

**Extended Abstract for 11th Global Labour University Conference,
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Title: *'The contradictions underpinning the relation of nature, community and labour: An empirical study of the (lack of) relationship between the anti-fracking movement and trade unions in Australia.'*

This research was motivated by the hypothesis that it is the different conceptions of nature and our relation to it, which underpins the lack of relationship between the trade union movement and environmentalists on the issue of unconventional gas exploration in Australia¹. However, through my research and interviews with key stakeholders a different picture has emerged, one in which nature and climate change in a broad sense were considered secondary to issues of organizational structure, union factionalism, and the core demands of the Lock the Gate campaign². The lack of cooperation between the union movement and the Lock The Gate campaign raised some fundamental questions about how so-called old and new social movements could work together, and the need for a fuller understanding of neoliberal capitalism to better integrate different resistance movements. The study draws on social reproduction theory as a theoretical lens from which to approach unconventional coal and gas exploration and the unprecedented resistance that it has provoked.

Social reproduction and feminist approaches highlight the dialectical relationship between social reproduction and production in the evolution of capital, encapsulating the interrelatedness of so called "lifeworld" and "workplace" issues (Federici 2012). However, I suggest that this fuller picture also produces new tensions and contradictions amongst the left, highlighting differences between old and new actors such as the workers' movement, as

¹ The term unconventional gas exploration is used here as it covers different forms of fracking, coal seam gas (CSG), shale and other methods of gas exploration in use in Australia.

² The umbrella campaign of many of the groups campaigning against unconventional gas in Australia

symbolized by trade unions, and social movements such as the Lock The Gate campaign. It is proposed that trade unions and social movements can be at loggerheads when production and social reproduction are seen as separate rather than dialectally related (Bhattacharya 2015). Rather than providing an analysis of the success of the campaign itself my research explores the relationship between the union movement and the Lock The Gate campaign in Victoria from this perspective, teasing out possible obstacles to, and potential for, future cooperation. The research draws on a number of interviews with key actors in the campaign as well as policy documents and government submissions.

The Lock The Gate campaign is national in scope bringing together a range of groups and activists, who work with communities to declare them coal and/or gasfield free (Lock The Gate 2016). On 30th August 2016, after a five-year campaign against the industry, which mobilized unprecedented community support, the Victorian state government announced that all future unconventional gas exploration would be banned in the state (Sullivan 2016). The campaign brought together environmentalists, farmers, anarchists and local communities under a broad community coalition that prioritized the voices of those most marginalized through participatory democracy and community-led campaigning (Counteractive 2016). Critically, very few unions engaged with, let alone supported the campaign. The exceptions, which include the National Union of Workers (NUW), the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), are the focus of the study from the union side.

As background, natural resources are a large part of Australia's economy and exports and there is a history of tense community divisions over their extraction. Battle lines are often drawn between those for jobs and growth vs. the environment, indirectly linking many union demands with that of industry. The Australian union movement has had a somewhat unstable relationship with environmental campaigns oscillating between the impressive Green bans and campaign against Uranium mining in the 1970s (Burgmann 1993), to the more recent alliances forged with industry against environmental campaigners in

support of old growth logging and future mining projects (Tranter 2011). However, although presented as one union movement under the banner of the ACTU, there are long-standing divisions and factions within the organization meaning that it is more realistic to talk of *union movements* rather than a singular entity. These divisions can play out between blue and white-collar unions, those more aligned to industry through corporatist models, the types of workers organized or the way they view their role in wider society. The NTEU and NUW, who organize precarious workers and have critically engaged with the shifting forms of work and labour relations, have supported Lock The Gate in some form, signing on to Trade Unions for Energy Democracy's (TUED) call for a moratorium on fracking. In contrast, the AWU, one of the largest unions in Australia, who organizes coal and gas workers, has come out in support of the industry (Australian Workers' Union Vic Branch 2015).

The Lock the Gate campaign in Victoria focused on the grass-roots level and creative organizing, which signaled a shift from previous top-down environmental negotiations. By August 2016, after surveying each resident, 75 communities across Gippsland and Western Victoria had declared themselves coal and/or gasfield free. Each community, under the LTG banner, carried out creative actions that caught the attention of national media, engaging in direct actions as well as training each other in blockading and campaigning skills (Walker 2016). Significantly, they always prioritized local voices and those not in positions of power in the community, especially women (Hutton 2012).³ This campaign forged alliances across communities and bridged the gap between "greenies" and farmers, to the point where eco-anarchists and conventional conservative farmers were working arm in arm.⁴ This is a historical divide in Australia that has rarely been overcome. The organizational structures were non-hierarchical, network orientated, and focused on participation and community control.

³ The Knitting Nannas are an example of this.

⁴ Own interviews

This campaign encapsulates some key issues that need to be addressed if trade unions want to work with these types of social movements in the future. Firstly, it is problematic to talk of a single trade union movement. Instead there are multiple and at times conflicting positions and conversations occurring. There is a tendency within unions that organize traditionally blue collar and highly organized industries to take the position of jobs and growth, and those already organizing precarious workers or new industries who take a more proactive position on issues such as a Just Transition away from coal and unconventional gas.⁵ There are thus two very different conversations happening within the union movement that come into conflict when engaging with the LTG campaign. Critically, due to the AWU's size, political clout and direct involvement in the industry, they have had a much larger discursive space in the campaign, meaning most environmental or community activists have taken their position as that of the union movement as a whole.⁶ Thus cooperation between trade union movement(s) has been limited as they do not necessarily share the same discursive space despite the LTG campaign approaching such movements as singular. Unions involved in production industries tend to focus solely on jobs, growth and the workplace, but demands of the communities involved in the LTG campaign were much broader, highlighting wider systemic criticisms of which some unions are seen as contributing to.⁷ The growth paradigm, linked to the necessity of reliable energy supply, has allowed for a confluence of interests between the state, capital and organized labour, leaving little space for alternative positions (Räthzel and Uzzell 2013).

This links back to what unions and activists understood the campaign as being about. For the AWU the issue was framed as one of jobs Vs. nature (Australian Workers' Union Vic Branch 2015), whereas for LTG activists the campaign was as much about the perceived democratic deficit and limitations of our current socio-political system as the environment.⁸ At the heart of the LTG campaign was a lack of community control and faith in existing political systems, participants

⁵ Own interviews

⁶ Own interviews

⁷ Own interviews

⁸ Own interviews

suggesting of a broken democratic system or one in which communities had little faith in being truly represented⁹. The form of the campaign reflected these demands with non-linear decentralized organizing, and frameworks such as the step-by-step guide to 'locking the gate', which communities interpreted as they wished (Counteractive 2016). Thus tactics and strategies focused on participatory democracy and community-led collective action, with demands and declarations made at the community rather than individual level (Gasfield Free Seaspray 2016). This signals a subtle but radical shift in Australian politics away from private property or individualized decision-making towards a commons based on building relationships from the ground up and shifting power relations within the community. These issues were not addressed by the AWU or the union movement more generally, and unions aligned with government and industry were criticized along these lines.

Interestingly, criticisms leveled at government and industry were also linked back to union structures that were seen as hierarchical and lacking true democratic participatory models. Activists felt limited in their ability to work with unions because of their institutionalized organizational form.¹⁰ In contrast to the usually highly regulated union bureaucracy, for LTG, which resembles many new social movements, the content and form of the campaign informed each other. LTG activists perceived that as they were "only" volunteers, union secretaries were unwilling to speak to them, whereas larger more hierarchical environmental groups such as Environment Victoria, who lack a grass-roots element, had more fruitful relationships with the union movement.¹¹ The union structures, activists argued, were more aligned to companies or government than grass-roots or community-led campaigns. There was thus an organizational misalignment between those old actors like trade unions that respond to crises at sites of production – in the workplace – and the social movements responding to the more nebulous infiltration of capital into the common or lifeworld (Harvey 2016).

⁹ Own interviews

¹⁰ Own interviews

¹¹ own interviews

These divides between production and social reproduction were further felt in the different conceptions of working class, or emancipatory actors put forward by some unions and LTG activists. LTG focused on community, suggesting that they were a working class movement because they focused on empowering the most marginalized in the community and aimed to challenge underlying power relations even if this meant working outside the established workers' movement.¹² The community in this case stands in for working class, with working class being more than those working in industrialized and more organized industries.¹³ In some ways this shift encapsulates the changing class relations and economy of Australia. The community, as a different form of working class, one focused more on the power relations underpinning society rather than just the workplace, encapsulates this dialectic between work and life, the relation put forward by social reproduction theorists.

Thus cooperation between unions and the LTG campaign was limited due to reasons beyond differing conceptions of nature. These can be linked back to conflicting ways of understanding contemporary capitalism and the role of trade unions: social partnership or radical reformism, and potential differences between old and new social actors. However, the LTG campaign also showed that it could win without union support or involvement, suggesting that unions are only one of many viable left political forces. The union movement(s) need to work out how they can fit into this and on what terms. It could be argued that LTG and trade unions are responding to different facets of the relation of capital – social reproduction and production – and trade unions in particular have a tendency to see these as mutually exclusive rather than dialectically connected and thus unable to be separated. When seen in totality, organizational structures or institutions responding to workplace demands have an equal role to play as those more networked campaigns responding to community demands. Yet for these to complement each other, there needs to be a confluence of goals; the goal of societal transformation must be shared. So to answer why cooperation was limited and possible ways forward we need to first recognize that the union

¹² Own interviews

¹³ For example, AWU members would often be in privileged positions in these communities, on high wages and good conditions.

movement in Australia is far from a cohesive unit. There are those who take a broader understanding of capital and the limitation of social partnership and possible opportunities that the environment can offer, which is usually found in those unions already organizing precarious workers and who are willing to take a supportive role in community-driven campaigns. On the other side are unions who have traditionally been conservative, and are digging in, with reactive and divisive policies to protect their membership's jobs and conditions within the workplace – this is the productivist approach. Being a part of the established institutions allows for the legitimate criticisms of government to be extended to trade unions, many of who lack the direct democracy and participatory forums that successfully organized the LTG campaign. Trade unions need to work out how to work with these groups and campaigns, where they are best placed to assist and whether certain organizational forms can be appropriated. Trade unions must extend their mandate to include the whole worker, not just the workplace or they will be on the back foot, which does not mean they need to be leading such campaigns, but rather think where their power could be useful such as occurred in the Green Bans. On the other side, the success of future social movements could benefit from harnessing the existing institutional and structural power that trade unions still maintain.

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