

Reflection 17th April 2011

Have you noticed the rise in discussions about 'bullying' lately? You might say that these things go in fashions, and that sooner or later the fashion will come around to something else and that 'bullying' will go off the agenda. But I can't help being reminded of another 'epidemic' of social concern that was rife in the '80's: 'Repetition Strain Injury' (RSI). Hardly anyone has it now. How come? This epidemic came about because the 1980's was the time when computers were being introduced into the workforce. Lots of people were being asked to adjust to working with new technology, and naturally, there was a lot of resistance to it, and a lot of anxiety in people who were being forced to adapt to ways of working that they had not adapted to before.

How could they show their displeasure? How could they resist this inhuman treatment? The collective answer was to 'Get sick'. Norman Swan from Radio National's 'The Health Report' has detailed the way in which the epidemic of 'RSI' was people's response to the introduction of new technology. Just as in the first industrial revolution, people 'put a spanner into the works' or threw their shoes (sabots) into the works and so sabotaged the process, so in the current industrial revolution people who are subject to these changes expressed their frustration in the only way that they could, by getting 'RSI'.

It is worth noting that the bosses who drove and introduced these changes were never subject to them themselves. How common is it to hear retiring bosses or politicians say 'Well, I'll have to learn how to send an 'e.mail' now.' Mostly the people driving the change are not the ones subject to the change. That is in part why resistance builds up in the work

force. The other side of the coin is that the workforce is relatively powerless to stop the change or to confront it head on. The chief characteristic of the 'RSI' epidemic was that it was a form of passive resistance on the part of relatively powerless people to changes which they could not directly confront.

The 'RSI' epidemic was a response not so much to the technology as such but to the inequality of the *power relations* between the people driving the change, and the people who were forced to live with it.

This is where I think the comparison with the latest round of attention to 'bullying' comes in. Bullying is, at a more overt level about power relations. The purest example that I know of we call 'the casting couch'. Powerless actress who wants a job confronts powerful director who has the can offer her a job. The contract goes 'You sleep with me and I will give you a job.' In the workplace today the balance between the worker and the boss has shifted much in favour of the boss. Just ask any young graduate how much they have to work and the idea of a 36 hr. week with a weekend and eight hours sleep is laughable. The idea of collective action and organisation on behalf of the workers has nose dived, with union membership at an all time low.

I do not understand it, but perhaps the general level of prosperity that we all enjoy, or the conditions under which generations X and Y are growing up mean that the individualised work practices, as well as an individualised 'lifestyle' have become the norm. The role of the head of the ACTU is much diminished by comparison to what it used to be. The arbitration commission has morphed into the 'fair work' commission. Capi-

tal has 'won.' There is now no disagreement between the Labor side of politics and the Liberal side of politics about this.

Just look at Monday's 'Age'. In the Opinion piece Michael Pearce writes 'Hawke and Keating...took steps toward reconciling Labor's traditions with free market reorientation...Having embraced the right's economic policies and been wedged out of any meaningful differentiation from the right can Labor find salvation in social policy? The answer is a resounding 'No.' Further Michael Pearce writes 'As a result, a once great party has become little more than a vehicle for political careerists, drawn mainly from the trade union movement.'

But there is a 'dis-ease' in the population. People cannot find a voice against the work conditions under which they are now forced to work because the power relations are stacked against them.

The only form of protest left is the one that Jesus advised when he was offering a response to the overwhelming might of Rome. Passive protest. Make the soldier go *two* miles instead on the legal *one*, and get *him* into trouble. Protest with 'dis-robing' in front of the court by giving your oppressor your coat as well as your shirt. To me, the rise in concern about bullying is in part a way that powerless people can do something about redressing the balance of power in their work place, but on an individual level. It is 'acceptable' to talk about bullying, but not acceptable to talk about the power relations that exist in a work place which makes the charge of 'bullying' the only one that can be conceived of to bring.

At some point or other, someone

needs to 'join the dots' between the symptom of 'bullying' which is now gaining a hearing and the disease of inhuman working conditions for many people brought on by the worship of money and the erosion of a 'human' life. Some one needs to take a leaf out of the Feminist hand book and say again 'The personal is the political.' Some one needs to say in public 'If you think you are being bullied, then join some form of collective to address your work conditions. You can not fight the 'system' on your own, and besides, bullying is a kind of protest against a deeper malaise.

Karl Marx criticised religion for helping people to deal with the results of an inhuman system of organising work. But at bottom, as the battle between the 'beastly' regime and 'The Human One' in the book of Revelation shows Christianity is on the side of what it means to be 'Human'

Jesus life, whose last week we remember, beginning today, was a life directed toward confronting the powers that be in the name of 'The Human Being'. The cleaning out of the temple was a way of saying 'What was meant to be a place of access to God has instead become simply a place for you to make money in.' I want to say the same about work. Work is meant to serve the human need for creativity and for 'going out' of ones self in service. We should take 'bullying' seriously, and then go further to look at the power relations in the work place that produce it.

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest



Paul Dalzell.

