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Peace is Union Business Panel

Thanks ...

Recognising we meet on Ngunnawal country; I too pay my respects to the traditional owners.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk briefly about union power.

A commonality between peace and union movements is that people in these groups value human safety above all else.

The priority Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union places upon physical, and psychological safety is evident in the employment of Wellbeing Officers, of whom I am one. We are part of the Workplace Health and Safety team. My wellbeing officer colleague and I are registered nurses who support distressed members, deliver mentoring workshops and engage with organisations such as IPAN, the Climate and Health Alliance and Unions for Refugees. We also hold the QNMU annual Social Justice Event for current and retired members whose interests include human rights, refugee advocacy and climate change.

Aligning with IPAN's values too, growing power, improving wellbeing and the health of our community, are key parts of the QNMU purpose.

I'd like to share examples of people power demonstrated by unionists in three areas: public hospitals, aged care and the private sector. Each instance upholds Hahrie Han's insight published in the *New York Times* in 2019: "To build power, outrage needs organization".

Post publication of her book *How Organizations Develop Activists*, Dr Han was a keynote speaker at the QNMU annual conference in 2017. Her research looks at how associations blend online and offline strategies to build their activist base and grow power by getting people involved.

The QNMU has exercised union power by 'organising outrage' in many ways.

Nurses and midwives committed to an ongoing peaceful fight for safe conditions is exemplified, in the longstanding QNMU Ratios Save Lives campaign. In 2016 Queensland became the 4th jurisdiction in the world to pass a law establishing minimum nurse-to-patient ratios in public medical and surgical units. Results of a study upon the effects of the legislation and published in the internationally trusted health journal *The Lancet*, revealed

that ratios significantly improved mortality, length of hospital stay, re-admissions, staffing levels and cost savings in Queensland.

The methods by which QNMU has exercised power with Ratios Save Lives include rallies, TV ads and calling members before elections to inform them on which State politicians signed our ratios pledge and which didn't.

On International Nurses Day in 2018, QNMU organised more than 80 nurses and volunteers to conduct surprise audits to review ratios of nursing staff to residents and the provision of care, in 83 of Queensland's 446 privately run aged care facilities. The damning results were published in Murdoch's Sunday paper in Brisbane. QNMU Secretary Beth Mohle said, "One reason we held the audit was to pull back the veil on the culture of secrecy in Australian aged care." Later in 2018, the Aged Care Royal Commission began, exposing considerable threats to safety in understaffed aged care facilities.

In the lead-up to the 2022 federal election, QNMU asked politicians to sign a pledge committing to key aged care reforms recommended by the Royal Commission. Who signed and who didn't was shared with the QNMU membership by telephone, digital messaging and published on our website.

The 'Implementing Care Bill' was recently passed by the Australian parliament. It legislates for: mandated minimum care minutes, Registered Nurses on site 24/7, financial transparency and accountability on public funding.

This kind of reform doesn't happen without significant public support. Many QNMU activists and aged care nurses and carers spoke out on the situation in aged care. Their voices were heard, and it's thanks to them that aged care has become the national issue it is today.

Attaining better legislation is an example of the exercise of a particular kind of union power by influencing politicians. Another type of union power is exercised to change the behaviour of the employers of our members.

This year, nurses from Wongaburra Aged Care Facility outside Brisbane communicated in a private social media group. Two spoke out and gave witness statements which led to QNMU winning a wage theft dispute in the Fair Work Commission. Wongaburra has given an undertaking that it will backpay stolen wages from all nurses who undertook Rapid Antigen Tests in unpaid time for months during the pandemic. The total amount to be paid by Wongaburra is around \$45 000 or more, plus applicable penalty rates.

It is anticipated that this win can be used to reduce the incidence of aged care employers undervaluing safety. The expectation of aged care employers that their nursing staff do all kinds of unpaid work outside their rostered hours, directly increases their fatigue.

The QNMU Growth and Campaigns Team is now inviting non-member nursing staff at Wongaburra, to join the Union. Increased union membership is vital to attain more wins for workers.

The last and perhaps the best known example of union power I'd like to mention is industrial action, such as the withdrawal of labour.

It's hard for anyone making the decision to take this action and particularly for nurses whose focus is fundamentally on the safety of people for whom they provide care. I remember experiencing this dilemma 9 years ago when involved in protected stop work action with the Australian Red Cross Blood Service. We held a series of hour long stop work meetings on footpaths outside blood collection centres, after which management returned to the table with a more acceptable package aligning with the *Nurses' Award 2010*. Memorably too, our reasonable demands for predictable and consistent roster patterns to mitigate fatigue were finally met.

More recently, the nurses who care for people accessing the Salvation Army Alcohol and Drug Services took protected industrial action, in the form of indefinite (generally lasting one hour) stoppages of work. Their action achieved a wage increase of 5% including 12 months back pay. The long battle won the "Highly Commended" for "Best Workplace Campaign" award at the Queensland Council of Unions Labour Day Dinner in 2021. This annual event is known as the Union Logies, at which prizes are given for the best things done by Unions covering all workers in Queensland.

Human safety is paramount in all these campaigns. Underpinning the success are the conversations - incremental, one on one, in person and online interactions to highlight visions for change.

Union and peace movements in the internet age make use of many tools. Our groups thrive on dedicated people. We value safety, are motivated by kindness, and are inspired by collective achievements, to ensure grass-roots actions are indeed powerful.

References

Hahrie Han, "When Does Activism Become Powerful?" Dec. 16, 2019 *The New York Times* December 17, 2019

Beth Mohle quoted in *Inscope* Winter 2018 p. 21