda the big three options and all of them were good options in that you could earn decent money in the mines or the steelworks or you could

The WOW offices in Market Street just after they were seized and occupied in June 1983
invest in yourself and get a university degree and at the end get decent money somewhere on the other side of that. But over that latter period of high school I was just watching all of that stuff dry up. Watching the pits close, watching the steelworks layoff everyone, watching all of the apprenticeships dry up, watching all of the degree traineeships, which used to be one of the best ways for people to get a degree in Wollongong, by getting something sponsored by the mines or whoever. So by the time it got to actually applying to go to university there didn’t seem to be any possible vocational outcomes at the end of it. So it was like, well, there is no work, so I might as well go to uni and do something that’s got nothing to do with work, that’s got nothing to do with actually getting a job at the other end. But try and study stuff that may in fact be interesting or, just give me something to do, more than anything. That’s not a good enough reason to go to university as I soon discovered. I mean, if there is no logical end result to it, it’s hard to be motivated, to discipline yourself to do this work for no apparent end outcome.

Whereas at the same time [I had] friends who were starting to do stuff about this dreadful situation that had arisen, who seemed to be committing their time to community based groups that were actually trying to address the effects of this. So I was attracted to joining some of these groups. Things like the Community Youth Support Scheme, which served to be a real hub for disaffected or bored young people in Wollongong who weren’t just going to sit at home watching telly or pulling cones all day; who had more energy than that, wanted to do something more than that, but didn’t know what the hell to do, so were hanging around places like the CYSS, the youth refuge and anywhere else that had any kind of funding and was targeted at young people. And all started, I suppose, out of that boredom, picking up skills, learning to screen print, learning to publish little community newspaper things, learning to typeset. And so all of these non-job ‘jobs’ appeared. It was, like, okay there might not be any jobs and uni seems like a complete waste of time, but at least there are things to do. There are all these jobs to be done. No one’s going to pay you to do them but there are all these jobs, that are important, to be done. So unemployment benefits were kind of a way of being paid to do those jobs that needed to be done. Fortunately, at that period of time, the cost of living in Wollongong, in terms of rent as a proportion of income you received from unemployment benefits ... meant that if people got into share housing arrangements and lived smart, by using all
of the stuff that was around then, that you could actually survive, not terribly well, but you could actually survive on unemployment benefits and be as busy, or as active, probably as someone who was doing a standard job. But it was in a very bitsy way, going off to this committee meeting or helping this person print these T-shirts for a rally or going to this demo or putting on a fund raiser concert for this cause or that cause. You were only really limited by your imagination as to how much you did. The broader political backdrop at the time really facilitated and encouraged this. Wollongong was such a strong industrial town, that in the early days of WOW part of what attracted me to it was that other people were taking this thing seriously. People are seeing that people weren’t just sitting around on the dole pulling cones. They’re sitting on the dole pulling cones, but on top of that they are also putting out these newspapers, rabble rousing and advocating for people at the CES (Commonwealth Employment Service), scamming resources from left, right and centre for use by the unemployed. Those things were very possible. There was a general kind of goodwill from the employed towards the unemployed at that point in time. Which is kinda hard to remember now. There was an enormous amount of support coming from the trade union movement, coming from working people, in terms of providing the physical resources for us to do this stuff. Whether it was helping to get premises, typesetting machines, filing cabinets, all of those sorts of things they came to the party with. So, it kinda felt like a bit of a choose your own adventure form of creating employment, that wasn’t employment, in that it didn’t get paid. But your time was employed and I felt useful, like I was doing something. Today they talk about mutual obligation, but, quite independently of carrots or sticks, we were more than fulfilling anyone’s notion of mutual obligation.

NS: So, did you actually want paid employment at the time?
CD: Yes and no. Yes but not at any price. And yes, but not just any job. I could be accused of being one of the fussy unemployed. Because, I’m sorry, but, I was smart. I knew I could offer more to an employer than being able to pack the shelves at a supermarket at night. Which is one of the only jobs I did get during that period of time. I left that job because it was mind numbing, just hideous and soul destroying. I’m glad I did because, sorry, that’s a complete waste of a mind. And I thought I had kind of demonstrated to the world through my other activities that I was capable of a much broader contribution than putting price stickers on cans of dog food. So, yeah I wanted a job, but a job I
felt was commensurate with my abilities. I wanted a job that would be valuable to the community and to myself. So, I held out and continued to hold out until eventually a job came along that I felt did offer all of those things. And the moment it did I took it and I stayed with that employer for over twelve years. Before I eventually got that job I was starting to buckle. After a while the grinding poverty started to get to me. I got to the point where I thought “Fuck! I just need a job, any job.” So, I sat for the public service exam and blitzed it. So, they offered me some positions and I was about to say yes to some hideous job as an entry level clerk at the Public Trustees Office or some equally mind numbing crap. Then along came a job creation scheme for long-term unemployed people, remember those, and I was a living example of one of those job creation schemes that actually fucking worked.

NS: Was there a culture of refusing work within WOW?
CD: I think it really varied within WOW probably along class lines to a point. I thought the refusing work culture was more endemic amongst the more middle class kids than it was amongst the working class kids. There seemed to be a much more pragmatic attitude towards employment amongst the working class kids. I think it was us middle class kids who were more idealistic in our approach to those kind of questions. So I think it was largely the sons and daughters of the middle class that were the most likely to have that kind of refusal of work culture.

NS: Why do you think that was?
CD: I think probably my attitude of “I don’t want to do that crap job”, I was not alone in having it. I think that once people did actually start to become involved in a more fulltime sense, in being active, not just in WOW but being active generally, in different groups, causes and campaigns, that that stuff seemed more meaningful and relevant, a more worthwhile way to spend your time than the fierce grind of doing a nine to five Monday to Friday. I think we were quite contemptuous of people who had bought into that as the preferred way of being. In many ways a lot of us were trying to find out if there were ways of living outside of that. Whether it is possible to create alternative structures and alternative ways of living. It was kind of experimental like that, not wildly dissimilar to what earlier generations have done. Whether it was the hippie movement or whatever.

NS: Did that create tension with those who were in jobs?
CD: Definitely. There was the attitude of well, it’s easy for us to take these hard lines, these pure ideological lines, when they were basically subsidising us. Not just subsidising us
in that really obvious sense that, “Oh, we pay taxes which pays your dole”, but also too socially, those who were in jobs inevitably cross subsidised their friends who were out of work when it came to going out or buying drinks or pot. So I think that there were resentments at the micro and macro level economically speaking. However I think that was far less prevalent in Wollongong, at that point in time, than probably in most places and since then. I think there were a lot of working people who were also taking the attitude that, “Hey, good on ya, you’re not just sitting on your arse, going down the beach every day having a fucking ball while we all go to work.” You are actually working too and you’re actually doing stuff that might be in their best interests as well as your own. I think a lot of the more enlightened working people didn’t have that much of a problem with it.

NS: What do you think were the effects of punk culture on WOW and its members?

CD: Punk was absolutely central to it, in that the whole DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic that typified punk, the whole “things don’t have to be glossy, things don’t have to be highly produced, you just gotta do it.” Anyone can form a band and put out a record, anyone can design a poster, anyone can do a T-shirt. The inherent democracy of punk certainly informed most of my involvement. It gave me permission to do everything. To design, to draw, to paint, to make music, to, you name it. Punk said that it didn’t matter how well you did things. It just mattered that you did. To me that was much more central to the culture of WOW than the outlaw stuff. There was certainly elements of that kind of thing but for me that was more peripheral. The whole WOW thing was punk. It wasn’t new wave shit, or any of that bullshit post-punk. WOW had that punk thing that said if you’re in a position to say something and if you don’t say something you are morally bankrupt. An artist like a soldier without politics is an assassin. I think that most people felt that pressure, do it yourself, but do it yourself to say something, the point is to change the world. While philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways the point however is to change it.

NS: How important was the right to work for WOW?

CD: It was the raison d’être. It would now be called the brand identity! It was its reason for being and it was the one line that everyone suddenly understood. It was like that encapsulates what we’re about in three easy words. I believe it was having that notion as WOW’s central notion that was what made it so appealing not just to the unemployed
but to the trade union movement, to employed people. It gave everyone a feeling that, yeah, that’s something that we can all agree on. It’s almost a motherhood statement in a sense. But at the time it was really something that was up for grabs because we were dealing with unemployment levels that were so high that you were talking about creating a permanent pool of people who were never going to get work. So it really was a threshold issue of, “Am I going to have the right to ever get a job? Or am I, due to the luck of geography, of being born in the wrong bloody place, going to be condemned to a life of living on benefits, or being forced to take shit jobs putting price stickers on dog food, because if I don’t they will cut me off?” The right to work, as the central tenet of what WOW stood for, really enabled the media to get a handle on it and it made WOW’s profile and influence disproportionately large for what it was. I mean, it was a bunch of fucking kids just out of high school, most of them who didn’t know shit, who somehow or other managed to become the self appointed spokespeople for the unemployed, sometimes of Australia. It was quite a unique position.

NS: How would you describe WOW’s relationship with the trade union movement?

CD: Prickly. Problematic. But symbiotic as well. WOW could not have got up and could not have made the splash it made and couldn’t have got over that critical early establishment phase without the support of the trade union movement. It was those little things like the filing cabinets, the house, that were the fundamental pre-requisites for WOW to be anything more than a bunch of people talking in someone’s lounge-room. WOW was completely dependent for its birth, its genesis, on the trade union movement. What happened after that, it started to get its own head of steam and apply for grants and get them and so on and become much more self resourcing. But initially it couldn’t have got to that point if it hadn’t been for the seed money and seed resourcing that the trade union movement put into it.

NS: Did you consider yourself part of the working class before you became active in WOW?

CD: Yeah. For a couple of reasons. For one, my father never earned more than $25,000 a year in his life, despite the fact that he was in an apparently lower middle class job of being like a retail manager for a chain of shoe stores. But they paid him shit. He was paid less than your average steelworker. We lived in a working class suburb in a weather board average suburban house. The other thing
that made me feel working class was the outsiderness of being half wog. That having a funny last name and all the concomitant shit that went with that meant that you tended to identify more with under-culture than dominant culture. I never really felt a part of the middle class culture although intellectually I was ultimately middle class. My parents were working class in income but they gave me a middle class upbringing in a sense with what they exposed me to. I was like a middle class intellectual head on a working class body. But I couldn’t really proclaim to be of the working class either. I was sort of neither fish nor flesh in a kinda no-mans land personally. That sort of semi-outsider status also helped me to be a mouthpiece from time to time for WOW. Because I was a reasonably educated person who could sound convincing and mount an argument. So I felt useful, from that point of view.

NS: When you were active in WOW did you consider yourself part of the working class?

CD: No, not really. I always felt like a fraud, like an impostor. That this wasn’t where I belonged and I always thought that one way or another I would end up alright. Other people around me had said the same thing too. So there was always this dreadful underlying arrogance that made me much more optimistic about my own prospects while I was being pessimistic for everyone else’s. That’s why when you asked at the beginning of this discussion why I became involved in WOW I said guilt. I felt like the world was my oyster and that I would be alright in the end, that I would lead a comfortable middle class life. But, for so many of my peers that was just not going to happen and that that just wasn’t fair. That really sucked and they should be able to. What the fuck was different from one person to another? They should be able to live comfortably and be happy.