

Feminists look left

What happens when an inquiring newcomer interviews feminists about left campaigning?

It was Merwen's first rally. She'd seen a poster about it. The massacres overseas had been in the media and she wanted to do something about it. Merwen arrived at the scheduled time, but nothing much happened for ages. Finally there were speeches, one after another, some good, some not so good. Then it was over.

Merwen wasn't sure what to think. What did it achieve? Would she come to the next rally? She didn't know anyone there and hadn't talked to anyone.

She wanted to find out more about left campaigning and what she could do. She decided to talk to experienced activists. She started with Ama, an old friend of her mother's who had "retired" from activism years ago.



Ama's judgement was tough and to the point: "The years go by but left campaigning doesn't seem to change much. Yes, there are new issues but the *style* of activities is much the same. That's one reason I burned out. There are rallies, marches and speeches—on and on. There are lots of meetings and mailouts. There are media releases spelling out the left's position. There's organising to get the numbers for ballots. It never changes ..."

Merwen interjected: "It sounds like you were doing lots of good things."

"Don't get me wrong. I really admire left campaigning."

Ama changed tack. "Don't get me wrong. I really admire left campaigning. It's often been what has made the difference in stopping corporate exploitation and government repression. We used the same old organising methods because we knew they would mobilise people in predictable ways. Supporters know what to expect with marches, newsletters and meetings."

Merwen was intrigued. "It sounds like the left's methods are better for the experienced than newcomers like me."

"You're probably right," said Ama. "The left's campaigns don't seem to be attracting all that many new people. Lots of new inspiration and participation is now being channelled into the so-called 'new social movements' such as environmental, feminist, gay and lesbian, and indigenous people's movements. I think one thing that attracts people to them, besides the issues themselves, is their more participatory style."

Ama continued: “In crude terms, the old left is often caught up with a bureaucratic, top-down approach in which individuals are seen primarily as resources to serve goals set out by leading organisers. In contrast, a participatory approach values individuals in themselves and seeks to involve them in decision making as an end in itself as well as a means to more effective campaigning.”

Merwen asked, “Why hasn’t the left taken on board issues and methods from new social movements?”

Ama replied “Well actually it has, though there’s still a long way to go. And don’t imagine the new social movements are perfect either. They have a lot to learn from the left. If you want to check this out further, your best bet is to talk to current feminist activists.”

And Merwen did. She decided to search out feminists who are activists and ask them what they thought was the best way to organise participatory campaigns against injustice, attacks on human rights, repression and aggression. She was also interested in what they thought about leadership and decision making, communication and language and planning for action and training.



First stop was Yinevra, a veteran of several women’s actions. Merwen’s first question was about participation. Yinevra was forthcoming. “The key thing is to ensure genuine participation by as many group members as possible. In fact, one of the best ways to measure the success of a campaign is by counting the number of women *actively* involved.

The personal is political.

“The best actions I’ve been in used affinity groups—you know, small groups of say 7 to 12—where women were consulted and given necessary campaign information. The affinity groups would identify the strengths and skills of their members and then, depending on that, take responsibility for specific work. Decision making by the broader facilitating or coordinating group would be based on the affinity group process.”

Merwen was a bit perplexed. She could see how the small groups would work for a longer campaign if it was well organised. “But how would you do that at a rally?”

Yinevra continued. “Affinity groups are not something you develop in five minutes, though at some actions they build strong bonds remarkably quickly. Some groups are pre-existing, but others can be made up on the spot.



“With affinity groups, everyone is encouraged and supported. Group members can obtain the information they need to act. They have clear roles and can take responsibility for work. They can seek as much or as little support as they need to use their skills to contribute.

“The key thing about the small group process is the value of forming alliances or friendships. They are the foundation for long term networks that truly reflect that old feminist slogan, ‘the personal is political.’ These networks, characterised by trust and solidarity, can be readily mobilised when the call comes.”

After talking to Yinevra, Merwen was

reading about social action and again came across the slogan “the personal is political.” She read that much of the second wave feminist movement had developed as a reaction to chauvinist behaviours by male leftists. These torchbearers for the oppressed were treating women in the movement as secretaries, cooks, cleaners and sexual objects—not as equals. Feminists said that personal behaviour, including childcare, housework and everyday use of language, was “political” in the sense of involving power. In other words, party politics and public activity weren’t the only type of politics.

Merwen wondered about leadership in all this. If affinity groups were about fostering equal participation, who would lead the operation? She talked to Usha, one of the activists Ama had recommended.

“Yes, small group strategies are good for promoting participation but leadership is certainly necessary. But we don’t have to assume that leaders are somehow superior. With commitment to good campaign processes, then at certain times such as a crisis, leadership roles may emerge with the endorsement of the broader group members. The key things when considering the role of leadership or coordination are issues such as accountability, trust, consultation and participation.



“Someone taking a coordinating role is not necessarily a problem as long as the integrity of the campaign and its strategies are maintained. In fact, having two or more facilitators may more readily reflect the style of a feminist political campaign.”

“That sounds all very well for normal times,” said Merwen, “but what about needing to act in a crisis?”

Usha had thought about this. “Yes, a crisis is a greater challenge. Much of the organising and networking has to happen in advance. Nevertheless, an emergency often allows for collective political campaigning for the experienced activists, at least in the short term. The old, familiar organising traditions kick in and the common ‘enemy’ usually looms large. On the other hand, the added pressure of urgency makes it very difficult for broad left campaigns to adopt democratic, participatory strategies. The end result is too much work for too few, too many missing voices, and familiar but often tired strategies are used to communicate.”

Usha now became enthusiastic: “Feminists are likely to take the best of existing strategies and seek creative new ones. Many feminists are likely to ask questions ...”

Merwen jumped in. “Like who is participating and who is not? If they are not part of it, why not? How can this change? What worked before? What didn’t?”

Usha agreed. “Exactly. While this may not appear great progress, many activists are not asking any questions.”

It occurred to Merwen that the language feminists use is important. She told Usha: “I’ve noticed that the feminists I spoke with are careful about language.”

Usha explained: “Feminist language derives from women’s oppression and our low standing in the hierarchy. Our language attempts to counteract this oppression. We are good at developing simple words and slogans that have a deep meaning. For example, ‘the personal is political.’ Women activists have embraced

non-sexist and non-racist language in an attempt to change behaviour and be more inclusive.”

Merwen responded: “Yes, the words we use strongly influence the way we feel about things?”

Usha continued: “Yes, gender-aware, non-racist and nonviolent language is needed to create a workable environment. We know that women aren’t drawn to the aggressive language of the military. For example, a recent newspaper article covering the Wollongong Women’s Centre’s 20th anniversary had members in front of a peace banner, described as ‘foot soldiers’ who ‘soldiered on during a lengthy fight which has made significant advancements on the front.’ It went on to describe their battle! Other metaphors would have been preferable.”

Merwen commented: “I feel it’s best to just use simple and clear language.”

Usha agreed: “That’s appropriate for all audiences. Also, there is a need to check regularly that people understand what you are trying to communicate. We need to be aware that the cultural context is very relevant to determining the use of language. The meaning of words is often bound by this context. This influences the way people from different cultural backgrounds want to represent their ways of thinking about social justice issues. Some groups relate better to some words than others.

“For instance, there is a whole political history that uses music and ‘popular theatre.’ Other cultural contexts talk about ‘people power’ and ‘theatre for liberation.’ Other groups of people have been talking about cultural action and social action and social defence for years in their political campaigning.”

Merwen was also interested in how activists communicate. She approached Nisi, a freelance journalist and feminist agitator, to ask how the left communicates. Nisi found the question a bit too general.



“Well, what is there to say? The left uses every method you can think of, including ringing each other or using phone trees, now we also e-mail, use the radio, have face-to-face meetings, put out newsletters, distribute broadsheets in the streets, sell left newspapers, do letter box drops, drive around the streets with a megaphone for local actions and hold workshops and conferences.”

“That’s the trouble,” said Merwen. “How do you decide which method to use?”

Nisi said that the choice of methods depends on the issue and the purpose of the activity and of course what resources were available. “Some methods are more useful in organising finely targeted campaigns while others are more useful in gaining broad-level involvement in an issue. It depends on whether you’re aiming to mobilise supporters or whether the aim is to persuade opponents or reach those who aren’t involved.”

“Can you give some examples?” asked Merwen.

Nisi obliged. “Years ago in Canberra a small group of women attempted to join the Anzac Day march to protest about women raped in war, and they were arrested. This generated lots of media

attention and the next year, following attempts to ban women from marching, women poured out of their homes to join the protest. In this case the mass media publicised the issue, but personal networking among the organisers—phoning and meetings—was crucial.”

Merwen interjected. “Isn’t that good networking rather than communication?”

“Well, they aren’t as separate as you might think at first. By choosing to operate through networks, feminists also choose certain methods of communicating, especially face-to-face. Sometimes a ‘network’ can be just two people and it may have the responsibility of making some decisions. However, if you’re networking on a one-to-one basis then it lacks broad discussion.”

Nisi continued. “Another thing, feminist groups usually prefer openness so we opt for open meetings and broader involvement. Yet, this has to be weighed up against those who are participating who don’t want all the information on everything, as they would become overloaded and unable to act on anything.”



Nisi thought of another point. “New social movements like to combine discussion and action. This can include theatre and other creative stuff that is often really enjoyable. This can be an effective way to communicate ideas for change and stimulate discussion of possible options for a campaign. For example, activists might

rehearse a scenario of an issue or campaign up to the point of a crisis. Then people from the audience are invited to come onto the stage and try ways to put into place actions for change. This triggers discussion about possible options and encourages audience participation.”

Merwen was getting a better idea of feminist approaches to social action but also an appreciation of the strengths of the left. Through her discussions and reading, she had realised that left activists often choose from a variety of methods including strikes, rallies and mass meetings. It depends on what is going to be effective in a particular community and around a particular issue and what risks people are prepared to take and what resources are around.

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Nisi pointed out that strikes are important not only as a tactic for exerting pressure but also for highlighting the importance of each individual worker. And how rallies can often help to bring the community together. Protesters can feel their communal strength and thereby feel empowered. Also, rallies can generate media attention. Alternatively, mass meetings are useful in opening up to a wider group. Sometimes at large public meetings, draft propositions can be worked out beforehand and voted on at the meeting.

Merwen decided to talk to one more feminist activist, an experienced campaigner named Lystra, who immediately began by recommending affinity groups for mass actions. “These have small cells and both the group and individuals within these groups have roles. All essential tasks are divided between and within the groups.”

Merwen had heard this before but she let Lystra continue.

“In campaigning feminists see the value in the process as well as the outcome. The structure of an event or campaign can make a difference to women’s participation, with smaller groups often being better. For example, attempts are sometimes made to ensure that everybody is able to speak coherently to the media, know the issues and explain the story of the particular campaign, even though the media often expect to have one person as their contact. This is useful for many reasons, not the least that the group members are developing skills and using them. If you involve everyone, that’s good feminist meeting procedure.”

Merwen agreed, “The aim should be to help everyone involved feel that they are doing something worthwhile?”

Lystra nodded. “A boycott, for example, is one way for lots of people to be involved without much danger, but lots of education and networking is required to get a boycott to be effective.”

Merwen probed for a new angle. “Do you reckon feminists have anything special to offer when it comes to working with a range of people?”



Lystra paused. “Feminists, like anybody else, can sometimes be exclusive, but generally speaking have more experience at trying to be inclusive than most other political organisers. When diverse groups are involved, it’s not useful to skim over differences. There’s often a lot of common ground to allow us to work together. It’s

better to be explicit as to what people have to offer, what they can do, and why they are there as part of the activity.”

Merwen thought about the issue of training and wondered if there’s a need for it in left campaigns

Lystra was happy to talk on this issue. “Training needs are dependent on the action or the campaign. And it depends on who might need training and for what.”

“I was wondering, for example, what feminist activists might do if they wanted to change the way some people behave in the workplace,” said Merwen.

Lystra was interested. “Well, in bureaucratic environments with hierarchical structures, some people acquire bullying or autocratic habits, especially towards women, but this can be changed. For instance, it is important to help those in vulnerable situations to network and establish support groups. You could also show people how to lodge complaints or how to negotiate or mediate.”

Lystra continued. “There are a lot of other things worth knowing. For example, in an emergency you may need to know core survival skills such as obtaining food and shelter. In the long term, it may be important to learn such diverse skills as how to organise a phone tree and effectively maintain a 24-hour picket line. Also, things like computer skills, using e-mail networks, or even how to use the latest telephone services could be useful.”

This provoked Merwen to contemplate whether there were any issues where men and women should train separately, or if feminist activists organised special skills training. She asked about this.

Lystra thought for a moment. “Mostly organising and training happens with both men and women. Nevertheless, I think that your question, Merwen, has raised an important issue. There might be some occasions where it is better for women to campaign separately, and there may be some instances where men and women are looking for different kinds of training. There are a lot of men’s organisations now

that concentrate on men's issues, especially building emotional support with other men and looking at nonviolent conflict resolution. And women's networks or action groups may want to work separately on negotiation skills or ways of dealing with harassment."

Lystra thought of other skills to develop. "Learning to use dance or theatre or even sing is not easy for many of us but with a little practice we can create a powerful public performance. And there's always a need to train both men and women to speak more confidently and effectively in public, or to use the media more skilfully."

Merwen was keen to do something. She thought back to that first rally. Perhaps there should have been something happening from the very beginning, as soon as people arrived, that would involve all comers. Perhaps some

songs or a skit that could be expanded as more people arrived.

Maybe a rally should be treated more like a social gathering. At the best occasions Merwen had attended, people made special efforts to introduce each other, not just generally but personally to others with something in common. So maybe some 'introducers' at the rally were needed, to put people in touch with others they didn't already know. Or maybe some stories and funny anecdotes to loosen up the atmosphere!

Then there's the problem of all those speeches. What's the alternative? Maybe something more interactive. Perhaps for part of the time people in the crowd could be asked to get into groups of half a dozen or so to welcome each other, discuss some issue, prepare a comment for the whole group, or organise a quick skit. Now that would be different!

Schweik Action Wollongong is a collective fostering awareness of nonviolent alternatives to oppressive systems. The group is named after the fictional character Schweik (or Svejek), a soldier who created havoc in the Austrian army during World War I by pretending to be extremely stupid. Read the novel by Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (Penguin, 1974).

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The names of the characters in the article are taken from Joan Slonczewski's feminist science fiction novel *A Door Into Ocean* (London: Women's Press, 1987).

Schweik Action Wollongong
PO Box U129, Wollongong NSW 2500